



The
DARK
SHIPS



HULBERT FOOTNER

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BOOKS BY

HULBERT FOOTNER

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THE DARK SHIPS

THE ISLAND OF FEAR

THE MURDER OF A BAD MAN

SCARRED JUNGLE

THE MYSTERY OF THE FOLDED PAPER

EASY TO KILL

DEAD MAN'S HAT

THE RING OF EYES

MURDER RUNS IN THE FAMILY

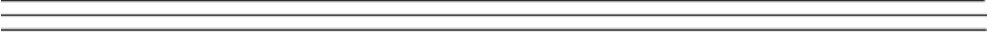
DANGEROUS CARGO

THE WHIP-POOR-WILL MYSTERY

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The
DARK SHIPS

By
HULBERT FOOTNER



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FIRST EDITION

A-M

THE DARK SHIPS

THE two were walking fast up Charles Street in Baltimore, not looking where they were going. It was the hour when the better shops closed and everybody was bound homeward. Many people turned their heads to glance after the good-looking pair; the young man, tall, broad-shouldered, with curly black hair and a notable look of resolution in his dark eyes; the girl, tall also for her sex, brown-haired, peach-skinned, with that special quality of beauty that makes a man feel helpless. They were quarreling.

“He’s old enough to be your father,” said Neill.

“He’s not!” retorted Janet. “He’s only thirty-nine!”

“That’s what *he* says!”

“You’re just being hateful.”

“You know nothing about this man.”

“What does a girl know about any of the men she goes around with? He’s an amusing companion. That’s all that concerns me.”

“You mean he spends his money on you.”

“That’s a nasty thing to say!”

“I believe he’s a crook.”

“You have no reason to say such a thing. You’re only jealous!”

“Jealous! Of *that*! If that’s what you want . . .”

“I don’t ‘want’ him!”

“I say he’s a crook! I can trust my hunches in such matters. That’s my business.”

“You have never seen him!”

“I’m judging just by what you have told me about him.”

“You’re jealous!” she said again.

“I’m not jealous; I’m sore!”

Janet laughed angrily. “What’s the difference?”

“Plenty of difference. I’m not the jealous type. You and I can’t be together much. Well, I don’t expect you to sit home nights when I’m not here. I’ve always encouraged you to have a good time, and you know it!”

“Then what are you fussing about?”

“This guy, Prescott Fanning, sticks in my crop. He’s not one of us. He’s too old for you; he spends too much money; he’s too slick!”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, people are always warning me against poor Prescott as if I were a schoolgirl! I can take care of myself.”

“Somebody else has warned you?” he asked, quickly.

“He had no more to go on than you have.”

“Who was it?”

“A lawyer here named Horace Kettering. A friend of my father’s.”

“What did he say?”

“Very much the same that you have said. When I pinned him down he hadn’t anything definite against Prescott.”

“Anyhow, I should think you would listen to a friend of your father’s.”

Janet did not answer.

Presently Neill said, gloomily, “Why do we have to quarrel?”

She looked away. She was softened, but she wouldn’t let him see it. “You started it.”

“I’m sorry for some of the things I said. . . . But you must admit that I’ve got reason to feel sore. Try to put yourself in my place. . . . Yesterday I made the biggest capture of the year in our department. I put Luciano Rosazza behind the bars. You know who he is, the head of the narcotic ring in New York. He’s the guy who poisons the young lads with his filthy snow; even high-school children.

“Well, I felt pretty pleased with myself. I’ve been after him for nine months. And today when I came down to Washington to report, my chief slapped me on the back and promised to give me a district on January first. ‘Son, you’ve earned a vacation,’ he said. ‘Take a week off and enjoy

yourself. Go some place where you're not known, and lie low, because this Rosazza guy has powerful friends who will be looking for you.'

"So I came over to Baltimore to be with you. Riding the crest of the wave! Why, I haven't had a whole week at a time with you in two years. Gosh! was I happy? And what did I find? That you had gone and got your head turned by this old guy, Fanning! Is it any wonder I'm sore?"

"Don't be absurd!" said Janet, with fresh anger. "He *isn't* old, and I *haven't* got my head turned!"

"Don't you like me any more?" he asked, diffidently.

"Oh, I suppose I do. But when you make me angry how can I feel it? What kind of a life would we have together if we got married and you flew off the handle every time I spoke to another man?"

"I don't fly off the handle every time. It's only Fanning. He's a crook!"

"He *isn't* a crook! And I'm not going to let anybody talk to me like that! I left a good home and went to work and supported myself on my earnings so that I could be free and independent. If my people wish me to be on my own, I'm not going to let you dictate to me."

Neill looked at her longingly. "We mustn't quarrel," he said, low-voiced. "Our time together is so short."

"I don't want to quarrel," she said, lowering her head; "but you won't let me call my soul my own."

"I love you," he said.

"That's not the right way to show it."

"Look," he said, "let's be quiet and sensible. Tell me more about Fanning. Who are his friends?"

"He knows everybody. One of his most intimate friends is Gerald Bromley, the manager of the Cecil-Calvert."

"Anybody can be friends with a hotel manager."

"Now you're being hateful again."

"Sorry," said Neill. "What's in that box under your arm?"

"A new evening dress."

"Another?"

“It was returned by a customer and Madame Annette let me have it for next to nothing.”

“I suppose you’re going to wear it tonight.”

“Certainly.”

Neill got sore all over again. “Damn!”

They walked a block in silence.

“Look, Jen,” he said, persuasively. “Break this date with Fanning and wear the new dress for me tonight. Lord! you don’t know how much it means to me! My first night with you. I rushed over from Washington all primed for it. And I only have a week.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s impossible. I didn’t know you were coming. This little party was got up for me and all the arrangements have been made. I can’t get out of it now.”

Neill was filled with an intolerable sense of injury. “Well, the hell with it, then,” he muttered. “I’d better leave you before I say something that I’ll be sorry for.”

“I’m not keeping you.”

They parted abruptly. Before he had taken twenty steps, Neill looked longingly over his shoulder. But Janet was still marching ahead, eyes front, and he scowled and kept on. A second after he had looked, Janet looked over her shoulder, all ready to run to meet him, but Neill was looking ahead then and she kept on. Neither would look again. That’s the way these things go.

Neill strode back down Charles Street with a burning coal at the pit of his stomach. The one thing clear to him was that he must immediately make good his words that Prescott Fanning was a crook. Where could he find out something about him? Neill was not well acquainted in Baltimore.

Janet had let fall two names. The first was Horace Kettering. Neill turned into the first drug store he came to and looked up the telephone number of Kettering’s office. He was too late: They told him that Mr. Kettering had left for the day. Neill then called up his house in the suburb of Guildford, but with no better luck. Mr. Kettering was not expected home to dinner.

The other man Janet had mentioned was the manager of a well-known hotel. Not difficult to get hold of him. Neill entered the marble-lined lobby

of the Cecil-Calvert and asked at the desk for Mr. Bromley.

“He’s in the bar, if you don’t mind stepping in there,” said the clerk.

Neill didn’t mind. It was easy to pick out Mr. Bromley where he stood in the bar with a group of friends, because with his immaculate grooming and his air of good-fellowship he looked like nothing in the world but a hotel manager. It occurred to Neill that he had better conceal his hand in this matter, so he ordered a drink and watched his opportunity.

Presently Mr. Bromley strolled away from his friends. As he came by, Neill nodded to him in a friendly fashion.

“Hello,” said Bromley. “Do I know you?”

“Walter Patton is the name. I have stopped here before a couple of times, but I suppose you see so many faces you can’t remember them all.”

“It’s a fact,” said Bromley.

“Will you have one with me?” asked Neill.

Mr. Bromley having had a couple, was not averse to increasing the load a little. They drank.

Having thus broken the ice, Neill was able to ask: “Do you know a man called Prescott Fanning?”

“Sure. Everybody knows Fanning.”

“What sort of fellow is he?”

“Oh, an all-round sport, swell-looking guy; built like an athlete; elegant dresser; free with his money; a general favorite.”

Neill swallowed this with a wry face. “Where’s he from?”

“New York banker. Investment house.”

“Have you ever investigated him?”

“Wasn’t any need to. He hasn’t tried to sell me anything.”

“But I was told he was an intimate friend of yours.”

“Good God, man! a mere acquaintance like ten thousand others.”

“How long has he been around?”

“I couldn’t tell you exactly. Some weeks.”

“What brought him here?”

“He likes the town. Looking for a little place in the Green Spring Valley. I’ve got a place out there, and that’s how I got acquainted with him. But it didn’t suit him.”

“Who introduced him in Baltimore? Who vouches for him?”

“’Deed, I don’t remember. Fanning is the sort of man you just see around. . . . Do you know anything queer about him?”

“No indeed,” said Neill. “I was just trying to find out something about his standing.”

“Well, don’t ask me.”

“Is he a man you would trust?”

“I don’t trust any man,” said Mr. Bromley, grinning.

Neill saw that there was nothing to be had here. “Where does Fanning hang out?” he asked.

“Lord Baltimore Hotel.”

This hotel was farther downtown and Neill took a taxi. He sat down in the lobby and looked around. It came to him that the bell boys of a hotel generally have the low-down on the guests, and he beckoned to a lad in a bob-tailed jacket who was passing.

“Fetch me a couple of Eden Perfectos from the cigar-stand, will you?”

The cigar-stand was not above fifty feet away, but Neill knew that bell boys never resent a guest who refuses to wait on himself. He’s a source of profit.

The cigars were brought and the boy generously tipped. He held a lighted match and Neill detained him in talk.

“Do you know a guest here called Prescott Fanning?”

“Mr. Fanning? Sure do, Boss. He’s in 1410, one of the best suites in the house. Mr. Fanning’s a real gentleman, he is.”

“What’s his business?”

“Don’t seem to have any. Just enjoys hisself.”

“Does he get much mail?”

“Not at the hotel.”

“Come on,” said Neill, persuasively: “Loosen up.”

“What’s *your* graft?” asked the boy, with a sharp look.

“Oh, put me down as a nosey individual with a big heart,” said Neill, grinning.

“Well, Mr. Fanning’s been a good friend to me and I ain’t a-going to . . .”

“I could be a better friend if you gave me any real information about him.”

The boy grinned at him as much as to say, Prove it! “Always happy to oblige,” he said. “But I can’t tell you what I don’t know. Mr. Fanning carries a wad of new money in his wallet an inch thick. He plays the races, and his bar bill’s pretty near a hundred a week. He appears to know everybody in town. He talks a lot, but he never tells nothing, if you know what I mean. Just joshes.”

“A bell boy’s hero!” said Neill.

“You said it, mister! I wish they was more like him. . . . Sorry, I got to beat it. I’m not allowed to stand and talk.”

Neill let him go. If he did know anything about Fanning, it was clear that the latter had paid him to keep his mouth shut.

An odd-looking man sidled up to Neill from behind him. A skinny little fellow, gray as a badger; gray hair, gray skin, gray lips. He wore a wrinkled gray suit, too, as if for protective coloring. It was impossible to guess his age. He would have been completely insignificant had it not been for his eyes. They were the most tragic eyes Neill had ever seen, and they had a wild, burning quality that made a normal man sheer off a little. He looked like a lost soul; yet his colorless lips were twisted in a grin.

“Pardon me, sir,” he said, with a fawning air. “But I couldn’t help overhearing part of your conversation just now.”

“So what?” said Neill. He felt that he ought to be sorry for the man, but as a matter of fact he only felt repulsion.

“I heard you asking the boy about Prescott Fanning.”

Neill pricked up his ears. “Do you know him?”

The gray man moistened his lips like a cat. “Yes,” he said, slowly. “I may say . . . that I know him.”

“Sit down,” said Neill. “Have a smoke?”

“That looks too big and strong for me,” said the gray man, with a sidelong look at the cigar. “If you will excuse me, I prefer my pipe.”

“Smoke up,” said Neill.

While the little man was busy filling his pipe Neill studied him. A new type. Not criminal, yet somehow repulsive. Neill wondered uncomfortably if every man who has been through hell becomes repulsive to his luckier fellows.

“You may call me Eyster,” he said. “David Eyster.”

“I’m Walter Patton,” said Neill. He was glad that Eyster did not offer to shake hands. His gray paws looked like a dead man’s.

“Do you know Fanning?” asked Eyster.

“No.”

“Are you anxious to meet him?”

“No. But I want to find out about him. . . . What are your relations with him?”

“I have no relations with him,” replied Eyster, grinning. “He doesn’t know me, but I know him.”

“Well, tell me,” said Neill, “what sort of fellow is he?”

“What is your purpose in asking?” said Eyster, cautiously.

“I’ll tell you,” said Neill. “A young fellow that I know has been going around with him lately, and I suspect that Fanning is a bad influence.”

Eyster laughed noiselessly. “A bad influence?” he said. “That’s putting it mildly. . . . I assume that it is really a young woman you are talking about. Fanning has no use for young men.”

Neill let it go at that.

A spasm of hatred convulsed Eyster’s gray face. “He’s a devil to women,” he exclaimed, with an odd breathlessness. “A devil! A devil!”

Neill turned hard inside, thinking of the danger to Janet. At the same time he exulted a little because he had been proved right. No harm had come to Janet yet, and now he could show her!

“Give me chapter and verse,” he said, eagerly. “Give me some concrete evidence to show, and it will save a woman.”

But Eyster only grinned and shook his head. “These are things I can’t tell a stranger.”

“Then why did you approach me?” asked Neill.

Eyster was silent.

Neill felt that he must use caution in dealing with this half-cracked soul. “Where is your home, Mr. Eyster?” he asked, in order to get on safer ground.

“I have no home.”

“No home?”

“I just go from hotel to hotel.”

“Don’t you find that rather expensive?”

“I have enough money for my needs.”

“What’s your business?”

“I have no business.”

“What brought you to Baltimore?”

“Fanning.”

“What’s Fanning’s business here?”

“I haven’t been able to find out,” said Eyster. “After all, I’m only one man and I can’t let him get on to me. But he’s up to no good, you can be sure of that.”

“What’s his record?”

Eyster shook his head. “I won’t tell you . . . yet.”

“Why can’t we work together on this?” asked Neill. “We both distrust the man and want to prevent him doing any further harm . . .”

“I don’t care how much harm he does,” Eyster interrupted.

Neill looked at him in exasperation. He seemed part madman, part child, and scarcely human.

Eyster moistened his lips. “The rottener he acts the more fun it is to watch him,” he said, softly. “And the more satisfactory his finish will be.”

“What do you mean, his finish?”

Eyster declined to explain. "I like you, young man," he said, with a grin. "You won't let anything on, but I can see that you hate him. . . . I'll tell you something," he suddenly went on, with a spurt of venom. "My hatred of Fanning is all I live for. And my business, that you asked me about just now, is to follow him around and watch him and feed it."

"Good God!" muttered Neill. "Why?"

Eyster turned cautious again. "I'm not going to tell you anything more until I've tested you out," he said. "I don't want my plans interfered with."

"What's going to be the end of this?" asked Neill.

"The end may be slow in coming," said Eyster, grinning, "but it's certain!"

Neill looked at him, wondering how to deal with such a crack-pot.

"Do you know about his yacht?" asked Eyster.

Here was a bit of real information. "No. What yacht?"

"He has just bought a yacht called the *Nadji*. I can't figure what he wants a yacht for."

"Won't it be difficult for you to follow him if he goes off on a yacht?" suggested Neill, fishing.

"I have made my arrangements," said Eyster, grinning.

"Where's the yacht lying?"

"At the City Pier, foot of Broadway." Eyster got up abruptly. "Have you ever seen Fanning?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, here he comes. . . . I'll leave you."

★ II ★

FOLLOWING the direction of Eyster's glance, Neill saw a tall, dark, handsome man coming in from the street. At first glance he scarcely looked the thirty-nine years he confessed to, but as he came closer Neill judged him about five years more than that. He was in the pink of condition, with a skin as fresh as a baby's. His black eyes were set close together, giving him a foxy look; they were the kind of eyes that turn continually and overlook nothing. A hard face, but rendered superficially attractive by a good-natured smile. A crook, and a slick one, thought Neill.

Fanning, nodding pleasantly to his acquaintances in the lobby, strolled on into the bar. After giving him a moment or two, Neill followed.

He found Fanning leaning negligently on the mahogany, watching the bartender stir him up an old-fashioned cocktail. Neill lined up near by and looked him over in the mirror without appearing to. Fanning was wearing a perfectly-cut gray flannel suit and an expensive Panama hat. His shirt and tie were just a little different from anybody else's. Evidently a man who gave a good deal of thought to his dress. Neill, who bought good clothes without thinking about them, resented it. Just the sort of thing that would catch a woman's eye!

Since it was the hour before dinner when nobody is in a rush and each of them was alone at the bar, it was natural to fall into talk. When Neill also ordered an old-fashioned, Fanning said, with his ready smile:

"Great minds think alike!"

"Great ones and small ones, too," said Neill.

Fanning laughed. "Are you registered here?"

"No. At the Stafford."

"My name is Prescott Fanning."

“I’m Walter Patton.”

“Where from?”

“New York.”

“That’s my town, too. But I’m thinking of retiring and settling in Baltimore.”

“You’re a young man to be talking about retiring.”

“Oh, well, I’m not ambitious,” said Fanning. “Forty or fifty thousand a year is ample for my needs. I’m looking for a place in the Green Spring Valley. Nothing opulent or showy, you understand, a small place, but perfect in every appointment. That’s my ideal. Two or three blooded horses in the stable, a flat field where I can land and take off in my own plane.”

Blow-hard! thought Neill. “Are you married?” he asked, pleasantly.

“No indeed!” said Fanning, laughing. “I’m too fond of the sex to tie myself down to one. Women are like wines; you want a different type with every course. I wouldn’t give up champagne just because I like Johannisberger.”

Neill fingered his glass longingly. He had a terrible yen to fling the contents in the man’s face. “Tell me, how did you make enough to retire so early?” he asked, laughing. “That’s something every man is interested in.”

“In the Street,” said Fanning, carelessly. “Things are coming back.”

“As an operator or a broker?”

“Both. . . . You hear a lot about the cleverness of Wall Street men, but believe me it’s all a myth. They’re so dumb that a fellow of just ordinary intelligence like me can go in and clean up in short order.” He laughed. “What’s your line?” he asked.

“Contact man for a firm of contractors. What’s your firm?”

“I’m out of the Street now.” . . . “Have you heard this one?”

He told a funny story about Wall Street. While his mouth was full of humorous friendly talk the foxy black eyes never relaxed their vigilance. Neill had the sense that he was being keenly sized up in his turn.

He matched Fanning’s story with another. Fanning laughed and clapped him on the back. “I like you, Patton! You and I speak the same lingo.” He beckoned to the bartender. “Set ’em up, Jim. This round is on me.”

Neill reciprocated. By the time they had had three a perfect barroom friendship had developed. But while the drink appeared to loosen Fanning's tongue, he made no disclosures about himself. When Neill asked a question he told a funny story. From time to time he slipped in a shrewd question of his own. Neill answered with seeming frankness, but Fanning's sharp eyes hardened.

He is suspicious of me, Neill thought, and he doesn't mean to let me go until he's found out what I'm after. Well, two can play at that game.

After they had fenced in this manner for some time, Fanning asked: "What you doing tonight?"

"Eating alone, worse luck," said Neill.

"Look, I'm having a little party, and I need another man. I'd be darn glad to have you join us. I like the cut of your jib, Patton. We must see more of each other."

Neill grinned inwardly at the thought of Janet's face when Fanning brought *him* to the party. It would be a pretty little revenge. "Certainly is nice of you to ask me," he said. "I haven't my evening clothes with me."

"It doesn't matter, my boy! The girls will dress up, bless their hearts! but we don't have to. You're a good-looking young guy, Patton, damned if you're not, and you'll be a credit to my party just as you are."

"Well, thanks a lot," said Neill.

"Let's go up to my suite and wash up, and we can start out from here."

"Okay."

They paid for their drinks and went up in an elevator, Fanning talking and laughing. At the same time there was a glitter in his black eyes that spelled danger. Neill's job had accustomed him to that. He was armed.

Fanning's suite was one of the most expensive in the hotel. High above the street, it looked over the lower part of town and across the harbor to Federal Hill. Neill noted that, though Fanning presumably had occupied it for several weeks, there were no photographs or knick-knacks, no personal belongings of any kind on display; nothing to give him a line on the man's past.

They made themselves ready for the party, Fanning keeping up a running fire of humorous stories. As they were slipping into their coats again there was a knock at the door of the parlor. Fanning went to answer it, but held the

door in such a manner that Neill could not see who was outside. A whispered conversation took place. The caller was a man.

Presently Fanning opened the door farther, but still Neill could not see who was on the other side of it. As the crack between door and frame widened he had a sense that an eye was applied to it on the other side. Somebody was giving *him* the once over.

The conversation continued. Though the voices were low, Neill suspected that they were disputing. Finally he heard Fanning say, "Well, you'll have to lump it then! . . ."

"Aah! I never thought to get this from *you*," rumbled the other voice, sorely.

"Shh!" said Fanning.

He went out, pulling the door almost to behind him, and Neill heard the two of them walking away. Tiptoeing to the door, he put an eye to the crack and saw the two figures moving in close converse toward the elevators. They were gesticulating angrily. Fanning's visitor was a rough-looking man of enormous physical strength. His shoulders were so heavy they were bowed forward, and his big hands hung almost to his knees.

Neill retired from the door, leaving it exactly as he had found it. The telephone rang, and he picked it up. A man's voice said cautiously over the wire:

"That you, Pres?"

Neill subdued his voice to a husky whisper. "Right."

"What's the matter?" asked the voice, sharply.

"Nothing. There are others in the room here."

"Oh! I just wanted to tell you that everything is all right. The old girl hasn't squawked."

"Who did you say?"

The unknown speaker evaded the trap. "I say the old girl hasn't squawked."

"Good!"

"Shall I see you tomorrow as agreed?"

"Right. Where are you speaking from?"

Again he drew a blank. "Read's drug store. So long."

"So long."

Neill hung up. Eyster might be mad, but even the few words he had heard were enough to confirm the fact that Fanning *was* a crook! As yet, however, he had secured no concrete evidence to lay before Janet. He looked around the room sharply. There was no time to make a search. Anyhow, he supposed that Fanning would never have left him alone had there been anything incriminating in the place.

Fanning returned with his made-to-order laugh, saying: "These darn realtors call on you at all hours. It's almost impossible to get rid of them."

"That's right," agreed Neill. He was thinking, that was no realtor, old man!

Fanning fetched a sealed bottle of Scotch from a cabinet. "We must have one last spot before we go," he said.

"Just a short one for me," said Neill.

"This is something special," said Fanning. "A friend of mine brought it from abroad. Such whisky as this is not ordinarily shipped to our country."

Neill was on his guard, but there seemed to be no danger in drinking from an unopened bottle, since Fanning was preparing to drink from the same bottle. Fanning took two glasses into the bathroom where he could be heard washing them. He brought them back still wet; and opened the bottle with care.

"When I get my own little place I'll have a cellar, Patton, stocked with the choicest wines and liquors that the world produces. I'm not a heavy drinker, but I must have the best!" He poured two drinks. "Here's how," he said, raising his glass.

"Same to you," said Neill. He waited until he saw the liquor actually running down Fanning's throat, and then tossed off his own. Certainly it was superfine whisky.

"Let's go," said Fanning.

His last act before leaving was to take a packet of one hundred new five-dollar bills from a drawer of the bureau and drop it in his wallet. "Just an evening's pleasure!" he said.

"Well, you're no piker," said Neill.

They descended in the elevator and hailed a taxi at the door of the hotel. “To the Belvedere,” Fanning said to the driver. “That’s where we pick up the girls,” he added to Neill.

From Hanover Street they turned into Fayette and then into Charles. The pavements of Baltimore’s best street were almost empty now. Fanning began to tell another funny story, but his voice seemed far away.

Neill felt great. He had never found the streets at evening so beautiful. A delicious languor was stealing through his limbs. He seemed to be reclining on a fleecy cloud that was being wafted away into space. By a certain tone in Fanning’s voice he realized that he had come to the point of his story, and he laughed politely. Fanning began another. Meanwhile Neill was being wafted farther and farther away from all earthly cares. He passed into unconsciousness.

★ III ★

WHEN NEILL came to, he found himself lying fully dressed on the bed in his room at the Hotel Stafford. For the moment his mind was a blank; he was only aware that he felt terrible. The sun was streaming in and he glanced at his watch. Nearly twelve o'clock. He sat up, pressing his head between his hands, and presently staggered into the bathroom to get water. What has happened? he kept asking himself.

Suddenly recollection returned; Janet; the Lord Baltimore Hotel; Prescott Fanning; the taxicab. Good God! Fanning doped me! he thought. But how? how? I was watching him. The dope must have been in the wet glass when he brought it from the bathroom! O God! what a fool I was!

Neill went through his pockets. His money had not been touched, but a glance in the other side of his wallet told him that his papers had been ransacked. So Fanning knew now that he was an agent of the Treasury Department. Only one thing had been taken from his wallet—a photograph of the smiling Janet that he had snapped against a background of flowering dogwood.

When he thought of Janet he turned sick with anxiety. What had happened to *her*? He ran to the phone and called up the smart dress shop on Charles Street where she worked. A woman's voice, refined and acidulous, said over the wire:

“No, Miss Emory isn't here.”

“When will she be in?”

“I don't expect to see her again. She sent me a telegram this morning resigning her position. She has left me flat. It is the most inconsiderate . . .”

Neill was not interested in Madame Annette's feelings. He hung up. Janet gone! He could not take it in fully. Gone? Gone?

He took down the receiver again and called up the flat that she shared with a girl pal. A sickening wait while he listened to the double buzz of the bell ringing at the other end. No answer. Remembering what Eyster had told him, he called up the City Pier to ask about the yacht *Nadji*. She had pulled out at seven-thirty the previous evening, he was told. At seven-thirty Fanning had been with Neill. But of course they could have joined the yacht at some other point later. Where was the yacht bound for? Through the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, he was told, and out to sea through the Delaware Capes.

He rose and paced his room in an agony of distress, not knowing what to do then. Janet's friend was a student at the Maryland Institute and he didn't know how to reach her by phone.

In a moment or two his telephone rang and he ran to the instrument with a wild hope of hearing Janet's voice over the wire. No such luck. It was the clerk downstairs saying:

"There's a young man here wants to see you. He says you don't know his name. I think he's a taxi-driver."

"Send him up," said Neill.

It was a wizened little fellow in nondescript clothes, with an engaging grin. So far as Neill could remember, he had never seen him before. He said, grinning:

"My name is Johnny Tingstrom. I'm the guy that picked up you and the other guy at the Hanover Street entrance of the Lord Baltimore at seven-thirty last night."

Neill seized his arm and jerked him through the door. "For God's sake what happened?" he demanded.

"Wait a minute!" said the little fellow, laughing. "The other guy he tells me to drive to the Belvedere . . ."

"I remember that."

"When we are coming up the hill beside the Peabody he raps on the glass and says: 'My friend has passed out cold!' So I pulls in to the curb and gets out, and we looks at you and shakes you. You was in the gauze all right. Paralyzed. So the guy says: 'He lives at the Stafford. We better take him home and put him to bed!' and I says, 'Okay, Boss.'"

"So I drives to the Stafford and we take you in, one on each side. The clerks and the bellhops and the other guys in the lobby they get a big laugh

seeing you brought in cold so early in the evening. So me and the other guy we lays you on your bed and beats it. I drives him to the Belvedere according to orders.

“Now I thinks there’s something funny about this business. You was perfectly steady when you got in my car. You passed out *too* quick. So I made up my mind to take a little time out to investigate. So after I dropped him I turns at the next corner and drives back, and I sees the guy coming out of the Belvedere and getting into a private car.”

“Did you get his license number?” asked Neill.

“Sure, but that won’t do you no good, because I looked it up myself later, and it was only a drive-yourself car, hired for the evening. It was brought back to the garage at eight-thirty by the guy who was driving it. They thought it was funny because he hadn’t had it out but little over an hour.”

“Did you get a good look at this driver?”

“Sure. And confirmed it by the description of him that they give me at the garage. A hell of a big guy with shoulders so heavy they seemed to weigh him forward. . . .”

“I’ve seen the man. Go on.”

“From the Belvedere they drives to a house on Calvert Street and picks up a young lady. Gee! a wonderful-looking girl, Boss! She was wearing a pink dress and a black velvet wrap; light brown hair and blue eyes that looks almost black at night. There was something about her, you know, something that strikes a man down. I mean any man, even a poor hackie like me.”

“Get on! Get on!” said Neill, irritably. “I know what she looks like.”

“Pardon me, Boss. From Calvert Street they drives to the Hotel Milner on Cathedral, with me following. At the Milner they picks up a couple.”

“Describe them.”

“Well, I don’t get a very good look because I don’t dast go close. A youngish couple; the doll was all fixed up swell, but not like the young lady, too much paint. And the guy, he is just one of these ornery guys who dresses up like a sore finger and goes out at night when some other guy is paying.”

“Go on.”

“They starts downtown with me following, but at this hour the streets is almost empty and the big guy, I reckon he gets on to the fact that he’s being

trailed and passes the word to his driver. They begin to speed up and turn one corner after another to try to shake me off.”

“And you lost them?”

“It was no fault of mine, Boss. I was stopped by a cop at the corner of Madison and Eutaw. It is always the way in this world; the crook gets away and the honest guy gets a ticket!” Tingstrom ruefully exhibited a pink card. “I’m on my way now to the traffic court.”

“How much will they soak you?” asked Neill.

“A fiver, I reckon.”

Neill gave him the money. “Here.”

“That certainly is white of you, Boss.”

“Not at all. It’s only fair. When you come up before the judge say nothing about my passing out, or that you were trailing another car. That won’t help us any.”

“Just as you say, Boss.”

“Give me a telephone number where I can call you if I should want you later.”

Tingstrom went away still grinning, and Neill recommenced the pacing of his room, hoping against hope that Janet would call him up. Even though they had quarreled he could not believe that she would sail away out of his life without a word. The strain of waiting soon became more than he could bear. He had to be doing something. He bathed and shaved and set out for the Maryland Institute. By asking from class to class he finally found Percita Wales, Janet’s friend.

“Where’s Janet?” he demanded.

Percita looked at him queerly and bit her lip before replying. She was a quiet, placid sort of girl who seldom went around with men. “Janet’s gone away,” she said.

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re lying!”

Percita flushed up. “If you’re going to talk to me that way . . .”

“Sorry,” said Neill. “I’m near out of my mind.” A sudden thought came to him. “Did you get a telegram?”

“Why, yes!” she said. “How did you know?”

“Let me see it.”

She fished it out of her handbag. Neill read:

Going to Canada for a few days. Don’t tell anybody and don’t worry. Writing. Janet.

Neill groaned. “Janet never sent this! It’s not her style.”

Percita’s eyes widened. “O! What do you think has happened? Do you *know* anything?”

“Keep your mouth shut about this until I can find out something,” said Neill. He ran out.

The telegram was a night message which had been filed in the main office on Baltimore Street at nine o’clock the previous evening. Neill took a taxi to the office and asked to be shown the original.

“Sorry. We can’t do that without proper authorization.”

“How can I get authorization?”

“If it’s a police matter, go to the police.”

Neill went out without answering. He couldn’t go to the police, for, after all, Janet might have gone with Fanning willingly, and he could not expose her to publicity. He himself was partly responsible. Their quarrel might have spurred her on to do something reckless. Girls were like that. Meanwhile she was swallowed up. Not for a moment did he believe that she had gone to Canada. Canada was the one place where he was sure she had not gone.

He went on to the Lord Baltimore, not that he expected to learn anything there, but just to be doing something. He asked for Fanning at the desk.

“Haven’t seen Mr. Fanning this morning,” said the clerk. He called up 1410. “No answer,” he said, after waiting awhile.

“Has he checked out?” said Neill.

“Checked out?” echoed the clerk, staring. “Certainly not! Mr. Fanning is a permanent guest here.”

Neill thought: Fanning is just fooling them. He's gone all right. Left a few things in his room for a stall.

"Have you got a guest here called David Eyster?" he asked.

"Mr. Eyster has checked out."

Neill suspected that Eyster possessed better information than he had.

"Say where he was going?" he asked.

"No information," said the clerk.

Inquiries of the bell boys and the door men turned up nothing. Eyster apparently had slipped out of the hotel unseen.

He called up the office of the lawyer, Kettering, but again failed to find him. Mr. Kettering had gone to Washington for the day, he was told, and would not be in his office.

Neill taxied back to the Stafford because he had no place else to go. At the desk he was told that his room number had been called up twice while he was out. His heart leaped up and then sank again, fearing that he had missed an important clue. "The man left no message," the clerk told him, "but he said he would call again."

Neill ascended to his room and paced the floor, half crazy with the suspense of waiting. Three times he telephoned downstairs to make sure that the operator had not forgotten that he was in. When the bell finally rang, he flung himself on the instrument.

A man's voice asked: "Is this room seven hundred four?" It was a voice Neill had never heard before. A tenor voice with a Scots burr.

"Yes."

"Are you the guy that rents that room?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Never mind that. I have a message for you from a certain girl. I don't know her name. Here's what she looks like; brown hair; blue eyes with a kind of surprised look in them. Was wearing a pink silk dress and a black wrap."

"Sure! Sure!" said Neill, in a shaking voice. "What's her message?"

"She's on the yacht *Nadji* in Absalom's Harbor, and she's in bad trouble."

“Where’s Absalom’s?”

“Southern Maryland. Eighty miles south of Baltimore.”

“What are the circumstances? What kind of trouble . . .?”

Neill heard a click as the receiver went up. The line was dead.

As he went through the lobby on his way out of the hotel, a well-meaning clerk said: “Is there anything wrong, Mr. Patton?”

Neill had no notion of confiding in him. “Why, no,” he said, easily. “What makes you ask?”

“There was a man came to the desk at eight o’clock this morning, asking for you. When I said you weren’t up he wouldn’t let me call you.”

“What sort of man?” asked Neill.

“Big fellow; roughly dressed; stoop-shouldered. I went off duty at nine or I would have told you. When I left the building he was waiting outside. The other boys told me he was waiting there all morning. Did he find you?”

“Nobody found me,” said Neill. “I think you fellows are seeing things.”

The clerk laughed, and Neill went on.

This added to his uneasiness. The stoop-shouldered man again! It looked as if he had a friend and an enemy both unknown to him. It was certainly not the stoop-shouldered man who had called him on the phone. That was a high-pitched voice, whereas the big fellow’s voice as he had heard it the night before had a subterranean rumble. Neill suspected that he had been followed all around town, and in his excitement had failed to notice it. In the street he looked sharply up and down for the big man, but he was not visible then.

★ IV ★

AT 4:45 that afternoon the bus for Absalom's pulled out of the terminal on Redwood Street and headed South. Neill Tryon sat by a window, looking out with a wooden face. Now that he had an objective, he had steadied; he could wait. After thinking it over he had decided to handle this matter by himself—quietly. He wished to avoid subjecting Janet to any ugly publicity. He had dressed himself in a rough surveyor's outfit, including khaki breeches and knee boots, in order to be ready for anything.

The bus was a small one for local traffic, and the passengers were all residents of the southern counties who had been to town for a day's shopping. Neill, as the only "foreigner" aboard, received many curious glances which made him slightly uneasy, because he didn't want to be too well remembered afterward. He had to adopt a new name and character for this expedition. A Ford car passed at the moment and he noticed a field of wheat darkening for the harvest. So be it; he would call himself Ford Wheatley.

The driver, whom the passengers addressed as "Joey," appeared to be the main circulating medium of gossip for the counties. He was a well-set-up young fellow with a snappy Fedora on one side of his head, and he thought well of himself. He imparted the local news to his passengers and received what they had in return. Neill paid little attention to the talk back and forth; the principal subjects were crops and fishin'. But he pricked up his ears when he heard a voice ask Joey what was the latest from Absalom's. Joey said:

"There was a dandy little yacht come into the harbor before dawn. She busted a gear or something out in the bay. I fetched her engineer up to town this morning to have a new one made. He calculated to go back with me this evening, but he ain't turned up, so I reckon it wasn't finished in time."

Good! thought Neill. The yacht is still there.

“What’s the yacht’s name?” somebody asked.

“*Nadji*.”

“What the hell’s that mean?”

“Dogged if I know, Henry.”

“Who’s her owner?”

“Gent named Barrett from New York.”

New York was too far away to be of any interest to them, and the conversation passed to other matters.

“Joey, did you hear that Rainy Stivers hauled seine at Battle Island yesterday and pulled in three thousand pound of rock?”

“No kidding!”

“Gemmen, it’s a fact! At ten cents a pound that’s three hundred dollars at one haul.”

“That money will burn a hole in Rainy’s pants, certain. Bet he comes out in a new automobile, Sunday.”

As they bowled down the concrete road the afternoon shadows lengthened and the passengers got off one by one. Finally there were only two left for Absalom’s. The driver kept turning his head to cast an inquisitive eye at the stranger. At last he said:

“Are you acquainted in Absalom’s, mister?”

“No. Never been there before.”

“What’s your business there may I ask?”

“No business. Thought I’d like a couple of days’ fishing.”

“You ain’t brought no tackle.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure what I’d need. I’ll get it there.”

“Ain’t often a fellow comes down alone to go fishing.”

“Oh, reckon I can join on to some party.”

“Where you going to stop?”

“There’s a hotel, isn’t there?”

“Sure. There’s Wickes’s Hotel, but you’d do better in one of the boarding-houses.”

“Well, I’ll go to the hotel tonight and look round in the morning.”

“What’s the name, mister?”

“Ford Wheatley.”

“Where from?”

“Baltimore.”

“Who you work for there?”

“I represent a New York firm.”

And so on. And so on.

As they came over the top of a low hill Joey pointed out their destination far off to the left. Neill saw, on a little promontory almost surrounded by blue water, a village of white houses dazzling in the level rays of the sun. The wide mouth of the river lay beyond, and still farther off, the misty expanse of the Chesapeake. Neill hardened as he looked at the pretty scene. There lay his job.

As they turned the next corner in the road four gigantic ships loomed before them moored side by side and making a little forest of masts and funnels. It was a surprising sight to come upon in that simple countryside.

“See them ships?” said Joey. “Them’s what we took from Germany after the war. It’s the *Montpelier*, the *Montmorenci*, the *Columbia* and the *Abraham Lincoln*. Looks as if they was moored right in the cornfield, don’t it? The river’s there, but you can’t see it from here. Once they was the biggest and the fastest ships on the ocean. I been aboard ’em. Jehu! what grand saloons and cabins with the walls covered with hand-paintings and all! It’s a sight, mister!”

“What are they doing down here?” asked Neill.

“The Shipping Board keeps them down here because there’s good shelter and deep water, and it don’t cost nothing.”

“Are they just rusting away?”

“No indeed. Old Captain Bickel and three men lives aboard, and they hires what painters and oilers they want by the day. They’re kept in A-1 shape all right. Once a month they turn the engines over with compressed air.”

“What good are they?”

“I don’t know,” said Joey. “Some say they’ll be wanted for transports in the next war. Others say it would save the taxpayers money if they was sold for scrap.”

“I dare say,” said Neill.

A minute or two later they were in the village. The river lay on one side, the inlet that constituted the harbor on the other; the mouth of the river and the bay out in front. The simple frame houses of the fishermen and the lack of trees, the all-surrounding water and the boats at anchor, gave the place a sea-going character. There was a tang of salt in the air.

It was about eight o’clock and still light when they pulled up in front of Longcope’s general store which faced the harbor. Neill’s eyes instantly fastened on the trim little yacht lying there. A crowd had gathered on the porch of the store to greet the bus and he decided to wait a little until dark before going out to the yacht. It would attract less attention.

“Hey, Wickesy!” shouted Joey. “Here’s a lodger for you.”

The hotel was next door to the store. It was a staring clap-boarded building of several stories out of keeping with the old village. The proprietor, a slack-looking fat man came forward and Neill submitted to being shown a room, but declined dinner. It was impossible to think of eating until he had done what he had come for.

Returning to the porch of the sprawling store, he sat down at the end of the line of men taking their ease and enjoying their after-supper pipes. Sunburnt fishermen, mostly, in gum boots and faded drill shirts. Neill learned that fishing was good and that pound nets were being set out in the bay. The trout had come earlier than was customary.

None of this was to his purpose, and he studied the yacht. Very smart and modern, with her high sides and stubby funnel. Something under a hundred feet over all. She carried two boats on davits amidships, and he noted that one of them was gone. As darkness gathered it seemed odd to him that no lights showed in the cabins. The riding-lights were up.

The man next to Neill was a tall fisherman with white hair and a complexion the color of beet juice. “That’s a tidy little yacht yonder,” Neill remarked to him.

“So you might say,” was the answer. “She’s the latest caper all right. But ugly as hell if you’re asking me.”

“Is she owned hereabouts?” Neill asked, to draw him.

“Nah! We got no toys like that down here. We’re working-people. New York man.” He told Neill the story of the accident to the yacht’s engine.

“Is the owner aboard?” asked Neill.

“Sure he’s aboard.”

“I notice their dinghy is ashore.”

“The crew just come in to go to the movies.”

Neill grinned in hard satisfaction. Owner aboard; crew ashore; the situation was working out to his advantage.

Another man, hearing them talking about the yacht, took up the tale. “The owner was in the store telephoning awhile ago. Fine-looking, big slicker; fresh-complected. But surly. Didn’t have a word to throw to a dog.”

Neill took heart from this. If things were going badly with Fanning, so much the better for himself.

“You’re right he’s a surly brute,” said another. This was a lanky fellow with an innocent blue eye. Neill noticed that the others were inclined to make a butt of him. “I rowed out there with a mess of trout, thinking they’d be glad to buy some fresh fish,” he said. “Just out of the water they was, the prettiest trout I caught this year. But when I come alongside the owner, he ordered me off. ‘Get the hell away from here!’ he says. ‘I don’t want any damned fish! . . . Get the hell away from here!’ Just like that!”

“That was manners,” said another voice. “What did you say, Jake?”

“I says ‘Go to hell yourself you long-legged so-and-so! I’m as good a man as you if you do own a yacht. And if you’ll come ashore I’ll prove it!’”

There was a general laugh.

“All right,” the speaker went on, “I told you before and I tell you again there is some funny business aboard that yacht, and we ought to investigate it!”

More laughter.

“What do you mean, funny business?” asked Neill, carelessly.

“I’ll tell you, stranger. When I come alongside the yacht I was standing up in my skiff and I could look right into one of the portholes. All closed they was, warm as it is. And on the other side of the glass I seen a beautiful young girl with bare arms and neck. Only seen her for a second, but she nodded her head to me, and beckoned pitiful as if she wanted help real bad.”

Neill's breast was suddenly lightened. Janet *was* aboard the yacht, then; he had come to the right place. And she was not a willing passenger, either. That relieved his worst fear. He felt a gush of friendliness towards the speaker.

But he, it seemed, enjoyed no reputation for veracity among his mates. They laughed him down. "You're seeing things, Jake. You're wasted fishing. You ought to be one of these here, now, story-writers in the papers."

"All right! All right!" said Jake. "Some day you men will learn that I'm not as big a fool as you like to make out!"

When it became really dark and the vessels in the harbor were no longer sharply silhouetted against the water, Neill got up and strolled away. Each house along the harbor front had its little pier sticking out from the shore with one or more small boats moored to it, and he had it in mind to borrow one of these without saying anything to anybody.

He turned to the right because in that direction the shore road rose somewhat. Here the little piers were under the bank, and screened from observation. Climbing down the bank, he walked out on a pier and found a skiff with oars in her. He got in and, untying the rope, rowed quietly out in the direction of the yacht.

The water was as smooth as a mirror, and voices came off from the shore with startling distinctness. On the porch of Longcope's they were still talking about fish. Every star in heaven was shining. No moon. This moon was near its end, Neill remembered. Wouldn't rise until near dawn.

When he drew alongside the yacht he hailed her, not loud. There was no answer. Tying his skiff to the ladder, he climbed on deck and spoke again. No answer. There was something about the stillness of the little craft that chilled his blood. Where was Janet? He walked forward along the deck and aft again, sticking his head in the different doors and speaking. There was no movement, no sound in reply. Everything aboard was neat and shipshape. The silence was not absolute, for somewhere below he could hear the hum of a generator.

There were two deckhouses on the yacht. The forward house contained a luxurious little dining-saloon, while the after house was merely the entrance to a companionway leading to the quarters below. Having satisfied himself that there was nobody forward, Neill switched on lights in the after house and went down the stairs with his heart rising in his throat. His instinct told him there was something very wrong aboard.

He found himself in a miniature saloon with doors forward and aft. The forward door admitted him to a comfortable sleeping-cabin, empty. A man's belongings were scattered about. Fanning's? The after door was locked. It was a light door and putting his shoulder against it he heaved and burst it in.

Switching on lights, he saw Prescott Fanning lying on the floor at his feet, dead. There was a bullet hole in his forehead and a dark wet stain was slowly spreading through the rug under his head. Janet in her pretty evening dress was lying limply in an easy-chair near by. There was a crude smear of blood across her cheek. A gun had slipped from her hand to the floor, and a stale smell of gunpowder hung on the air.

Neill's heart stood still. He ran to the girl and flung his arms around her. Her body was warm; she breathed; there was no wound on her. Upon wiping her face he saw that the blood was not hers. He crushed her to his breast, trembling in the reaction from his first terrible fear.

Leaving her for a moment, he dropped to his knees beside the body on the floor. Fanning was dead, all right, but to Neill's astonishment there was still warmth in his body. If only he had come a few minutes sooner! He saw that the hole in his forehead was a wound of egress. He had been shot in the back of his head and the gun had been held so close that his hair was singed.

Neill glanced toward the door that he had burst in. Its key was on the inside. All the portholes were closed and fastened. To his mind there was only one possible explanation. Fanning had attacked Janet and she had shot him. Neill had no thought of blame for her; he approved her courage. Lucky that she had the gun. Where had she got it?

He carried her out into the saloon and laid her on a couch. There was a thermos jug on a stand near by. He sprinkled water in her face and bathed her temples.

Meanwhile he had to make the greatest decision of his life. The trained sleuth in him said: She shot this man and we'll have to face it out together. She'll be acquitted, of course. But the man in him thought of how she would be dragged through the mud—Janet! whom he had always laughed at and loved for her delicate ways! And how, after acquittal, fingers would forever point her out as a murderess. I don't care what the evidence is, the man in him said, she *couldn't have done it*. And I'm going to keep her under cover until I can prove it!

She opened her eyes and looked around so wildly and senselessly that Neill feared for her reason.

“Janet!” he murmured. “This is Neill. Don’t you know me, dear?”

Recognition came into her eyes, and like a frightened child she flung her arms around his neck. “Neill! Neill!”

“It’s me, all right.”

“You’ve come!” she murmured in a passion of relief. “I knew you’d come!”

He soothed her silently.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Let’s not talk about it now, dear. I have you safe!”

“Oh, take me away from this horrible place!” she moaned. “Take me away! Take me away!”

He set his jaw and considered. He was on the other side now; he was the hunted instead of the hunter. Quite a different thing. No powerful department to back him up now. Strictly on his own. Where could he find Janet a hideout? The obvious thing was to hire a car and drive to town; but a car could be traced and in that case his usefulness as her defender would be over. He must be on the spot in order to discover the truth of this affair. Where could he put her under cover in this unfamiliar neck of the woods? Suddenly he thought of the dark ships up river.

“Take me away! Take me away!” murmured Janet.

“Okay, Jen. We’re getting out of this.”

Running back into the after cabin, he snatched up her velvet wrap where it lay on a chair. It was a flimsy garment. Apparently that and the gauzy evening dress was all she had. Not enough to keep her warm in an open boat. He picked up a traveling-rug that lay folded on a seat locker, and returning to the saloon, wrapped her in it. She clung to him. Carrying her up on deck and down the ladder, he deposited her in the stern seat of the skiff.

He paused to make sure that everything was straight in his mind. Must take food. He started back aboard the yacht.

Janet raised up, instantly wild with terror. “Don’t leave me!”

“Only to get something to eat. Back in a jiff.”

In the pantry adjoining the dining-saloon on deck he found a refrigerator stocked with cooked food of various sorts. He packed everything hastily in a tin bread-box along with the bread and ran out on deck again.

“Hurry! Hurry!” murmured Janet in the skiff alongside.

“Half a moment!”

He gave a hasty glance in the direction of the shore. All quiet there. Remembering a flashlight he had seen on the bookcase in the saloon, he ran down to get it. While below he thought of something else. In the after cabin he dropped to his knees beside the dead man, and went through his pockets. Finding the little photograph of Janet that Fanning had taken from him the night before, he transferred it to his own pocket, and hastened up on deck.

Casting off the painter of his skiff, he ran out the oars and pulled toward the open water.

AS NEILL rowed along with the lights of the village on his left, it was still only about nine o'clock and there was plenty of life in the place. He could see shadowy figures passing under the street lights, while the sounds of dogs barking, motor horns and male laughter from the porch of Longcope's store reached his ears. Farther along he could hear the harsh sounds of canned music coming through the open windows of the moving-picture theater.

At Absalom's Point he lay on his oars for a moment, debating whether it might not be better to row across the bay. It was a calm night and he could have made it in safety. Nobody would think of looking for Janet over there. But it was fifteen miles and he couldn't possibly get back before daylight. Nor visit her there. No. Better the ships. So he turned the point and rowed on up the wide river, passing along the other side of the village.

The sight of Janet bowed and silent under her blanket wrenched him with pain. After what she had been through what could he say to her? To have tried to make light talk would sound like mockery. In the end it was Janet who spoke.

"Where was Fanning when you came aboard the yacht?"

Neill thought her mind was wandering. "Never mind him," he said, gruffly. "He won't trouble you any more."

"Did you kill him?" she asked, simply.

"Don't want to talk about it," said Neill.

"All right," she said, perfectly docile. "Nothing matters as long as we are together."

He hated to think of leaving her alone in her present condition. But there was no help for that. It would be impossible to trust anybody he didn't know

to take care of her. Travis County, Maryland, was a peninsula remote from the great world and he judged that its people at the best were inclined to be suspicious of strangers. Somehow or other he must take care of Janet, and save her, too.

“I’m so thirsty!” she presently murmured, like a child.

Neill’s heart sunk for he had forgotten water. He looked along the village front. It would not be too easy for a stranger to obtain water. If he went to somebody’s well it would lead to awkward questions. And he had nothing to carry water in.

The main and only road into the village came down along the river shore before striking across the neck to the harbor in front of Longcope’s. Midway along this road he distinguished the lighted front of a store. One could always buy something to drink. In front of the store the usual little pier ran out into the river. The water was shallower on this side and it was a long pier. Janet could remain hidden in the dark at the end of it.

He hesitated. There was a terrible risk in landing now. If he were seen he would be remembered. However, it had to be taken. He rowed in and tied the skiff to the end of the pier.

“What’s this for?” she asked, nervously.

“I’m going to get water for you.”

“No. No. I don’t want water.”

“We’ve got to have water.”

“Can’t I come with you?”

“Your dress would attract too much attention.”

“Ah, don’t be long,” she said, with a catch in her breath.

He walked in over the creaking planks, climbed the bank, crossed the road, and entered the store. It was a much smaller and tidier store than Longcope’s and business was not so good. The little old man who kept it was grateful to the unlooked-for customer. Neill bought two bottles of carbonated water.

On his way out of the store a sedan coming from the direction of town passed rapidly and slid to a quick stop a short distance beyond. Neill had an uncomfortable feeling that this stop was in some way connected with himself. Somebody was looking out of the back window, the face merely a grayish blur through the glass.

There was nothing he could do about it. He hastened down the bank and out over the pier. Janet let out a shaking breath of relief at the sight of him. The car went on and turned the corner. Presently a car came back, but Neill couldn't tell if it was the same one.

They went on, and finally passed the last houses of the village. Now there was a dark field between the road and the river. Neill had rowed upwards of two miles, but he was still only some hundreds of yards from the yacht across the neck of land. Suddenly from the dark shore a light flashed out over the water and searched the river up and down. It was evidently a strong electric torch held in somebody's hand.

Neill pulled the skiff's head around and rowed farther out into the river. He couldn't be sure whether or not the light had picked them up, and a nasty anxiety attacked him. Why should anybody stand on the shore, casting his light over the water, unless he were looking for them? And who could be looking for them? Who could guess that they were about to pass that spot? The light went out, and nothing came of it, but Neill's anxiety remained.

He rowed on, keeping about a furlong off the shore. The opposite shore was invisible in the dark. Here and there at long distances a dim light showed in the window of a farmhouse, and up river the red light of a gas buoy twinkled off and on, marking some shoal. With every pull of Neill's oars two little eddies of phosphorescence swirled astern. A soft breeze from the south sprang up.

Janet exclaimed, "What's that?"

Looking over his shoulder, Neill saw the masts and the funnels of the four great ships rising against the stars. "The German ships turned over to us after the war are moored here," he said.

"Who would expect to find them here!" she murmured.

Neill thought it over. It was a desperate chance to take, but any way you looked at it their situation was desperate. If there were only four men aboard, it was not enough to keep a close watch at night. In one of the cabins below he could make Janet comfortable. Where could he hope to find a better hiding-place?

"Jen," he said, "what would you say to going aboard one of the empty ships to hide until we can decide what's best to be done? Would you be afraid?"

"Not if you were with me, Neill."

He pulled up to the outermost ship. Her smooth steel side rose towering over their heads like a cliff, ghostly and awe-inspiring in the night. No sound came from aboard her.

“How could we get on?” whispered Janet.

“That’s just the question,” said Neill, with a brief laugh.

He rowed softly on around the flotilla. The big ships lay side by side and staggered; that is to say the first pointing downstream, the second upstream and so on. Each was double anchored at the bow, and further secured at the stern by steel cables running to groups of piles driven deep into the river bottom. There were no openings in the hulls, no protuberances to climb up by, no convenient ropes left dangling. The sheer bulk of the silent vessels was overpowering.

About two hundred yards separated the inside vessel from the shore. This ship had a wooden stairway let down over her side, with a platform at the bottom having several skiffs tied to it. Neill dared not use the stairway, since if a watch was kept anywhere on board it would certainly be at the head of it. High above their heads there was a light showing in the captain’s quarters on the bridge of this vessel. All else was dark.

Neill rowed on until he had completed a full circuit of the ships. He saw that he could not climb aboard by the anchor chains. They disappeared into hawse-holes in the bows and from these holes there was no way of reaching the deck. His best bet appeared to be one of the steel cables on the third ship from the shore. This cable passed under the rail of the lower deck astern, an out-of-the-way part of the ship where no watchman was likely to be lurking.

“Will you stay in the skiff while I climb aboard?” he asked.

“Can’t I come with you?” she said, piteously.

“You couldn’t climb over this cable.”

She drew a long breath to steady herself. “Very well, I will wait.”

Neill tied the skiff to the bunch of piles and, divesting himself of jacket and boots, stood on the seat and sprang for the cable over his head, his legs kicking in the air. The way seemed endless and he slowed down more and more as his arms tired. It required a powerful effort of the will to cover the last few yards. Finally he was able to grasp the rail and draw himself up.

He found himself on a little working-deck aft, much cluttered with coiled hawsers and the steam steering-gear of the vessel. In order to get forward he had to climb a ladder. This brought him to the upper promenade

deck. It was an endless and ghostly promenade now, lined with dark windows that were like watching eyes. He tried every door that opened on deck, but all were locked. Even if he succeeded in bringing Janet aboard he would still have the problem of getting her under shelter. He crossed over to the outermost vessel.

Had anybody approached, there was no cover anywhere in the promenades, and he ascended by a deck ladder to the boat deck. Here, with the boats hanging from the davits, the ventilators and innumerable other objects, he had plenty of cover. In his stocking feet he proceeded noiselessly from one shadow to the next, pausing often to peer through the dark and to listen.

This vessel was the largest of the four and from the boat deck he overlooked the other ships. He searched the decks for any glimmer of light that might reveal a watchman on his rounds. Nothing showed. The windows in the captain's quarters on the first ship were now as dark as the rest. The four great hulks lay under the stars like ships of the dead.

At the forward end of the boat deck he descended two ladders to the main deck, and explored as well as he was able in the dark. There was no sound except the endless gentle lapping of the water against the steel hulls. From this deck there was a wooden gangway over to the next vessel. The ships were kept in pretty good order, but of necessity there was a lot of spare gear of all sorts lying about the decks.

Returning to the promenade deck (this ship was pointing upstream) Neill was able to search along the port side with his flashlight, since he was hidden here both from the other ships and from the shore. On a ring-buoy hanging from the rail he read her name: *Abraham Lincoln*. He saw several odd-shaped bundles against the wall, and upon examining them closely discovered, to his joy, that they were rope ladders with wooden steps of the sort that sailors call "Jacob's ladders." Here was a way of getting Janet safe aboard.

But first he felt he must satisfy himself as to how much watching was done aboard these ships at night. He crept across the gangway to the next ship and explored the deck, watching and listening, taking advantage of every bit of cover; then to the next; and finally to the last, the one nearest the shore. He knew that this vessel was inhabited.

She was of an older type of construction and had two promenade decks, upper and lower. It was from the lower deck that the stairway led down to the small boats that gave the ships' caretakers communication with the

shore. Neill crouched at the corner and, peeping around, stretched his ears to listen.

He heard a sound. Gradually it resolved itself into a gentle snoring. He crept forward pressing his body against the wall, pausing between each step to listen. Dimly he made out the shape of a deck chair before him, with a man's body in it, relaxed, snoring. Here was the watchman.

Noiselessly he backed away around the corner, and made haste to return across the four decks joined by gangplanks. He figured that he could have Janet aboard in a few minutes, and certainly he would get no better opportunity than now while the watchman was taking a nap.

He unrolled the Jacob's ladder, and lashing the end to the rail, lowered it overboard. Stripping to his underclothes, he stuffed shirt and breeches behind the other ladders, and went overside. At the bottom of the ladder he let himself noiselessly into the water, and struck out toward the spot where he had left the skiff.

When the little boat loomed before him a sudden fear gripped him because he couldn't see Janet's figure outlined against the night sky. The skiff appeared to be empty. He caught hold of the gunwale and pulling himself up, spoke her name:

"Janet!"

She answered him from the bottom of the skiff in a scarcely audible voice: "Neill! . . . O, Neill!"

He hastily climbed in. "What's the matter, Jen? . . . I can't touch you because I'm dripping wet. Did anything happen while I was gone?"

"Somebody is watching us!" she whispered.

"How could that be out here in the dark? What makes you think so?"

"I saw him, Neill. . . . Another skiff stole up. It came so quietly I didn't hear anything. I turned my head and there it was. Quite close. With a single figure in it. Watching. I thought maybe you had got a boat somewhere and I spoke your name. . . . He never answered. . . ."

"Did he speak at all?"

"No. Just faded into the darkness. . . . I thought you would never come!"

Neill suspected that this was a hallucination. Janet had been talking wildly ever since he had found her. If anybody *had* become suspicious of

their movements he would naturally raise an alarm. Just to hover around them, watching, wasn't good sense. . . . But there might be something in it!

However, the die was cast now. It was too late to look for another hiding-place. He intended to sink the skiff, and he hoped that they couldn't be traced aboard the ship, anyhow.

"It's all right, Jen," he said, with assumed cheerfulness. "Just an accidental meeting in the dark. Probably a fisherman visiting his nets. . . . The fact that he went right away shows that he means us no harm."

He cast off the line and rowed back toward the ship. Before approaching the ladder he lay on his oars, listening. There was no sound, and certainly he could see as far through the dark as anybody else could. Satisfied that nobody was watching them, he rowed on and, tying the skiff to the Jacob's ladder, started up, telling Janet to follow him.

On deck he had already picked out a coil of steel cable as heavy as he could lift, and a light rope. Tying the rope to the coil, he lowered it overboard, and hitching the rope to a stanchion, set Janet to watch at the corner of the deckhouse, and went down the ladder again. He tied the steel cable to a seat of the skiff, and thrust the oars under so that they could not float free. Then tying the box of food and the rug to the end of the rope, he stood on the gunwale of the skiff until she took water, filled and sank.

Returning to the deck, he pulled up their supplies and drew in the ladder. As he was rolling up the ladder, Janet came to him.

"There's a man coming across the decks," she whispered. "He has a light."

"Take off your shoes," said Neill.

He stood the rolled up ladder alongside the others, and snatching up their belongings, ran aft with Janet at his heels. As they reached the after ladder and went up, the light was visible up forward, but they were beyond reach of its rays. They ran forward on the boat deck. With his pocket-knife Neill cut one of the ropes that fastened down the canvas cover of a lifeboat. Helping Janet under it, he followed her into the boat.

Peeping out under the cover, he saw the light mounting the ladder astern and coming toward them. He ducked. Soon they could hear the leisurely footsteps of the watchman. He stopped alongside where they lay, and Neill held his breath. Janet's hand convulsively gripped his. There was a moment of horrible suspense; then they heard a match struck, the watchman puffed at his pipe and moved on.

Neill quivered with inward laughter. "He might as well catch us as scare us to death," he whispered.

Looking out under the cover, he saw the man going down the forward ladder. After giving him a moment, he climbed out of the boat and, creeping forward, peeped over the edge of the deck. He saw the watchman returning over the gangplank with his lantern, and let out a long breath of relief.

★ VI ★

WHEN NEILL had changed to dry garments they set about finding some way into the ship. All the cabin doors were locked, but alongside the engine-room skylight above the boat deck they found a booby hatch with a door which had no lock. Neill opened it, and cast his light down into the bowels of the ship. A spidery iron stairway descended into the pit, back and forth from landing to landing. Far at the bottom gleamed the cylinder heads of the engine.

“Come on!” he said.

“Not down there!” murmured Janet, hanging back.

It was as forbidding as the entrance to hell and Neill could not blame her. You had the feeling that there was something at the bottom of that blackness waiting for you. However, he laughed it off.

“The whole ship is ours,” he said. “We can go where we like.”

“There’s no place to sleep in the engine-room.”

“There must be some way down here of reaching the engineer’s quarters, and from there the rest of the ship.”

He started down the ringing iron stairs, with Janet following gingerly. Back and forth and ever deeper into the hold without finding any opening in the smooth steel walls of the shaft. However softly they stepped, the place was full of echoes. Finally when they had almost reached the top of the engine they came to a steel door on a landing, and upon opening it found themselves in a little corridor. Various cabins opened off it with enameled signs over the doors: Second Engineer; Third Engineer; Engineers’ Mess, and so on.

“If this is their mess, there must be some way of reaching the galley from here,” said Neill. “And from the galley we can get into the dining-

saloon.”

The cabins had been stripped of movables, but there were still quaint reminders of the officers who had once occupied them; pictures tacked to the walls, rusty pens on the desks, a stained pen-wiper. Behind one of the doors Neill found a good oilskin coat that he took possession of.

The air of the corridors was close and dusty. Though the vessel had long been out of use, the characteristic ship’s smell still clung to her, a smell compounded of paint, oakum, grease, with a faint admixture of bilge water. As they pushed through doors and turned corners Janet murmured, fearfully:

“Will we ever be able to find our way back again?”

Neill laughed. “Our motto is forward! Honey.”

They found the galley, an immense room with a cooking-range extending almost the whole width of the ship. It had not been thought worth while to remove the pots and pans, and the place looked ready to start breakfast. The bunkers alongside the range were still full of coal.

Beyond lay bakery, butcher shop, refrigerating-rooms and pantries. They pushed open a swinging-door and found themselves in a saloon big enough to seat six or seven hundred people. Their flashlight was not strong enough to reach into the corners. The chairs had been removed, but the tables remained fixed to the floor. Neill’s light picked up a piano against the wall. Putting down his burdens, he turned back the cover and struck a few chords.

“The Ocean Blues!” he said, grinning.

Janet laid her hands on his. “Don’t! Don’t!”

“Nobody can hear us.”

“It isn’t that. The music fills the ship with ghosts!”

From amongst the litter of things stored in the big saloon Neill picked a coil of thin strong rope and a ball of tarred twine that he said would come in handy. Adding these things to his burdens, he led the way up the grand stairway. He figured that the saloon was on E deck, starting with the boat deck as A. On D deck they found sleeping-cabins, but they were narrow and cramped.

“The most expensive accommodations are above,” he said, grinning. “We might as well take the best.”

On C deck the rooms were bigger and arranged *en suite*, each with its bathroom. They confined themselves to the port side of the vessel—that is to

say, the side with windows looking away from the shore. Neill would not be satisfied until he had opened each door and looked in. Amidships they found a suite larger and more luxurious than any other. It consisted of a parlor with a bedroom on either side. The parlor had two pairs of French windows opening out on a little private veranda or deck, with a row of heavy plate-glass windows overlooking the water.

“This is certainly the royal suite,” he said. “Just our style.”

Janet, who had borne herself with good courage since coming aboard, began to shake when the strain relaxed. “Oh, Neill!” she faltered.

He took her in his arms and, dropping on a sofa, held her close until she quieted. What she had been through was too terrible to be talked about yet. Whatever had happened, she was dearer to him than his life.

Afterwards he opened the windows to sweeten the air. The whole suite was paneled in rare woods. The movable articles had been carried away, but the thick carpets still covered the floor, the luxurious overstuffed couches were in place, as well as the built-in furniture which matched the paneling; wardrobes, cabinets, dressing-tables, desks. He called Janet’s attention to the stout bolts on the inside of every door.

“You will feel safe behind those when I have to leave you.”

“Leave me?” she said, apprehensively.

“We can’t stay here indefinitely. We have food enough for only two days and two bottles of water. I have to find out what is going on, and get you clothes and make arrangements for a complete getaway.”

“Well . . . I can do it if I must,” she said.

“You’ll be safe here,” said Neill. “The fact that they keep all the doors locked proves that they never trouble the cabins of the ships. The decks and the engines keep them busy.”

Neill suddenly remembered that he had not eaten anything during the past strenuous twelve hours. They spread out their provender on the cabin table and he hung the flashlight upside down from the ceiling to give them light. They feasted on cold meat, bread and butter, pickles and salad, and because they were young and in love they forgot danger for a little while.

“I wonder if any couple before us ever had a whole twenty-five-thousand-ton ship to themselves,” said Neill, grinning.

When he looked in Janet's clear eyes he was relieved of the fear that her mind was deranged. Still some of the things she said rang queerly, as when he told her he would leave her his gun and she said:

"I wouldn't know how to use it."

Neill made no comment.

Later she said, tremulously, "You are so good to me, Neill!"

"Why the hell shouldn't I be good to you?" he growled.

"Not one word of reproach for me!"

"I'm so darn glad to get you back there's no room for reproaches."

When they had finished eating and cleared away, Neill unrolled his coil of light rope. Even had they been able to bring it down from the deck, the Jacob's ladder was too heavy for Janet to haul up after he had gone or to lower for him when he came again, and he planned to make a rope ladder to take its place. Cutting off short lengths for the cross pieces, he showed her how to knot them so they wouldn't slip, and the two of them worked away together under the light.

"You haven't asked me what happened," Janet said, with her head down.

"You don't have to tell me now unless you feel like it," Neill said, quickly.

"Certainly. You have to be told. . . . Fanning was just what you said he was. I was a fool."

"We all are."

"He actually planned to carry me down to Cuba on his yacht. He said that before we got there I . . . I . . ." She blushed deeply.

"You would become reconciled to your fate and wouldn't leave him?" put in Neill.

"Yes."

"He had a hell of a good conceit of himself, didn't he? . . . How did he inveigle you aboard?"

"He said that the yacht had been offered to him at a great bargain, and suggested that we have dinner aboard and look her over. There were some other people coming, a Mr. and Mrs. Westbrook, so it seemed all right. . . ."

"Decoys," put in Neill.

“We had dinner, and afterwards, when Fanning wanted to show me over the yacht, the Westbrooks said it was too nice sitting on deck, so we left them there and went below. When we had looked at everything and came back on deck, they weren’t where we had left them, but I thought they were somewhere about. I suspected nothing. Fanning suggested that we take a little run down the harbor to see how she worked. He said I could steer her, and I was as pleased as a child. . . . Oh, what a fool I was!”

“Never mind that,” said Neill. “Go on.”

“We were tied up to the Standard Oil dock in Canton, taking fuel oil. The sailors cast off the ropes and we went down to Fort Carroll. When I said we must turn back, Fanning’s manner changed. He took me away from the wheel and a sailor steered. Fanning said we weren’t ever going back any more. At first I thought he was joking. When I saw that he meant it, I looked for the Westbrooks. It was then that I found they had slipped ashore while we were below.

“What could I do? We were in the mouth of the river a couple of miles from shore, and it was useless to cry for help. The sailors were all afraid of Fanning and they couldn’t help me. They steered away from the main channel so that I could not call for help if we passed another vessel. Fanning wasn’t rough with me at all; he . . . he . . .”

“He made out he was in love with you,” suggested Neill, grimly.

“Yes. He said there would be no compulsion on me. That I should be perfectly free and my own mistress until such time as I was ready to come to him. But that was all talk. However, he gave me the after cabin to myself, and there was a key in the door so that I could lock myself in. But oh, Neill! what a terrible night!

“There was some kind of accident in the engine-room. We were stopped for a long time, and then went on slowly. When it became light I saw that we had run into a harbor alongside a village, but I didn’t know where it was. Fanning was in an ugly temper because the accident had upset all his plans. He told me I would have to stay below as long as we lay in harbor.”

“How did you get word to me?” asked Neill.

“McGee, the engineer, had to take up part of my cabin floor to look at the propeller shaft. He was a decent sort of man; he looked as if he was sorry for me. Fanning was with him, watching. When I learned from their talk that McGee had to go to Baltimore, I wrote your room number at the

Stafford on a piece of paper—I knew you were registered under an assumed name—and slipped it to him when Fanning wasn't looking.”

“Good trick!”

“All day I stayed below. They brought me my meals in the saloon. In the evening Fanning sent the rest of the crew ashore to go to the movies. Through the porthole I saw them rowing away. Shortly after that Fanning came into my cabin without knocking, and I saw that he had turned ugly. . . . He locked the door behind him. . . .”

Janet began to shake pitifully. “That’s all I can remember,” she faltered. “I must have fainted through terror. The next thing I knew I was out in the saloon and you were speaking to me.”

“Did you have a gun?” asked Neill.

“Yes. I forgot that. After McGee had left my cabin I found it under the sofa. I supposed that he had left it there for me.”

“Where was the gun when Fanning came in?”

“Lying on the table in my cabin. . . . Why are you asking me these questions about the gun?” she added, nervously.

“When I broke in the door of your cabin Fanning was shot dead,” said Neill.

She stared at him in horror. “O my God! What are you saying? . . . I didn't shoot him, Neill! I swear it!”

He kissed her. He didn't believe her. Most likely the truth was that she had snatched up the pistol, mad with terror, and had shot the man without knowing what she was doing. Anyhow, he loved her, and what difference did it make? In fact, he hoped that she had shot Fanning.

He could not bring himself to question her further in her present shaken state. He said, lightly:

“Hold up a minute until I measure off how much ladder we've got. It was forty-two feet from the rail of the promenade deck to the water, and I figure we'll need thirty-three here.”

Janet was as eager to drop the subject as he was, and so it was allowed to lie.

When the ladder was finished he contrived a simple signal for the purpose of letting her know when to let it down to him. He fastened the

twine to the catch of a wall cabinet, and leading it out across the little deck and through a window, let it hang overside. A single strand of brown twine would never be noticed. When it was pulled the door of the cabinet flew open. They laughed at the simplicity of the gadget.

Wrapping Janet in the rug, Neill made her lie down on the dusty sofa and sat on the floor, soothing her like a child until her eyes grew heavy and finally closed. After kissing her to make sure that she slept, he went out on the little deck and, stripping off his clothes, wrapped them in the oilskin coat and tied it securely. Slings this bundle over his back he climbed out of the window, went down the rope ladder, and slipped into the water. Janet could pull up the ladder when she woke.

★ VII ★

WHEN NEILL emerged from the water he saw a dim light a couple of hundred yards off to his left. After dressing and hiding the oilskin coat in the bush, he walked along the beach to investigate. It proved to be a night light in the upper window of an old farmhouse on the river bank. Below the bank was a little wharf and tied to the wharf was a skiff with oars in her. Neill noted it with satisfaction. This would be convenient for the coming night.

Making a *détour* around the house, he gained the driveway that served it, and was led out to the state road at a point about a mile from the village. The first faint streaks of dawn were beginning to appear in the east when he reached the hotel. The outer door was unlocked and he stole up to his room without meeting anybody.

He slept for an hour. His anxieties would not permit him to rest any longer, and he was up and sitting on the porch of the store next door before any other person in the village was stirring. The *Nadji* lay out in the harbor, clean cut in the pure light of morning. White paint, mahogany, and brass all spick and span; nothing to suggest that a dead man lay aboard. Her dinghy was tied to a boom amidships, so the crew must have returned. Neill waited for developments.

At seven o'clock Virgil Longcope came down the little hill back of the store, whistling out of tune and swinging a big key. He was a leathery, middle-sized man wearing a wrinkled store suit of no particular color, and a derby hat placed just so. This outfit made him stand out amongst the boots and jumpers of the other villagers. Virgil had a cracked voice, a bright eye and an expression of sly good humor.

“Hello, stranger! You’re up early.”

“Well, I came down here to get a little sea air,” said Neill, “and this is the best time of day to smell it.”

“I reckon,” said Virgil, “though I don’t notice it myself no more. You ought to been here when the fish-fertilizer factory across the harbor was working. Gemmen! we had strong air then!”

Neill laughed to humor him. He thought: The killing is not yet known or he would certainly say something about it.

Having opened up his store, Virgil sat down beside Neill and chewed his cigar. “A man enjoys what he ain’t accustomed to,” he said. “I like to look at people in the street, and you like to look at blue water. I go to town for the noise and you come down here for quiet. I like to wake up in town and get a whiff of coal smoke through the window, while you sit here and sniff the fish factory.”

“Reckon nothing much ever happens down here,” Neill said, offhand.

“I wouldn’t say that,” said Virgil, cautiously. “Of course we don’t get in the newspapers” (You will today, thought Neill), “but there’s a power happens in this village that don’t meet the eye.”

The principal wharf of the place extended out in front of the store, and the whole panorama of village life unrolled before them: men on their way to work in the shipyard, professional fishermen chugging in from the bay with the night’s catch, and amateurs starting out with lunch-baskets and tackle. No sign of movement aboard the yacht *Nadji* as yet. One of Virgil’s first customers was a mild old man who drove up in a faded sedan.

“’Morning, Captain Bickel!” sang Virgil. They went into the store together.

Neill remembered that this was the name of the caretaker of the big ships, and kept his eye on the door so that he could put himself in Captain Bickel’s way when he came out. He wanted information.

Meanwhile the lanky fisherman who answered to the name of Jake had taken a seat on the other end of Neill’s bench. Neill said, just to make conversation:

“Mr. Longcope is quite a character.”

“’Deed I doggone swear is he,” said Jake. “He’s a character, Virgil is. He loves a dicker. He’ll take half a day to overreach you a dollar’s worth, and hand you five. Everybody cusses Virgil out, but he gets their vote when he wants to run for anything. He owns pret’ near ev’thing hereabouts, the

best farms, the best timber, but he don't never grow rich because he's too soft-hearted. Come a hard winter when the river freezes over and there's no oystering or fishing, this village would starve if it wasn't for Virgil. He carries them all."

When Captain Bickel came out of the store with his purchases he found Neill standing beside his car.

"'Morning, Captain. I saw your ships when I came down the road yesterday. Is a person allowed to go aboard?"

"You have to get a permit from the Department of Commerce, young man. I ain't authorized to let anybody aboard."

"Do you have many visitors?"

"No, sir. Them ships has been forgotten. Nobody asks to go aboard and if they did the Department ain't over-anxious to issue permits."

"Why is that?"

"We're afraid of fire. Don't want folks moseying around on board and maybe dropping cigarette butts."

"I suppose they send down inspectors from time to time."

"Oh, sure, the first of every month."

Two weeks! thought Neill. He said: "The cabins must be fixed up pretty fine."

"Sure. But we don't trouble the cabins. We lock 'em up and keep 'em locked. Our job is to keep the hulls free of rust and the engines greased."

"How many men have you?"

"Four of us sleep aboard. Me, my foreman, and a couple watchmen. I hire what painters and oilers I need by the day."

"Must be pretty lonely at night, just the four of you on those big ships."

"We sticks pretty close together," said the old man, with a grin.

He drove back up the road. What Neill had learned was all to the good—as far as it went.

He looked out at the *Nadji*. Still no sign of life aboard. The suspense was hard to bear. Virgil Longcope rejoined him on the porch.

A new gray sedan drove up. In it there were two men wearing fishing-clothes, and the back compartment was heaped with a tent, folding-cots and

other camping impedimenta. Of the two passengers one was middle-aged, spare of frame, with lanky blond hair hanging over his forehead, a long nose, and a hearty, voluble manner. The other was as different a type as could be; young, husky, dark-skinned and silent, yet they were stamped as father and son.

The older man got out. "Good morning, gentlemen! Good morning! Which of you is the storekeeper?"

"Me," said Virgil, turning over his well-chewed cigar.

The other thrust out his hand. "Delighted to meet you, Mr. Longcope. The name is Horace Kettering, lawyer of Baltimore. Yonder is my son Horace junior."

Neill took sharp notice of the speaker. Strange that this man whom he had looked for in vain should turn up now! It was too late to ask him questions about Fanning, but as a friend of Janet's family he might be a source of help.

"What can I do for you?" asked Virgil.

"Me and my son have come down for a few days' fishing," said Kettering. "We like to camp out, get close to nature and all that, you know, and I wanted to ask you if there was any place near by where we could pitch our tent?"

"Sure. Just keep on around the harbor road, and on the other side of the point you will come to a little open field. That has always been used as common land. The campers pitch there."

"Much obliged," said Kettering. "How's fishing?"

"Not bad," said Longcope. "There's no rock yet, but plenty of hard-head. And the trout are biting."

"Bait?"

"O, any God's amount of soft crabs."

Kettering threw up his head and sniffed the fresh morning air. "This is great, gentlemen. A man works himself near to death in the city, and what does he get out of it? A couple of days' fishing a year!"

"Work's a damn bad habit," said Longcope.

Kettering turned to Neill. "And you?" he asked.

"Ford Wheatley."

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Wheatley. You’re a stranger in the village, I take it.”

“Yes. Down for the fishing like yourself.”

“Fine! You must come out with my son and me as our guests. . . . Well, I’ll be seeing you, gentlemen.” He saluted them and climbed back in the car. The son had not opened his mouth.

There was something about his busy tongue and darting eyes that made Neill uneasy. This was not a man he could trust.

“A talkative cuss!” he remarked to Virgil.

“Yeah,” said Virgil, turning the cigar. “Looks like a case of the fox fathering the bull-pup.”

★ VIII ★

AT that moment Neill saw a white-coated figure appear on the *Nadji's* deck, run wildly forward, and disappear through a door. He forgot the Ketterings. The man reappeared on deck with his two mates. They ran into the after house. Presently they came on deck again, flung themselves anyhow into the dinghy, and started pulling crazily for the shore. Neill steeled himself for what was coming.

Virgil, who had not noticed anything amiss, was talking amiably about the city slickers he had known. The men in the dinghy tied their little boat to the wharf in front of the store and came running across the road, white-faced and staring with horror. Virgil broke off suddenly.

“What the heck is the matter with these three fellers?”

“Police!” they gasped out. “We want the police! . . . Where can we find the police?” All three were young men without experience, and they had completely lost their heads. A steward in his white coat and two sailors.

Their hysterical excitement made Virgil sore. “What’s the matter with you?” he demanded. “We ain’t got no police here. What do you want police for?”

All tried to explain at once. “Murder, mister! . . . There’s been a murder aboard the yacht! . . . The owner is murdered! . . . A bullet right through his head! . . . Must have been shot last night when we was ashore . . . We slept on board all night without knowing it. . . .”

Virgil stood up suddenly. “Murder!” he gasped. “My God!”

Neill’s nerves quivered at the sound of the ugly word. “Murder!” he echoed. “How terrible!”

“And the girl is gone!” cried the steward.

“What girl?” demanded Virgil.

All three spoke together. “We had a girl on board . . . the boss’s girl . . . and she’s gone! How could she get off? The other boat’s on the davits . . .”

“One at a time!” shouted Virgil, waving his hands. “You, Jake, run and fetch the doctor. You men come in the store!”

Neill followed them inside. As a stranger he was disregarded. Virgil, being the leading citizen, felt that it was up to him to take command of the situation, but it was a bit too much for him. He flung his derby hat on the counter and ran his hands through his hair as if he would tear it out. “Keep cool! Keep cool!” he shouted.

Every time he asked a question he got three answers. The crew, it seemed, could not agree on the simplest statement of fact. Out of the confusion Neill could only pick a phrase here and there.

“Found him when I took his morning coffee down. . . . In the girl’s cabin . . . The door was busted in. . . . There was a hell of a fight while we were ashore. . . . You’re crazy! It was the boss himself busted the door in! . . . Nothing else was disturbed. . . . We don’t know who the girl was. . . . Real nice, quiet girl. . . . We were aboard last night before ten-thirty. . . .”

It was no part of Neill’s game to try to bring order out of the confusion. He listened with taut nerves.

Virgil looked at him in a distracted fashion, forgetting he was a stranger. “Reckon I better call up the county constable.”

“It’s the obvious thing to do.”

“But he’s a farmer. He don’t know nothing.”

“Call him anyway.”

Virgil sent his clerk running to make the call.

“And Mr. Button Billings, the J.P.”—he went on pulling his hair—“he’ll have to be in on this. He’s an old grandmother, that’s what *he* is. O my God! He’ll ball everything up, and the newspapers will call us hicks and mossbacks and stick-in-the-muds!”

Neill said nothing. If things got balled up it would be like money in his pocket.

“If I only knew where to lay my hands on the proper man to handle the case!” said Virgil. After taking an agitated turn back and forth, his face cleared. “I know what I’ll do. I’ll get Mark Bonniger. He’s a man-of-the-

world, and he's one of us. We don't want no foreigners hornin' in. Mark will tell us how to do everything right."

When the clerk returned he was sent back to call up Mark Bonniger and also the justice of the peace. "Tell Mr. Button Billings to come straight to the yacht. He lives across the harbor."

Virgil ran out of the store, accompanied by the crew. At the door they met the doctor coming in, and carried him with them. All five of them piled into the yacht's dinghy, loading her almost to the gunwale. "No more room!" they cried when Neill made to follow them, and rowed away. Neill was left on the wharf.

Like a wireless flash word of the murder had spread from one end of the village to the other. Men, women, and children stopped everything and came running to the harbor. Nothing like this had ever happened in Absalom's. Housework was suspended, the stores shut up and fish were left without ice. The excitement in every face made Neill sore. What is it to them? he thought.

At first they contented themselves with lining up along the harbor road, staring out at the yacht and passing the same bits of information back and forth. Then one man jumped in his skiff. Immediately there was a stampede for the skiffs and a whole flotilla set out, rowing swiftly to the yacht. Women and children were left ashore.

Neill was unable to obtain a place in a skiff until Jake, the fisherman, got the idea of starting a ferry at two bits a head. Thus some minutes had passed before he got aboard the yacht.

The saloon below was packed to suffocation. The men had pulled off their hats out of respect to the dead, and were pushing and shoving to get a glimpse through the door of the after cabin. Neill worked his way through them. Everything that happened here was of vital importance to him. He was tall enough to look over a good many heads and he saw Virgil, and the doctor helped by the two sailors, examining the body, searching his pockets and so on. The young steward sat on the starboard locker, holding his head between his hands.

Everything in the room was being well pawed over in the search for "evidence," including the gun, and Neill smiled grimly to himself. Lucky he had only these hicks to deal with! He saw Virgil pick up the bullet on the floor beside the port seat locker, and hold it up for all to see.

Virgil was continually issuing orders without taking any steps to see if they were carried out. “Quit your shoving, men! Ain’t you got no sense of what is fitting? . . . The girl must have swum ashore. She couldn’t have got far. You, Tom Bolling, organize a posse among the men and search the woods across the harbor. Send a car up the road, somebody, to stop at every house and ask if she applied for shelter!”

A voice from the crowd said, “Somebody stole my skiff last night.”

“Well, then, maybe she tried to escape in that,” said Virgil. “A woman couldn’t row far. All you men that have motor-boats organize a search up both shores of the river and into the creeks. What like girl was she?”

The two sailors attempted to describe Janet. Very little could be gathered from it, except the pink dress and the black velvet cape.

“She musta had a guy helping her,” said a voice.

“What guy?” asked Virgil.

“How the heck should I know? Who was it busted in the door?”

“The dead guy.”

“Maybe he was already inside and the door locked.”

Neill stiffened. This was getting too close to the truth.

A tall gaunt old man in decent Sunday blacks came down the companionway behind Neill and pushed through with an air of authority. He had a thin gray beard that waved with every movement and an expression of grim piety. He looked like a picture out of an old book. This was Mr. Button Billings, justice of the peace. Neill breathed a little easier. No special danger to be feared from him.

As a matter of fact, as soon as he entered the after cabin a conflict of authority arose. “What’s this? What’s this?” he wanted to know. “Why didn’t you wait for me?”

Virgil looked at him with a mixture of respect and exasperation. He tossed his badly chewed cigar through the porthole and stuck a fresh one in his mouth. “We are just looking into the evidence, Mr. Billings.”

“That is my job,” said the old man.

Virgil let him have his way. Mr. Billings stood in the middle of the cabin, stroking his shaven upper lip, looking down at the body, looking all around. He frowned at the stricken steward on the sofa.

“Did *he* do it?” he asked Virgil.

The man jumped up with a cry. “No, sir! No! It was me who found him! He was stiff and cold then. He . . .”

Mr. Billings silenced him with a wave of the hand. “All in good time,” he said. “We’ll sit on him first.”

“That’s not the way they do it,” Virgil burst out. “They collect the evidence first, and then hold the inquest.”

“It’s nothing to me what’s done in other places,” said Mr. Billings. “We have our own ways. Always when a body is found we sit on it immediately.”

“We don’t know who he is yet,” said Virgil. “He called himself Barrett, but there’s no proof of it.”

“Well, if we don’t know who he is, then he’s an unknown person,” said Mr. Billings, crushingly.

“They’ll call us hicks in the paper,” muttered Virgil.

The old man ignored the remark. “This place is too small to hold it here,” he said. “We’ll carry him ashore.”

“The evidence is here.”

“What evidence?”

“The gun, the bullet that was shot out of it; the smashed door.”

“I will swear in a jury from among those present, and they can view the evidence.”

“We ought to take steps to catch the murderer first.”

Mr. Billings flattened him with a gesture. “We will proceed in due order, Virgil.”

A jury was duly sworn in—Mr. Billings had a Testament in his tail pocket—and with difficulty steered around the little cabin. Twelve solemn-faced fishermen and store clerks, they took their responsibilities seriously. Mr. Billings then requested them to carry the body up on deck and to lay it in one of the skiffs alongside.

Virgil, desperately rolling the cigar between his teeth, made another plea for delay. “Anyhow, wait till Mark Bonniger comes.”

Mr. Billings drew himself up. “What’s Mark Bonniger got to do with it?”

“I have requested him to take charge of the case.”

“Mark Bonniger is not an officer!”

“He’s a student and a traveler,” said Virgil. “He knows how these things are done.”

“You have gone beyond yourself in this matter, Virgil,” said Mr. Billings, severely. “We all respect you as a citizen, but you hold no office. I am the representative of the law in this district.”

Virgil flung up his hands. The cigar tossed like a ship at sea.

Neill was well pleased to see the body carried ashore. The officious Mr. Button Billings was doing all he could to make the finding of the killer more difficult.

A freight-shed on Longcope’s wharf was designated as the place to hold an inquest. The solemn jury and the witnesses disappeared inside and closed the door. While he waited, Neill circulated unobtrusively among the crowd, watching and listening for anything that might threaten danger. He was startled when he accidentally caught sight of his own strained face in the mirror of a slot machine. Fortunately, these people were not familiar with his ordinary face.

An hour later the verdict was announced: “Man unknown shot to death by person or persons unknown.” Neill could scarcely believe his ears. Was it possible they were going to drop the whole thing? No such luck. When he saw Virgil Longcope’s shrewd eyes and active cigar he knew it wasn’t going to be dropped.

Virgil was the only source of information as to what was really happening. Neill was unable to get hold of him again, but the nature of his activities leaked out of the little office from time to time. Mark Bonniger, it appeared, was away from home, and they were telephoning all over for him. Meanwhile Virgil had got the Governor himself on the phone, and had arranged that as soon as Bonniger was found he should be sworn in as a special officer. Thus he got ahead of Mr. Button Billings.

Virgil had a keen sense of the value of publicity. He telephoned the news to the Washington and Baltimore newspapers and it was said that the reporters were racing down in a fleet of cars. “I’m gonna have this matter handled right!” he was heard to shout. “I’m gonna put Absalom’s on the map!” Neill’s breast tightened, hearing this. He dreaded the prying eyes of the press.

Neill felt an anxious curiosity concerning this Bonniger whose name was on everybody’s lips. His fate and Janet’s depended on the kind of man he

proved to be. By keeping his ears open and asking an occasional question he built up a mental picture of Bonniger.

A quiet man. A widower in his middle forties, and the last representative of a family that had been prominent in the county since it was first settled. The Bonnigers were not the sort of people that money sticks to, and the family estate had declined since the Civil War, but Mark still had good tobacco and corn land and blooded riding-horses. He lived alone in his old house "Lordship's Grace" twenty miles upriver.

Mark Bonniger's neighbors regarded him with a mixture of familiarity and awe. They felt that he belonged to them, though they rarely saw him. He was a great traveler and would be away for months at a time without anybody knowing of it until he got back. He never went around, but he had good friends. Like Virgil. Virgil thought the world of him. Virgil had been trying for years to get him into public life like all the Bonnigers before him.

Chiefly, however, the men spoke of Bonniger's insight into character. "You can't fool Mark Bonniger! He will let you think you are fooling him, but he is fooling you. . . . Virgil Longcope he made no mistake when he picked Mark Bonniger to solve this case. . . . Mark Bonniger can see farther into a stone wall than most men." And so on. And so on.

All this was disquieting. Neill saw that in remaining on the spot he had cast himself in a difficult rôle. His thoughts turned to Janet. He wished that he had her hidden farther away. Too dangerous to try to move her now. He longed to be with her.

Later he learned that Mark Bonniger had been found and was being rushed to Annapolis so that the Governor could swear him in.

As he was circulating in the hotel lobby, picking up a word here and there—it was only idle gossip to the crowd, but to Neill it meant everything—he happened to glance at the letter-rack behind the desk and was surprised to see a letter in his box. Upon his asking for it a plain white envelope was handed him. Nothing but the room number was written on it. Inside he found a half sheet of note-paper with a note pencilled in a clerkly hand:

You been going round all morning with blood on your knee. You better wash it out before the investigator comes.

It was like an unexpected icy shower. Taking care to keep his face, Neill went quietly up the stairs. In his room he stared at his reflection in the

mirror. It was true! There was a brownish-red stain on his left knee as big as a quarter.

He must have got it when he knelt beside Fanning's body in the cabin of the yacht. The breeches were an old, soiled pair, and one spot more had escaped his notice. The thought of his carelessness brought the sweat out on him. A trained sleuth, it seemed, could be as blind a fool as any crook when it came to covering his own tracks.

He slipped out of his breeches in order to wash them. An ugly anxiety made him set his jaw. Who had written this note? It brought back to mind the unexplained happenings of the night before. Who was the sharp-eyed individual watching his every move? Who was there in Absalom's who knew so much about him? *And how much more did he know?*

★ IX ★

CAR after car arrived at Absalom's, bringing newspaper men from Washington and Baltimore, and later from more distant cities—Norfolk, Richmond, Philadelphia, and even New York. The reporters spread around, asking questions. They were full of professional enthusiasm. This murder, they said, had everything. To Neill it sounded ghoulish.

Other cars brought curiosity-seekers from all the adjacent counties and even from the city. Motor-boats from across the bay were coming into the harbor as if for a regatta. Neill wondered angrily what these people did for a living. The villagers gave up their usual occupations and took up good points of vantage to watch the arrivals and to pass the latest news. All this hullabaloo made Neill feel pretty grim. The whole world, it seemed, was aroused against him and Janet.

Shortly after four o'clock an ear-splitting chorus of sirens was heard approaching from up the river road, and a car bearing the Maryland coat-of-arms swept around the corner with an escort of ten state constables on motorcycles. They pulled up in front of the store. In the car rode a stern-looking man that Neill knew must be Bonniger, and beside him the sergeant of police in command of the detachment.

On the store porch Mr. Button Billings was waiting with his whiskers idly swaying in the breeze. A little behind him stood Virgil Longcope, grinning and chewing a cigar.

"How do you do, gentlemen?" said Mr. Billings, with dignity. "I am the representative of the law here."

"How are you Mr. Billings?" said Bonniger, and Neill saw that the stern man had a sense of humor.

The police officer was introduced as Sergeant Wilson.

“The deceased is over in the shed,” said the justice of the peace, mysteriously. “Will you step over and take a look at him?”

“In the shed?” put in Sergeant Wilson, sharply. “We were told he was shot aboard his yacht.”

“Well, he was. But we sat on him in the shed.”

Virgil stood by, enjoying every word of this. The cigar of the moment rolled merrily over and over between his teeth.

“And do you mean to say you have *moved* him?” said Wilson. “You have changed everything about?”

“It’s our custom to sit on a corpse,” said Mr. Button Billings, firmly.

“You could have waited until we got here, couldn’t you? What good did the inquest do? Did it establish anything?”

“The verdict was: Unknown man shot to death at the hands of person or persons unknown.”

“My God!” said the police sergeant.

The crowd laughed, Virgil the loudest of any. Mr. Button Billings glared around him and the laughter increased.

“I wash my hands of this case,” he announced, crushingly, and marched away with unshaken dignity, followed by laughter.

From that moment the comedy element was eliminated, and the investigation got to work in grim earnest. Constables were told off to establish police lines and to direct traffic, while others went in to prepare quarters for the detachment in the loft over the store. A man was sent out to eject the souvenir-hunters from the yacht, and to mount guard on her deck; one went with him to bring the crew ashore.

“These witnesses must be separated from the crowd,” said Bonniger. “Let them be kept in your quarters over the store for the present.”

Neill studied Bonniger as he stood on the porch, issuing his orders. This was his adversary. He saw a tall, spare man with the fine aquiline features of the old Maryland stock. There was good blood in this man. At present his face wore a grim, stern mask. A man who could keep his own counsel. He had a quiet voice and the kind of courteous manner that seems a little old-fashioned nowadays. The level gaze of his brown eyes warned Neill that he had a real man to deal with here. Bonniger dressed in a careless and slightly

old-fashioned style that suited his type—broad-brimmed black hat, soft shirt, and flowing tie.

Sergeant Wilson was of a much more conventional type; a fine soldierly specimen, and no doubt a good police officer, but not brilliant. Neill disregarded him. Bonniger was his man.

Bonniger, Longcope, and Wilson entered the store, and a constable was placed at the door to keep everybody else out. Others kept the crowd moving back and forth in the road. It galled Neill to have to parade with the others, just as if he had no more than a curiosity-seeker's interest in the case. He determined that somehow or other he would get in with Bonniger; he would make a friend of him so that he could be at the center of things. It would be dangerous, but it was only so that he could take his own measures intelligently.

Some time passed before Bonniger appeared again, but Neill had plenty of evidences of his activities. Searches of the woods on foot and of near-by waters by boat were organized, each under the command of a constable, and sent off. The latter party struck an ugly fear into Neill, but there was nothing he could do about it. He hung around on the wharf, watching their preparations and listening. The villager whose skiff had been stolen was describing his craft to them. Luckily, that skiff was at the bottom of the river.

Neill, chafing at his exclusion, had to watch messengers being dispatched in various directions, and different individuals being taken into the back office for questioning. He would have given something pretty to be at Bonniger's side.

On the outskirts of the crowd he ran into Horace Kettering in his old clothes, with a row of fish-hooks caught in his hat-brim. Kettering, it appeared, had just heard of the crime upon returning from fishing. "What's this? What's this?" he demanded of Neill.

Neill told him the main facts.

Kettering looked comically disgusted. "It's hard enough for me to get a few days' holiday, and now my fishing will be spoiled by this uproar! My boy and I caught thirty fish today. That's more important to me than a murder!"

"Oh, sure!" said Neill.

"What do these hicks propose to do about solving the crime?" asked Kettering.

“Virgil Longcope has got the Governor to appoint Mark Bonniger as a special investigator.”

“But he’s a county gentleman, not a detective.”

“Well, they seem to think he’s the best they’ve got.”

“I’ve met the man casually in town. I must go and say how-de-do to him.”

“What about this Bonniger?” asked Neill.

“Oh, he’s a fine fellow,” said Kettering. “Come on, I’ll give you an introduction.”

This was better luck than Neill had expected.

Bonniger, Wilson, and Virgil were now on the store porch. Kettering hailed Bonniger with his customary heartiness, and brought up Neill to be introduced. Bonniger shook hands with Neill courteously, but let it be seen that he had other things on his mind.

“I reckon this will spoil the fishing,” said Kettering, humorously, “but of course we’ve got to hold up the law’s hands at such a time. If there’s anything I can do, Bonniger, call on me.”

“Thank you,” said Bonniger, dryly. “I may be glad of a little legal advice.”

“Always at your service,” said Kettering.

A thought struck Bonniger. “Look, Kettering, the dead man was known to his crew as John Barrett of New York. But he boarded his yacht in Baltimore night before last, and I’ve an idea he may belong there. You have a wide acquaintance in Baltimore. Come have a look at him.”

They crossed the road and entered the shed. Neill managed to slip in before the door was closed. Fanning’s body lay on trestles with a sheet pulled over it. Already there was a smell of death in the place. Virgil took the edge of the sheet between thumb and finger and gingerly pulled it down. The dead man’s face was composed now. He was beyond all the bustle and noise kicked up by his own case. A lock of hair concealed the hole in his forehead.

“Good God! it’s Prescott Fanning!” cried Kettering. “I didn’t know he had a yacht!”

“What *do* you know about him?” asked Bonniger.

“Only what everybody knows,” said Kettering. He related it.

“From New York?” said Bonniger. “We must put out lines there. The rest is only Baltimore gossip. Can’t you give me something particular about the man?”

Kettering shook his head. “I didn’t know him at all. I saw him everywhere, but I haven’t spoken to him above three times, and then only to pass the time of day.”

“Well, we have established his name, that’s a beginning,” said Bonniger. “I’ll have inquiries made in Baltimore and New York.”

They returned to the store, with Neill tagging along. Bonniger disappeared into the back office to telephone, and Virgil went behind the counter to wait on Kettering. Business was going on again though there was a dead man across the road. Neill hung about at the back of the store until Bonniger appeared again. He had decided to make a bold play.

“Can I speak to you for a moment?” he asked.

Bonniger gave him a keen look. He was not a man that you could fool with. “Have you information to give me about this case?”

Neill faced him out, grinning. “Yes and no,” he said. “I want to offer you my services.”

“In what capacity?”

“I was introduced to you just now as Ford Wheatley. My right name is Neill Tryon and I’m a member of the Treasury Department’s Narcotic Squad.” He produced his credentials.

Bonniger read them and handed them back. “It’s a good work you people are doing,” he said, in his grave way.

“This is in confidence,” said Neill. “I’m supposed to be lying low for a few days.”

“Surely. . . . What brought you down to this out-of-the-way spot?”

“Fishing,” said Neill. “I never anticipated anything like this, but here I am if I can help you. I reckon you’ll need help. These people mean well, but, Lord! they’re dumb!”

Bonniger’s stern face broke up in an attractive smile. “You’re right, they’re pretty dumb,” he said. “I have to admit it, though they’re my own people.” He searched Neill’s face with his steady eyes. The examination was

satisfactory, and he offered his hand. "Very decent of you to offer to help, Tryon. You must be ten times the detective I am. I shall be glad to consult with you."

Neill's conscience reproached him because he had to play a double game with this man. He was drawn to Bonniger. He felt that he could have been friends with such a one. It was the first time he had ever lied to an honest man. However, for Janet he could do it.

Sergeant Wilson came up to consult with Bonniger, and Neill strolled out on the porch. Kettering had gone with his purchases, and Virgil was leaning against a porch post, watching the crowd.

The police were still keeping them moving up and down the road between store and wharf. The shed was the great object of the people's curiosity. They stared at it as if they could see right through the planks.

"Looks like a regular metrolopus, don't it?" remarked Virgil. "A man is always learning something. I never knew before that folks could run so crazy after what didn't concern them."

Suddenly among those approaching from the right Neill picked out a familiar figure. It was David Eyster, Fanning's half-crazy little trailer. There was no mistaking the gray figure ceaselessly turning his head from side to side. Eyster saw Neill, too, and it was too late for him to slip back into the store.

There was a new quality in Eyster's grin which reminded Neill of devil's laughter. Yet the tragic look showed in his eyes unchanged. As Neill put it to himself, the devil was still in hell, but something had pleased him. Neill said to Virgil:

"That's a queer little customer yonder in the gray suit."

"Quare is the word, mister," said Virgil. "Last night when I seen him first it give me the creeps."

"Last night?" said Neill, astonished.

"Sure he first come around last night after the movies. I don't know where he's from. Won't speak."

This gave Neill fresh food for thought. If the yacht had been driven into Absalom's by accident, how could Eyster have learned of her presence there so soon?

When Eyster came abreast of Neill he gave him a look of meaning and jerked his head slightly in the direction of up the road. It was clearly a summons to follow and Neill became a little hot. To come to heel at the beck of this repellent little man went against the grain, yet it was wiser not to disobey until he found out how much he knew.

So Neill left Virgil and strolled up the road with a wooden face. Just beyond the store the road (it could scarcely be called a street) took a turn to the left and, crossing the narrow neck, turned sharp to the right and followed the river bank. The shanty which served as a post-office stood on the river corner, and Eyster waited for Neill in its shadow. All the other promenaders turned back before they came to the river and the two were alone.

“Well, what do you want?” asked Neill, grimly.

“Just to shake your hand,” said Eyster, with his crazy grin. “You must give me that satisfaction. You’re a fine fellow and I’m your friend.”

Neill gave him his hand. He couldn’t trust his offers of friendship. And he didn’t want him for a friend, anyhow. But he couldn’t quarrel with the man.

“I see you’ve washed your pants,” said Eyster.

“So it was you who sent me that note.”

“Sure, I been keeping my eye on you.”

“Since when?”

“Since you rowed out to the yacht last night.”

A chill struck through Neill. He bluffed it out. “You’re crazy! I haven’t been on the yacht.”

“Friends shouldn’t lie to each other,” said Eyster.

“How did you know the yacht was here?” asked Neill.

“I told you I had made my arrangements.”

“When did you get here?”

Eyster looked out over the river. Like a child he made out to be deaf when he didn’t want to answer a question and you couldn’t force him.

“Did you come alone?” asked Neill.

“I am always alone.”

“I reckon you were out rowing yourself last night,” suggested Neill.

“I have never been in a rowboat,” said Eyster. “I wouldn’t know how to swing an oar.”

This somehow had the ring of truth. If it *was* true, Neill figured, there was another unknown factor in the case.

Meanwhile Eyster’s strange tragic eyes were fixed on his face. “I wish I had a son like you,” he said, unexpectedly. “You are my idea of what a young fellow ought to be; cool, hard, and able. I would do anything for you. You can depend on me to the death.”

This put Neill’s teeth on edge. Too melodramatic. Even if sincere, which he doubted, the “friendship” of this crazy little man would be terribly dangerous to him in his present situation.

“If you want to do me a service, keep away from me. See? We must never be seen together. Nobody must know that we are acquainted.”

“Right!” said Eyster. “My idea exactly. Just this one meeting to cement the friendship. Then pass as strangers. I’ll go around by the beach and you return by the road. Rely on me!”

He went down the bank with a crazy wave of his hand, and Neill turned back down the road, scowling. The secret which he had supposed to be all his own was shared by another, it seemed—and perhaps by two. It complicated the situation damnably.

HAVING accepted Neill, Bonniger in his grave way was disposed to be friendly. After dinner in the hotel he suggested that he and Neill and Kettering should sit down somewhere and discuss the case.

“I’d be glad to hear any suggestions you or Kettering may have to offer.”

Neill hardened with a sense of the danger of such a conference. He must appear to be working with them while he played his own hand. He must study every word that he uttered. Bonniger was not the sort of man to be easily confused by false issues. Above all, he must take care not to overplay his hand. At the same time Neill was conscious of the grim humor of the situation. To be asked to sit down and discuss the best way of catching himself!

“Kettering, I think, should be told who you are,” said Bonniger, “if you have no objections.”

“That’s all right with me,” said Neill, “as long as the newspaper boys don’t get hold of it.”

“I will protect you with the press.”

They took possession of the little parlor back of the hotel office, and locked the door to keep out the ever-present mob. The bus from town had arrived, and Bonniger had been closeted with McGee, the engineer. Neill’s chief anxiety at the moment was to learn if McGee had said anything to Bonniger about calling him up at the Stafford. If he had, it wouldn’t lead the investigator directly to Neill, because he was registered at the Stafford under an assumed name. But Bonniger would be able to get a good description of him at the hotel.

“What did you get from McGee?” asked Neill, carelessly.

“McGee’s story corroborates the other three as to the events leading up to the murder,” said Bonniger. “McGee himself is outside suspicion because he went to town on Tuesday morning. I got one new thing out of him. He confessed to leaving a gun where the girl could get it. He was sorry for her. I showed him the gun with which Fanning was shot, and he identified it as his.”

Neill was relieved in mind.

Kettering was much impressed when he was told who Neill was. “It’s providential that you should be here,” he said.

“I don’t know,” said Neill. “Murder is a little out of my line.”

“I’ve never solved a murder,” said Kettering, “but I’ve defended more than one murderer.”

Neill did not care much for Kettering. He was too wordy. He had an idea that Bonniger did not fancy him, either. But the man had a bright mind. He could pounce on the weakness of an argument. Bonniger and Kettering made a formidable combination to be up against. Neill let them do most of the talking.

Bonniger laid out the known facts. He took it for granted that the missing girl had shot Fanning. “Strange that nothing has turned up today to establish her identity,” he said. “The story has been out on the streets of Baltimore for hours, but nobody has come forward to tell us who she is. Nobody has reported a girl missing. If I am to believe the stories of the crew, she was a girl of remarkable beauty. Such a one ought to be well known.”

For Neill this was all to the good.

“The evidence suggests that some man helped her to escape from the yacht,” Bonniger continued. “It may have been a friend, or it may have been a stranger bent on rescuing a woman in distress. It’s easy for a beautiful girl to find men to help her, of course. But neither girl, man, nor skiff has been seen since they left the yacht. Where did they go? How could a beautiful girl in a pink evening dress and black velvet wrap disappear without having been seen by some one?”

“Perhaps the skiff swamped out in the bay and they were drowned,” said Kettering.

“It’s a possibility.”

Neill put in a word for Janet. “If Fanning attacked the girl, she was justified in shooting him.”

“Certainly. But she would have to prove that she had not previously encouraged his advances. The crew testified that she seemed to come aboard the yacht willingly.”

Kettering offered an alternative theory, that one of the crew might have shot Fanning before coming ashore to the movies.

Bonniger would have none of it. “Suppose one of these men shot Fanning to save the girl from him, is it likely they would go ashore and leave her alone with the body?”

“Perhaps they procured a skiff for her,” suggested Neill.

“Impossible. It was broad daylight when the crew came ashore and fifty people saw them. They went directly to the movie theater and paid their way in.”

“No,” Bonniger continued, “I questioned each man separately this afternoon, and their stories hung together. Fanning, the girl, and another couple came aboard Monday night and had dinner. Jolly party; plenty of champagne. Later the other couple went ashore. When the yacht started down the bay the crew suspected that the girl might have been abducted, because she had brought no baggage aboard. And as Walter, the steward, said, ‘She was the kind of girl might lead a man to do something crazy!’”

“Yet they stood for it,” said Neill, angrily. “What kind of men were they?”

Bonniger looked a little surprised at his indignation. (Steady! Neill warned himself.) “Well, they weren’t sure of it, because they said she didn’t cry or carry on in any way.”

“Some women don’t cry when they’re in trouble. They turn stony.”

“Quite right. Anyhow, you can’t expect men of that sort to play the part of heroes. Fanning was their boss. . . . The gun clinches the case against the girl,” Bonniger said, firmly. “She fired the shot, I take it, and her helper came on the scene afterwards.”

Neill had the sense of a net slowly being drawn around him and Janet. “You only assume that she had a helper,” suggested Neill. “There is no proof of it.”

Bonniger sprang a surprise on him. “Certainly there is proof. The three men who were sleeping on board saw him.”

“*Saw him?*” echoed Neill. “How could that be? . . . When?”

“They couldn’t tell me the hour. Sometime in the middle of the night.”

“In the middle of the night!”

“What is there about that which is so surprising to you?”

Once more Neill was warned not to betray so much feeling in the case. He laughed. “Oh, nothing,” he said, “only it was fixed in my mind that Fanning was shot and the girl got away *before* the crew returned from the movies.”

“Certainly Fanning was killed and the girl’s friend came on the scene before the crew got back,” said Bonniger, “because they heard neither the shot nor the breaking in of the cabin door. But it appears from their stories that the two did not make their final getaway until some hours later.”

Neill concealed his confusion behind a wooden face.

“What did the crew tell you?” asked Kettering.

“They returned to the yacht at ten fifteen. All was quiet aboard and they turned in. They sleep in the fore peak. Some time later the steward, Walter, said he was awakened by a noise on deck. A few moments were lost while he was awakening his mates and they were pulling on their pants.

“When they stuck their heads out of the fore hatch the man was on deck. He saw them and went over the side like a streak. They could only see him dimly. They couldn’t describe him beyond the fact that he was a big man. He pulled away swiftly in the dark. They thought at the time that it was a robber.”

“What about the girl?”

“They didn’t see her. I assume that she threw herself in the bottom of the skiff to escape observation.”

This explanation explained nothing so far as Neill was concerned. So there had been another visitor to the yacht after he and Janet had left it. Who was it? he asked himself. What was he after?

“Where do you suppose this guy was when the crew came back from the movies?” asked Kettering. “If he had a skiff with him they must have seen it.”

“I am supposing that he heard the crew coming,” said Bonniger, “and rowed off a little way in the dark to give them time to get below and go to sleep.”

“Sure!” said Kettering.

This was a false deduction, though a natural one, and Neill could afford to smile at it. With the object of drawing a red herring across the trail, he said:

“My idea is that the girl’s friend was an Absalom’s man. The story had already gone around the village that there was a girl locked up aboard the yacht.”

“Yes, I have been told that,” said Bonniger.

“The story was not generally believed, but I suppose there was one man who went out to see for himself.”

“No Absalom’s man is missing,” Bonniger pointed out.

“He furnished her with the skiff. She then put him ashore and rowed away in it alone.”

“Impossible!” said Bonniger. “The two sailors, the steward, the engineer, all tell me that she was a gentle and elegant girl, not at all the type who could have saved herself by rowing away in a heavy skiff. You can depend upon it, her man went with her. Everything points to the fact that it was somebody she knew and trusted. He must have followed the yacht down here.”

Neill set his jaw. If Bonniger had deduced so much already, he and Janet were likely to enjoy short shrift next day.

“He was a cool customer,” Bonniger went on. “According to the crew he took a rug out of the after cabin to keep the girl warm; a flashlight out of the saloon and all the cooked food there was in the refrigerator.”

“Why couldn’t he have shot Fanning?” suggested Neill.

Bonniger looked at him with grim humor. “I’m surprised at that,” he said, “from a man of your experience. Everything shows that Fanning was shot unawares. If anybody had burst in the door and attacked him, the cabin would have presented a very different picture.”

Neill was silenced.

“We will know him when we catch him,” said Bonniger, grimly. “Wilson got an elegant set of fingerprints on the refrigerator door. He photographed them this afternoon. He’s developing it now.”

Neill resisted the impulse to thrust his hands in his pockets. His finger tips tingled very unpleasantly.

★ XI ★

WHEN BONNIGER had returned to the telephone in Virgil Longcope's office, and Kettering to his camp, Neill locked himself in his room upstairs, and started to distribute the various articles he had bought for Janet about his person. He had not purchased everything in one place, but had picked it up at odd times during the day in the different stores about the village.

Women's clothes were out of the question, so he had got her overalls, a shirt, a pair of sneakers. These he had to buy in sizes suitable for himself, and he grinned, thinking how Janet would look in them. In addition he had biscuits, cakes of chocolate, a couple of cans of meat, a bottle of soda water, a towel and soap, candles and batteries for the precious flashlight. When all this was stowed he appeared to have increased suddenly in weight: however, he had satisfied himself that the back part of the hotel was deserted. He went down the back stairs and out by the kitchen door.

Once he was in the road, he felt safe from observation, for the street lights were feeble and far between. The crowd was still hanging about Longcope's store, and after he had turned the corner by the river, he met nobody. Aware that all his movements up to now had been watched, he walked with his head over his shoulder. It seemed impossible that anybody could follow him along the deserted stretch by the river without his knowing of it. An occasional car passed, but they were all coming from town.

When he came to the last houses he watched his chance and skinned over the fence into the cornfield between road and river. The motorcycle police had been ordered to patrol the state road all night. There was but this one road leading to and from the village on the point, thus it was an easy matter for the police to stop all who might try to leave by car. Neill lay out in the cornfield until he was very sure no one followed him over the fence.

He stumbled on over the plowed field, climbed a couple of fences, and found himself in the side road which served the landing used by the big ships. Coming out on the shore, he saw them lying huge, dark, and threatening out in the stream. The captain's lights were out tonight. Since his car was not there, Neill judged that he had been drawn to the village by the general excitement.

Neill walked up the beach to the little pier below the old farmhouse. The skiff was tied to it and the oars were in her. He cast off and, making a détour, came back to the *Abraham Lincoln* from the middle of the river. Feeling his way along the hull, his hand met the twine dangling from above and he twitched it. A moment later the end of the rope ladder fell on his head, and he sprang to his feet with joy. Janet was all right! In another minute he would be with her!

The thin rope lay flat against the vessel's side, and he saw that it was not going to be too easy to climb up. He took off his boots so that his toes could grip the rope, and went up slowly. She was waiting for him at the window. When he jumped in she flung her arms around his neck in a passion of relief and gladness, and for a little time neither of them could speak. Both felt as if oceans had parted them.

“Oh, Neill! The day was so long!”

How good it was to hold her close against him! “Honey! Honey! Honey! it was hard to be away from you!”

Having lighted a candle, Neill held her away from him so that he could look at her. To find her in these strange surroundings was like seeing her for the first time. In the empty ship, her fragile beauty had an unreal quality like a dream. He drew her to him with a sudden fear of losing her.

“If we could only stay aboard here by our two selves and let the rest of the world go to hell!”

When they came back to earth Janet began to pat him. “What did you bring me? You're covered all over with funny-shaped bumps.”

He began to disgorge. She laughed at the curious array of stuff he had brought.

“I wanted those clothes badly. Everything aboard the ship is so dusty my dress is already a sight!”

She carried the clothes into the adjoining room and presently returned looking like a country boy in her rolled-up, hand-me-down overalls. She

struck an attitude, sticking her thumbs through the galluses and pursing up her lips to whistle. She looked more real now. He was obliged to seize her in his arms again.

“By God you look good to me that way!”

“You’re smothering me!”

He unwillingly released her. “Have you had your supper?”

“No. I was waiting for you.”

“I’m not going to touch any of this food. Every crumb of it is for you.”

“I’m not hungry now.”

“Sit down and I’ll feed you.”

And feed her he did, mouthful by mouthful like a bird.

When she protested that she could swallow no more, Neill said she needed exercise and taking the flashlight, they started for a prowl around the ship. The silence of the long passages laid a kind of spell on them; Janet’s hand stole inside Neill’s and they spoke in whispers.

On B deck above, they passed through a series of immense public rooms, palm garden, lounge and smoking-room, all lavishly gilded and decorated with paintings. The movable furniture had been taken away, but the carpets were still on the floors and the built-in settees around the wall remained. The flashlight, wherever it was turned, revealed circles of dusty magnificence. And so empty! Like something left in the world after mankind itself had been wiped out.

“Imagine this scene with the lights turned on, the orchestra playing and the passengers dancing,” murmured Janet.

“Sure,” said Neill, “and imagine it in a storm with the ship rolling like a barrel and the passengers seasick.”

She laughed. It was good to him to hear her laugh.

The most attractive room was the restaurant up on the boat deck. It was painted to represent a bower of tropical verdure, and had windows opening to the floor.

“This is where the champagne corks popped,” said Neill.

They went down flight after flight of stairs to E deck, because Neill wanted another piece of rope and a bucket out of the galley. Back again in

the royal suite, he showed her how to lower the bucket out of the window when she wanted water for washing.

Afterwards they sat pressed close together on the sofa, smoking comfortably while Neill gave her an account of the happenings of the day. He left out what he thought would distress her too much. When he finished Janet said:

“Well, what are we going to do?”

“You had better stay here a couple of days longer if you can stick it out.”

“The worst is over now. I can stand it.”

“By that time the first crazy excitement ought to have died down!”

“And then what?”

And then what? he asked himself. However, he wasn't going to let her see that he was at a loss. “I'll arrange to have a car waiting for us across the river,” he said, confidently. “They are watching this side too close.”

“How will you get a car?”

“I'll go up to town. I know a man who will help us.”

As they talked things over Neill was obliged to confess that his money was running short.

“Oh, there's plenty of money, luckily,” said Janet.

Neill stared at her. “*What!*” he said.

She got up and, crossing to the desk, pulled out a drawer. She brought him a packet of new five-dollar bills, fastened with a paper strap and a pin, and with the stamp of the bank on the strap. Neill could scarcely believe his eyes. It was the same packet that he had seen Fanning put in his wallet two nights before, and he would as lief have seen a venomous snake in Janet's hands. The sight of that money reminded Neill that Janet had *not* told a credible story of what had happened aboard the yacht, and because he loved her so much it hurt him as if his flesh had been torn.

“Where did you get that?” he demanded.

“I found it in the pocket of my wrap,” she said, astonished at his tone.

“Who put it there?”

“I don't know.”

“It's Fanning's money!”

“Well . . . I suppose it must be. But if it’s a case of life and death with us . . .”

Anger swept through Neill like a gasoline fire. Snatching the money from her, he strode across the room and sent it flying through the outer window into the river. “I’d sooner starve than touch a dollar of it!”

Janet stared at him without speaking.

“You are lying to me!” he said. “I reckon you have been lying from the beginning!”

She was no tame woman. She sprang up. “I’m *not* lying! And I’m not going to take that!”

“I don’t care whether you smoked Fanning or not,” he said. “I hope you did. It was coming to him. What makes me sore is that you don’t trust me. After I have risked everything for you, you are still lying to me!”

“I’m not going to talk to you,” she said, starting for the bedroom.

He seized her wrist. “Oh, yes you are! We’re going to have this out here and now! . . . I’m willing to believe that you shot him without knowing what you were doing, and that you can’t remember anything about it now. That’s natural. But you couldn’t take his money and put it in your pocket without knowing what you were doing.”

“I didn’t take his money!”

“Listen! I broke in that door and found you two alone in the cabin. The key was still on the inside of the door, and the portholes were closed and fastened on the inside. If you didn’t take Fanning’s money, *who did?*”

“Perhaps there was somebody else aboard the yacht,” said Janet. “Somebody of whom we know nothing.”

“Somebody else!” said Neill, staring. He dropped her wrist.

“Fanning had told me more than once that he had enemies. That night when we were having dinner on the yacht I thought I saw somebody skulking on the dock. Perhaps he slipped on board when nobody was looking and hid himself below. Perhaps he was hidden in my cabin.”

“In your cabin?”

“There was a clothes-closet in there. I tried the door when I first went in and it was locked. Perhaps he had locked himself in there?”

Neill laughed harshly. “For God’s sake don’t tell that story to anybody but me! That’s exactly the kind of story that every hard-pressed defendant tells when he has no defense!”

Janet looked at him strangely, and went quickly into the bedroom. He let her go, and dropped on the sofa, pressing his head between his hands. Anger sickened him so that he could not think.

When she did not return, when he heard no sound from the next room, a sudden fear struck through him and he ran in to look for her. The room was empty, the door unbolted and standing open on the corridor. His anger vanished then. Snatching up the flashlight, he ran through the corridor softly calling her name.

“Jen! . . . Jen! . . . Wait!”

He assumed that there was only one way she knew; down to E deck across the dining-saloon and the galley and into the engine-room shaft. It was the way they had first come. Surely he could overtake her before she had gone far. She had to grope her way in the dark. He ran on, occasionally pausing to listen. He could hear nothing. He plunged down the two flights of stairs.

When he reached the galley he realized that he must have passed her. She had hidden behind some corner to let him pass. He turned back. Suppose his anger had rendered her completely desperate? Suppose she returned to the suite and threw herself out of the window? He ran on, sick with fear.

However, there was no sound ahead of him. She had not come back to this part of the vessel. He ran into the suite and, without waiting to pull up the rope ladder, closed the window upon it, and also the other windows of the veranda. They were very stiff and he knew she could not open them by herself.

He started down the stairs again. On D deck he heard some mouselike sounds in one of the corridors and searched it cabin by cabin. She was not there. Of course while he was looking on one side she could run through a cross-passage and return on the other side. It was like searching a rabbit warren.

He went down to E deck again. While he was in the galley he heard the clang of an iron door ahead of him and plunged in the direction of the sound. She had entered the engine-room shaft. She was going on deck.

When he got into the shaft he heard her far above him, racing up the iron stairs. “Jen! Jen!” he called. “Wait!” He leaped up the stairs, straining every nerve to overtake her before she could get out on deck. Before he reached the top she was through the door and running forward on the boat deck. He caught her by the forward ladder, and none too soon, because across the decks of the other ships he could see the watchman’s lantern coming toward them.

She struggled desperately in his arms. “Let me go! Let me go!”

“Quiet, Jen, for God’s sake!” he implored her. “The watchman is coming this way.”

“All right. Let him come! I want him to come! I’m going to give myself up!”

“No! No! Think what you’re doing!”

“I *will* give myself up! I’m not going to let you risk yourself if you don’t believe in me!”

“I do believe in you! I swear it!”

“It’s too late to tell me that now!”

Fearing that she would cry out, Neill clapped a hand over her mouth and started dragging her along the deck, resisting every foot of the way. With great difficulty he got her through the door of the booby hatch and closed the door behind them. He sat down on the iron stairs to recover his breath, holding her close in his arms. Janet suddenly broke into tears and clung to him, and by that he knew the crisis had passed. He had never loved her so well as at that moment. Strangely enough, he wanted to laugh.

“Oh, Honey, what a fright you gave me!”

“How could you say such things to me?”

“By God, I’m sorry now!”

“If you don’t believe in me I don’t care what happens!”

“I do! I do! I will never doubt you again!”

“How can I be sure that you mean it?”

“I love you better than my life!” he murmured. “We can’t quarrel. We’re in this thing together. What happens to one happens to the other. We’re like two parts of the same body. If we separated it would finish us both!”

Gradually she quieted down.

They returned through the ship hand in hand, pausing often for Neill to reassure her and to comfort her. They came together like the needle and the magnet. Neill was sore and at the same time immensely tender. He did not believe her story: in the ears of the trained detective it had a fatally fictitious sound; but he loved her far too well to question it further. It doesn't matter, he told himself; she is my girl and I'm bound to stick to her anyhow.

When they entered the suite the candle was still burning as they had left it. Janet, who had been considerably pulled about during the struggle on deck, ran into the bedroom to comb her hair.

Neill lit a cigarette. As he waited for Janet it gradually came to him that the room had been visited during their absence. The cushions of the couch had been disarranged; one of the drawers in the desk was pulled out a little. Suddenly chilled with fear, he ran out on the veranda. The window where the rope ladder hung out was open again.

He broke into a cold sweat. His position appeared truly terrible to him. It seemed impossible to leave Janet alone if her refuge had been discovered. And equally impossible to stay with her. They had only a day's food and almost no drinking-water. Almost worse than the danger was the mystery that surrounded the unknown spy. If he was aware of everything they did, why didn't he show himself? Why didn't he denounce them? *What was he after?*

Janet called to Neill from the parlor and he went in, forcing himself to smile.

"Much as I hate to do it, I must send you away," she said. "You had no sleep last night. . . . Unless you could sleep here?" she added wistfully.

He shook his head. "I must go," he said, flatly. ". . . Listen, Janet. When I leave you you must take the gun."

"What good would that do me?"

"If you were attacked you could use it, couldn't you? It is the right of every human creature."

"I suppose I could. . . . What has made you suddenly anxious?"

"Nothing. But I mustn't neglect any precautions." He started pulling in the length of twine that hung overboard.

"What are you doing that for?" she asked.

“There are too many people hanging around these parts,” he muttered. “The ships are objects of curiosity. Somebody might come around in a boat and see the string hanging down.”

“How will you let me know when you come?”

“I will whistle to you. . . . Do you know the call of the meadow lark?”

She shook her head.

He taught it to her. “When you hear that tomorrow night, let the string down with a small object tied to it so that it will fall true. Hold on to the string and I will twitch it four times. Then I’ll wait a second and twitch it four times more. When you feel that, you will know it’s me and you can let down the ladder.”

“Why all these added precautions?”

Neill grinned until his face hurt. “It’s just because you mean so much to me. I worry every moment I am away from you.” He looked at all the doors into the corridor to make sure that the bolts were fastened. “You’re pretty safe here. Certainly nobody can get in from the river. If anybody should attempt to smash those doors down you can throw down the ladder and escape by swimming.”

“Why imagine anything so terrible?”

“We must be prepared. . . . Promise me you’ll do what I tell you.”

“All right.”

★ XII ★

HE went down the ladder feeling as if he had left the best part of himself behind. He half expected to find his skiff gone. But it was there just as he had left it. Whoever had come and gone that way had had a skiff of his own. Neill reflected that the spy must have been actually hidden in the suite at the moment when he had come back and shut the windows.

Whoever it was, he was gone now. Neill rowed all around the ships and searched up and down the shore. No skiff. He finally tied his skiff in the place where it belonged, and started back across the fields the way he had come, looking over his shoulder at every other step and pausing often to listen. It was a dark night and he could not see more than a yard or two at best.

Coming to the state road, he lay down in the weeds behind the wire fence, peering through and listening. His intention was to wait until the motorcycle policeman had passed on his patrol. All Neill's attention was directed to the road, and for a moment or two he neglected to look behind him. He had no warning of danger. Suddenly a powerful figure dropped on his back, knocking the wind out of him and pinning him to the ground.

Neill struggled with all his power. It was useless. He was borne down under an incredible weight of bone and muscle. The man planted a knee on the base of his skull crushing his face into the earth so that he could not cry out. He hit him repeatedly on the side of the head until Neill became groggy, and was unable to fight back whereupon his arms were dragged behind him and tied together. Then his ankles.

The man turned him over and pasted his eyes and his lips shut with strips of surgeon's tape that he had ready for the purpose. In the brief second that Neill could see him he was just a shapeless hulk of humanity looming

between him and the sky. He flung himself down beside Neill, panting hoarsely after his efforts.

Neill heard the motorcycle coming down the road, and exerted himself to shout. Only feeble groans issued from his sealed lips. The policeman, deafened by the sound of his own exhaust, swept on, and the man lying beside Neill chuckled. After a minute or two the motorcycle came roaring past again. The sound died away up the road.

The man rose, and, picking up the helpless Neill as if he had been a child, dropped him over the fence. Once more the breath was pretty well knocked out of him. The man scrambled after, and picking Neill up, carried him across the road, and threw him over the fence on the other side. Neill wondered shakily how much of this the human frame could stand.

He was picked up again and shouldered like a sack of meal. The man set off across another plowed field. The going was bad through soft earth and he stumbled and panted. Neill was not disposed to make his job any easier. As soon as he got sufficient breath he started twisting and rolling on his carrier's shoulder. Whereupon the man flung him down and kicked him in the ribs. Neill took the hint. No use exhausting himself in a vain struggle.

After a time Neill recognized, by a new smell on the air, that they were nearing water. Probably the head of the inlet. They followed it for a while along the edge of the bank; Neill could hear the little waves below.

His captor finally slid down the bank in a cascade of loose earth, crossed a strip of crunching shingle, and tossed Neill from his shoulder to a sort of wooden shelf. Neill judged from the weathered feel that it was the deck of an old vessel. It was canted at an angle, but a little rail kept him from rolling off.

He heard the man climbing aboard. He was picked up again and dropped through what appeared to be an open hatch into the hold. This was the hardest fall he had had, and he lay partly stunned. There was water in the hold, and he wondered if he would drown without greatly caring. But it did not cover him. It was bilge water in the bottom of the old hulk. The smell was horrible.

The man dropped into the hold and for a few minutes was mysteriously busy beside Neill, breathing hoarsely. Neill heard the slap of a rope. As his full senses returned, and with it a renewed desire to live, the suspense was agonizing. What was the brute preparing? Neill groaned and rolled in his bonds and was rewarded with another kick.

When he was ready the man turned Neill over on his face and cut the bonds on his wrists. He turned Neill again, and smothering him under his full weight, pulled his arms forward and tied them in front. He tied a second rope to the first one and standing Neill on his feet started pulling on the other end, drawing Neill's arms above his head, and higher until his feet began to leave the ground. He then fastened the rope, leaving Neill dangling, his toes just touching the ground.

The man then came close and with his foul breath in Neill's face started going through his pockets and through his clothes to the skin. He even unlaced his boots and felt inside his socks. He took out Neill's wallet, examined it and put it back. This was no ordinary robber. He was after some particular thing, and when he failed to find it, he broke into a low, savage cursing.

"Where is the stuff?" he muttered.

You damn fool! Neill said in his mind. How can I answer you with my lips locked together. Meaningless grunts were the only sounds that came out.

The tapes were pulled off his lips. Neill instantly shouted with his full voice. The man laughed.

"Shout your lungs out," he said. "There's no house in a mile!"

Neill shut his mouth.

"Where's the stuff?" the man demanded again. "Come across or I'll kill you."

"What stuff?" answered Neill. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The man's reply was a blow that knocked Neill off his feet and almost jerked his arms out of their sockets. He spun around helplessly before he could gain a foothold again.

"Where's the stuff?" growled the man.

Neill knew he had been watched from the beginning. Evidently it was thought that he had secured something valuable on the yacht. Some loot of Fanning's. It was useless to protest that he didn't have it. He stalled for time.

"Loose me and I'll talk to you about it."

The man laughed. "What kind of a fool do you think I am?"

"You can come with me and I'll take you to it," said Neill.

“No, you don’t! You tell me where it is, and if I find it I’ll loose you. If I don’t find it I’ll come back and kill you with a blow of my fist!”

Neill thought: If I had an hour I could release myself. It’s worth trying. He said: “Do you know the wooden beacon that stands on Absalom’s Point?”

“I’ve seen it.”

“I buried the stuff in the sand near there.”

The man growled in a tone of pretended indifference: “Which direction?”

Neill thought, He’s biting! and went on: “Stand with your back against the beacon and face the big locust that grows in the field. There’s only one big tree. You can’t miss it. Take six full steps toward the tree and dig in the sand. It’s not buried deep. I didn’t have time.”

The man was silent, and Neill held himself tense for the outcome.

“All right,” he said at last. “God help you if you’re lying!”

Neill relaxed.

He pasted the tapes back on Neill’s lips. They were the same tapes and they didn’t stick so firmly the second time. He then pulled himself up on deck and leaped to the shore. Neill heard his steps crunching away.

Neill, blind, speechless, and bound, took stock of his situation. Unnoticed by his captor, the rope had stretched somewhat and his feet were now planted firmly on the deck. The strain had loosened the bonds on his wrists also, and his hands had a little play.

He rubbed his mouth against his arm until he got rid of the loose tapes. His eyes were more firmly fastened shut, and he let that go for the present. Eyes were of little service in the dark. His flashlight was gone.

He maneuvered his hands until he got hold of the rope from above. It was a coarse hempen rope that afforded a good grip. With endless, patient working, he drew himself up on it an inch at a time. The cross-beam was only a foot or so above his hands. He struck against it, and after several failures was able to hook his fingers over it and hang there.

He now caught the dangling rope between his upper arm and his teeth and holding it there, started gnawing. It seemed like a hopeless job; minutes passed before he could feel even one fiber parting between his teeth. Meanwhile his strained fingers seemed to pass beyond his control.

Momentarily, out of sheer exhaustion, they threatened to loose their hold on the cross-beam.

But life was sweet and Janet infinitely dear to him. The thought of her fate if anything happened to him kept his hands gripping the beam, kept his teeth grinding automatically. The hempen fibers parted one by one. He lost all count of time. He was no longer a thinking, feeling creature, but only a chewing mechanism.

The rope, he thought, was about half chewed through when he heard his captor coming back. There was a heavy slide down the bank and footsteps on the shingle. A sickening feeling of rage and frustration filled Neill. All his pains for nothing! He drew up his legs and let go the beam. The rope broke and he fell to the floor.

But he was still helpless. He tore the tapes off his eyes and pulled savagely with his teeth at the knots that bound his wrists. If he could only free himself so that he could put up a fight! Too late! The man was climbing aboard.

The round eye of a flashlight blazed in the hatch overhead. It dazzled Neill and he could not see what was behind it. He struggled to throw himself, or to roll, out of reach of its rays, but could not make it.

“Good God! What has happened?” said a husky uncertain voice.

This was not what Neill had expected. For an instant he was filled with stupefaction, then a surge of joy. “*Eyster!*” he yelled.

“What shall I do?” the voice quavered.

“Come down here quick and untie me!” shouted Neill.

“I dassent! I couldn’t get out again.”

An ugly suspicion arrested Neill’s joy. Was the man playing with him? Were the two in cahoots? “Let yourself drop,” he commanded. “You can see that it’s less than ten feet. I’ll boost you out as soon as you untie me. Be quick!”

Eyster finally lowered himself over the edge of the hatch and let go. Neill’s spirits leaped up. He could have embraced the little man then.

Five minutes later the two of them dropped to the shingle. Eyster was shaking with nervousness. Neill turned to take a look at his prison. It was an old Chesapeake pungy which had been abandoned on the beach. The masts were out of her. She was a complete wreck.

Neill said: “Walk along in the edge of the water so we can’t be followed.”

After splashing through the shallow water for a hundred yards or so, they made a wide détour around the course that Neill’s assailant had taken across the field.

“How did you find me?” asked Neill.

“Well, that’s quite a story,” said Eyster. “I was listening to you moving around in your room tonight . . .”

“Listening? Where?”

“My room is number fifteen, next door to yours. I heard you come out and go down the back stairs, and I followed.”

“Why?”

“Well, its just my way,” said Eyster, with his crazy grin. “I like to know what folks are up to.”

“Go on,” said Neill, grimly.

“I soon found out I couldn’t follow you without being caught at it. In the upper part of the village there wasn’t a person moving. So I gave it up and came back to the hotel to wait for you. I waited and waited and you didn’t come, so I went out again to look for you. It was only by accident that I found your tracks.”

“How come?”

“Well I had gone through the village when I heard the cop coming on his motorcycle and I went over the fence into the field alongside. I didn’t want to be questioned. In that field I found your tracks where you had crossed and come back again.”

“How did you know they were my tracks?”

“I have followed you before,” said Eyster, giggling. “There was another set of tracks coming back, a hell of a big foot. Somebody had followed you.”

“How do you know he had followed me?”

“Because there was places where his track pressed yours out.”

“Pretty good. Go on.”

“Well, the coming-back tracks brought me to a place where there had been a struggle. I picked up a flashlight there.”

“It’s mine,” said Neill.

“Beyond that place I couldn’t find your tracks; only the big man’s. He went over the fence. I couldn’t figure out what he had done with you. I looked around, and across the road I found where he had gone across another field and come back again. So I followed his tracks and came to the old ship and looked in her. Was I surprised!”

Neill’s feelings were mixed upon hearing this. If the story was true, he owed Eyster a debt that could never be repaid. But was it true? The man had such a furtive, mysterious air that Neill couldn’t trust him. Was it not possible that Eyster and the other were working together? The big man had changed his purpose, perhaps, and had sent Eyster back to liberate Neill.

“Do you know who attacked me?” asked Neill, grimly.

“No. Do you?”

Neill was pretty sure then that he was lying. His voice had too innocent a ring.

“Well, I certainly am obliged to you for coming to my help,” said Neill.

Eyster laughed in his queer, noiseless fashion. “Comes hard, don’t it, to be beholden to me?”

The village was asleep when they returned. They met nobody.

★ XIII ★

NEILL was up at six, sore in every joint. He anxiously consulted the mirror. His face was not as badly marked as he feared, for the man's blows had mostly fallen elsewhere. However, there was an ugly bruise on his right cheek.

When he opened his door to go out he was aware that a door down the corridor moved a little and that an eye was applied to the crack. So the spy was still on the job. The number of the room was 18. Neill fiddled with his lock while he debated whether to force the door open and have a look at the man. He decided against it. On Janet's account he dared not risk a showdown.

He found Bonniger already busy with his ham and eggs in the dining-room. He showed a calm front that filled Neill with envy. This case couldn't get under his skin. Neill himself was as tense as a hunted animal; every move, every word, had to be studied in advance.

"Sit down!" said Bonniger. His stern face relaxed in a smile. Evidently he had made up his mind to like Neill. It increased the danger.

"Thanks." Neill placed himself so that he could watch the bottom of the stairs. Nobody came down while he sat there. But of course there was the back stairway.

"Good God!" said Bonniger, when he got a look in his face. "What have you been up against?"

Neill seized on the first lie that offered itself. He recollected a rowdy resort on the bend of the road before coming to the river. "I dropped into Kinney's for a drink last night and got into a little mix-up."

Bonniger frowned. "This is a local-option county. Kinney has no right to sell hard liquor. I'll speak to the sergeant."

“Don’t do it,” said Neill, quickly. “You’ll only get me in wrong with the bunch. Let’s stick to the big case.”

Bonniger shrugged. “I’ve been on the telephone half the night,” he said. “They’ve given me a private wire into Longcope’s office.”

“Any news of the girl?”

“Plenty.”

Neill looked up startled.

“No reliable news,” said Bonniger. “I mean she’s been reported from all over the state: from Silchester across the bay; from Lower Blenheim thirty miles up the river; from Baltimore and even from as far west as Frederick.”

“She must be pretty spry,” said Neill.

“Sure, if it was all true, but such reports always spring up in a sensational case. They are started by people trying to horn in on it. The worst of it is, they’ve all got to be run down. The state police are doing it.”

Neill, bent on diverting his mind from the facts, said: “She must have got clear of this vicinity, or else she’s dead.”

“Nothing in it,” said Bonniger, coolly. “In my opinion she’s very much alive, and not a thousand miles away from here, either.”

Neill looked at him, but the calm face was giving nothing away.

“What was the report from Silchester?” Neill asked.

“A fisherman in the Cherry River says that he saw a skiff rowing in from the bay at six o’clock on Wednesday, with a woman sitting in the stern wearing a black wrap of some kind and a man rowing.”

Neill helped the false clue along as well as he could. “The mouth of the Cherry River is twenty-five miles from here. That would make it about right if there was a strong pair of arms at the oars.”

Bonniger was not impressed. “Sure, but if the fisherman wanted to lie he could have worked that out from what he read in newspapers yesterday.”

“Are you going over to investigate?”

“Why should I? My job is here. . . . I’ve got a good bit of dope on Fanning since I saw you.”

“What’s that?”

“I sent a photograph, measurements, and fingerprints up to New York, and they have found him in their Rogues’ Gallery. His right name is Lester Patchin, but he has used a string of aliases. Gilt-edge swindler, get-rich-quick artist, and so on. Has served a term in Massachusetts. Lately, according to the police, he has dropped out of sight.”

“What was he doing in Baltimore?”

“That I can’t tell you yet.”

“Well, he wasn’t there for his health.”

“I believe you.”

“What’s the program for today?” asked Neill.

“I’m going out to the yacht to look things over.”

“Want me to come along?” suggested Neill, off-handedly. “Two pairs of eyes are better than one.”

“Sure glad to have you!”

“I suppose you haven’t identified the girl yet?” said Neill.

“Not a clue!” said Bonniger. “And that’s the biggest mystery of all.”

Neill felt more like breakfast then.

When they had finished breakfast Bonniger went away to the store to receive a report. Wickes was in the hotel office, counting the previous day’s takings and Neill lingered under pretence of lighting his pipe.

“Who you got in room eighteen?” he asked.

Wickes glanced at the register. “Guy called Ira Buckless took that room Tuesday night. I put in a couple of other guys last night. Don’t know their names.”

“What like guy is this Buckless?”

“’Deed I couldn’t tell you, mister. I got such a crowd!”

Neill went on to the store porch to wait for Bonniger. Horace Kettering came along with a cheerful greeting.

“’Morning Wheatley!”

“’Morning, Mr. Kettering.”

“Look, Wheatley, my son was called up to town last night by the sickness of his wife. I hate to go fishing alone. Won’t you join me, today?”

“Thanks a lot,” said Neill. “Certainly is kind of you. But this darn murder case is so interesting I can’t tear myself away.”

Kettering laughed. “Oh, well, if you prefer murder to fishing, I can’t do anything for you. Another day, I hope. . . . Any news in the case?”

“Nothing has broken,” said Neill.

Kettering lowered his voice. “Is the federal government interested in this case?”

He asked the question with a malicious smile that made Neill uneasy. He regretted that Kettering had been told who he was. “Why, no,” he said, easily. “Why?”

“Oh, just you’re being here.”

“That was an accident.”

“Remarkable coincidence,” said Kettering. “Don’t work too hard on the case.”

“What do you mean?” said Neill.

“Don’t you agree that it would be better if this ugly mystery was never solved?”

“I don’t get you,” said Neill.

Kettering smiled, “Well, they say a word to the wise is sufficient.” He went into the store.

He left Neill in a state of inward confusion. Kettering’s words had the sound of a threat. What was Kettering’s interest in the matter? How much did he know? Were the Ketterings connected with the events of the night before? No. Horace Kettering was a middle-size man and underweight, and his son, while huskier than his father, was not the powerful brute who had jumped on Neill’s back.

He was still looking for the right answers when Bonniger joined him.

They rowed out to the *Nadji*, taking Walter, the steward, with them to answer any questions about the yacht that might arise. Walter was a blond, characterless young man, still badly shaken by his experiences of the past twenty-four hours. He smoked one cigarette after another as fast as he could light them. On the yacht they found Constable Forsythe. Walter was left with him while Bonniger and Neill went below.

The cabins showed the effect of the crowds that had swarmed through them on the previous day. Practically everything movable had been carried away for souvenirs. The lock on the door of the after cabin, which had been partly wrenched off when the door was forced, was now missing.

“How do they expect me to reconstruct what happened?” grumbled Bonniger.

They stood in the doorway without speaking, searching the little cabin foot by foot. It was a luxurious room with a pair of twin beds, seat lockers under the portholes on each side, and a capacious, chintz-covered easy chair. At the foot of the beds an ugly brown stain had dried in the rug.

Neill’s eyes flew to the door of the clothes-cupboard to the left of the beds. The sight of it stirred up painful feelings in him. He would have liked to believe that the real killer of Prescott Fanning had locked himself in that closet, but the story was too far-fetched.

Bonniger said: “All agree that Fanning was found lying on his back with his feet to the door and his head near the foot of the bed on the left as you look in. That’s where the blood-stain is. He must have been moved the instant he fell, because there’s no blood anywhere else in the room.”

Neill was not inclined to help Bonniger out in his reasoning. He said nothing.

“I know he was moved,” Bonniger went on, “because a man shot in the back naturally falls on his face, especially if he’s leaning forward. The bullet entered the base of Fanning’s skull, came out of his forehead, and then struck the drawer under the port seat locker. It was almost spent and has left only a slight dent in the wood. Its course indicates that Fanning was bending far over when he was shot. If the easy chair was where they say it was, he was bending over that chair. . . . Do you agree?”

“Absolutely,” said Neill, grimly. “You’re better than a professional!”

Bonniger shook his head like a puzzled dog. “Every theory I try to build up runs into a contradiction. The most natural explanation is that Fanning broke in the door with the intention of attacking the girl. But if he had such an intention, why had he given her a key to lock herself in with?”

“Perhaps he had no such intention in the beginning,” suggested Neill. “Perhaps he didn’t expect to be repulsed, and when he was repulsed he went crazy.”

“That’s a possibility. But having broken in violently, how could he be so foolish as to let the girl get behind him?”

Neill shrugged his shoulders. He went to the door of the clothes-closet and tried it. It was locked. “We ought to have a look in here,” he said. “I’ll ask Walter where the key is.”

He spoke to the steward from the companionway. “Where is the key to the clothes-closet in the after cabin?”

“Isn’t it in the door?” returned Walter.

“If it was I wouldn’t be asking you for it.”

“It has always been in the door.”

“Was it in the door when you discovered the body?”

“I couldn’t tell you that, sir. I didn’t notice such things.”

“Are there any duplicate keys?”

“There’s a bunch of keys in the pantry. I’ll fetch them.”

Neill returned to Bonniger with the keys. After trying several he was able to unlock the door and throw it open. The closet was empty. “Have you your magnifying glass?” he asked.

It was handed over. “What’s in your mind?”

“Nothing as yet. But it seems funny that anybody should make away with the key.”

Before using the glass, Neill pounced on a little bright object lying on the floor of the closet. “Look at this!” he cried.

It was a tiny spoon-shaped piece of nickel that had been broken off another piece. Bonniger turned it over on his hand. “Do you know what it is?”

“Sure. It’s for cleaning out the bowl of a pipe. It’s part of a little combination gadget that is sold to smokers.” Neill had dropped to his knees and was searching the floor of the closet through the glass. . . . “Look!” he said, handing over the glass. “Crumbs of bread and shreds of tobacco.”

Bonniger satisfied himself that it was so. “What do you make of that?” he asked.

Neill crumbled some of the bread and some of the tobacco between thumb and finger. “The bread is dry but not completely dry,” he said. “The

tobacco is fairly fresh. It cannot have been lying there more than two days. Within the past forty-eight hours some man has been concealed in this closet. While he was shut up here he ate some bread and he filled his pipe.”

“He couldn’t smoke his pipe if he was hiding.”

“He couldn’t light it, but a confirmed smoker gets a certain amount of satisfaction out of a dry smoke.” Neill was picking up shreds of tobacco, examining them under the glass and tasting them. “He smoked a mixture containing latakia, perique, burley, and perhaps other tobaccos. It would be an expensive mixture.”

“Well, I’m damned!” said Bonniger. “This puts a new complexion on the case!”

“Are you telling me?” cried Neill. He was so happy he could hardly play his part. Janet had not lied to him. It was not she who had shot Fanning.

Bonniger argued quite differently. “Now we know where the man came from,” he said. “She brought him on board with her!”

“What!” cried Neill.

“Sure! It’s as plain as a pike staff! No wonder she came aboard willingly. It was a job between the two to get Fanning.”

“What for?”

“For his money and valuables. We don’t know what has been taken. . . . The girl invited Fanning into her cabin, and while she was keeping him occupied, her confederate sneaked up behind and smoked him. It all fits together. It doesn’t matter which of them shot him. They’re both as guilty as hell and both will hang for it!”

Neill rubbed his lip. According to his premises Bonniger’s reasoning was perfectly correct, and Neill was a good deal taken aback. But not altogether taken aback, because to anyone who knew her Bonniger’s explanation was ridiculous. Janet was innocent and Neill was happy. But he saw that there was a lot to be done before he could *prove* her innocence.

Neill said, dryly: “If you are right how about the burst-in door?”

“Oh, when they went out they would lock the door and break it in in order to make it appear as if Fanning had asked for what he got. After they had broken in the door they would put the key on the inside.”

It was an ingenious explanation, though perfectly false. Neill thought: By God! as long as I live I will never convict a man on circumstantial

evidence alone! He said: “Well, anyhow, our job is to catch the man.”

“And the girl,” added Bonniger.

A new anxiety seized on Neill. If Bonniger gave the press this new slant on the case, popular opinion would run against the missing girl. So far the newspapers had been indulgent toward her because it was suggested that she had been lured aboard the yacht. But if it was believed that she had plotted with another man to bring about Fanning’s death, every hand would be raised against her. Neill thought: Well . . . I’m her sole friend now!

The thought suddenly leaped into Neill’s mind: Eyster! That’s who it was! Eyster is a pipe-smoker! It is exactly the crazy sort of thing he would do! These were the “Arrangements” he talked about. He was always watching and following Fanning. He sneaked aboard the yacht! It was Eyster who shot Fanning and that’s why he’s sucking up to me now!

★ XIV ★

WHEN they went ashore, Neill, moving through the crowd, never ceased looking for a man six feet tall weighing considerably more than two hundred pounds. He would be a roughly-dressed unwashed fellow, and he had an impediment that caused him to breathe noisily. Once he heard him speak, Neill would know him.

The day's mail had just been distributed and everybody was immersed in the *Sun* paper and the *American*. The columns of sensational reading matter and the spread of photographs gave the villagers the pleasant feeling of having become famous overnight. All were searching for their own faces in the photographs.

Bonniger went back to his work in the office, and Neill entered the hotel. He took a look into his own room on the top floor and found, as he expected, that it had been entered in his absence. He had arranged the few articles he had bought for himself, so that he would know it if they were moved. He had locked the door on leaving, but the lock was of the cheapest sort and he would not have been surprised to learn that the same key would open all the doors. It was no great matter, because there was nothing in the room that could betray him.

He knocked on the door of No. 15 adjoining. There was no answer. The door was locked. He knocked again and a sleepy voice asked:

“Who is it?”

“Wheatley.”

“Oh, *you!*” said the voice, with a pleased note, and bare feet pattered to the door.

Eyster in his underclothes, gray-faced and wasted, looked like the caricature of a man. His hair was standing on end. Having admitted Neill, he

hopped back into the bed and pulled the sheet over his legs. “Certainly was friendly of you to stop in,” he said.

“Well, I owe you something,” said Neill. He took a seat at the foot of the bed. The light from the window shone full in Eyster’s face, while his own remained in shadow.

“That’s a nasty bruise you got,” remarked Eyster.

“Well, I feel thankful that I am here at all.”

“That’s right! That’s right!”

There was a pause. Each was waiting for the other to speak. Finally Neill said, off-handedly:

“When did you get down to Absalom’s?”

Eyster saw through it and grinned. “Noon on Tuesday.”

“How did you come?”

“By taxicab.”

“Taxicab! That must have set you back something.”

“Twenty dollars. It was too much, but I was tight.”

“Tight?”

“Fact is I was tight off and on all the time I was in Baltimore.” Eyster went on grinning. “Didn’t you notice it? Tuesday morning I hear a guy talking about Absalom’s Point, what good air it was down here and good fishing and all, and I was just drunk enough to go out and hail a taxi and tell him Absalom’s. With the idea that it would be a good place to sober up. See?”

This was obviously an invention and Neill disregarded it. “How did you learn so quick that Fanning was here?” he asked.

Eyster looked innocent and sly. “I didn’t know Fanning was here till I got here.”

“Remarkable coincidence!” said Neill, dryly.

“Yeah,” said Eyster, “just as remarkable as you coming on the bus that afternoon.”

Neill laughed. “But you said you had made arrangements to follow Fanning.”

“Oh, I was just talking big then.”

Neill tried another line. “You seem to like me, Eyster.”

“I do, I do!” he said, quickly and it seemed to be genuine. “You’re a dandy fellow, Wheatley! Keen as a whip! I would do anything for you.”

“Why?” said Neill.

Eyster turned sly again. “I guess you know that,” he said.

“I swear I don’t.”

“Don’t you remember what I told you in the hotel?”

“You just said you were talking big.”

“I mean before that. . . . I told you what my purpose in life was. Well . . . you carried it out.”

Neill stared at him, wondering if he had heard right.

Eyster’s lips curled back. “I’ve only got one thing against you, Wheatley, you killed him too quick. He didn’t even see it coming. If it was me, I would have strung him up by his thumbs and tortured him slow. You know, gone back to it again and again. God! wouldn’t it have been sweet to see the look in his eyes when I come back to him!”

Neill asked himself if this was madness or part of a deep game that the little man was playing.

Eyster’s face fell. “But what could a poor shrimp like me do? I was afraid of him. I was afraid even to let him see me. I had to have a big fellow like you to do the job for me; a strong fellow, and afraid of nothing. . . . Let me feel your muscle, Wheatley.”

“Ah, the hell with it!” growled Neill. He was thrown back into confusion again. The psychology of the sly, lying, tormented little man baffled him.

“I wish I could do something to show my appreciation,” Eyster went on. “I reckon you want money. Young fellows always want money. And mine’s about gone. Not that it matters to me. But I haven’t anything to give you.”

“Don’t want it,” muttered Neill.

“Did you pick up anything on the yacht?” he asked, eagerly.

“Not a thing.”

“There ought to have been good pickings aboard. Fanning pulled off some kind of a dirty deal in Baltimore, and naturally if he was making his

getaway on the yacht, you'd think he'd carry the proceeds with him. Somebody else thought so, too."

Neill fixed him with his glance. "Do you know who that somebody was?" he asked.

A look of fright came into Eyster's face, and his eyes shifted away. "No," he said.

"You're not playing the part of a friend now," said Neill.

Eyster broke into a flood of denials and protestations and Neill saw that he could get nothing out of him by direct questioning. He made believe to fall for the suggestion of the loot.

"If I knew what Fanning had been doing in Baltimore I might get a line on it."

"I can't help you there," said Eyster. "I couldn't follow his financial operations."

"But you can give me some clue, can't you? Think back."

Eyster studied. "Fanning used to go to a fine apartment house on Charles Street Avenue," he said. "Sometimes I seen him go in. Sometimes I picked him up coming out. I don't know who he went to see there. I got thrown out when I went in to ask. I wasn't the kind of looking guy who could go in the front door of such a house. But you could."

This sounded like a valuable lead to Neill. "What's the number of the house?" he asked.

"3420 Charles Street Avenue."

Neill made a mental note of the number. He took out his pipe and blew through it. "Stopped up," he said. "Got anything to clean it with?"

Eyster was not to be caught napping. "I use a nail," he said, grinning. "You'll find it on the bureau."

When he got his pipe going, Neill said: "Well, I must be moving on."

"Don't go!" pleaded Eyster. "Tell me more about Fanning. Did he see you coming? Did he say anything?"

Prudence warned Neill to string him along. "Don't like to talk about it," he muttered.

A look of doubt appeared in Eyster's face. "It *was* you smoked Fanning, wasn't it?" he asked, huskily.

"You wouldn't expect me to admit it in so many words, would you?" Neill answered, grinning.

Eyster's face cleared. "No! No! You don't have to admit anything to me, fellow! You're all right! You're a grand guy!"

Neill went downstairs, rubbing his lip. The theory that he had so hopefully erected on the way up was already tottering. But it had not fallen. He was far from convinced that Eyster had not shot Fanning.

He found Bonniger in the little office back of the store, engulfed in the details of his job. Messengers were continually coming and going, reports arriving from the local search parties, and by phone from the state police in other counties. Bonniger was making arrangements to have the harbor dragged for a body.

Neill's whole attitude towards the case had changed now. Satisfied that Janet was in no way implicated, he was as keen to solve the mystery as Bonniger was. Also now he could let his real liking for Bonniger come out.

"Look, Mark," he said. "If we could find out what Fanning was up to in Baltimore, it would be a long step forward. It would lead us direct to the solution."

"Well, I'm not sure I can go so far as that with you." Bonniger said, smiling at his enthusiasm, "But at that, its important. I have a man on the job, but he hasn't got anywhere."

"Suppose I go up to town and look into it, outside of what anybody else is doing," said Neill. "Fanning had become a kind of public figure, and I ought to be able to pick up something."

"Certainly is good of you to suggest it," said Bonniger. "I hate to cut in on your vacation."

"Not at all," said Neill. "I'm interested in this."

"All right. I'll give you a police car, and a constable to drive you. Get something to eat before you start."

Neill ordered an early lunch in the hotel, and sat down to eat it in such a position that he could watch all who came and went in the lobby adjoining. It was a curiously-assorted crowd. Villagers, county people, newspaper men, and plain jays.

Finally his search was rewarded. Through the door from outside came a great hulking figure with a head disproportionately small, and repulsive flattened features. As soon as Neill laid eyes on him he guessed that this was his man. When the milling crowd opened sufficiently for him to get a look at his feet he saw crumbs of loose earth clinging to the big shoes. Then he was sure.

The man pushed through to the desk to ask a question, and afterwards turned to enter the bar on the other side, where beer and soft drinks were sold. When he presented his back Neill received another shock. He had seen that back before, with shoulders so heavy they were bowed under their own weight, letting the arms hang down in front like an ape's. The stoop-shouldered man! Here was the substance of the shadow that had dogged Neill from the start.

He had not yet spotted Neill. A solitary, sullen man. He spoke to nobody, and when others good-naturedly joshed his size he made believe not to hear. He drank his beer alone. Probably playing a lone hand, Neill figured. Eyster knows him, but he is in terror of him. Certainly it must have been one or another of these two who had shot Fanning.

When he had finished eating, Neill strolled out and paused at the desk. "Wickesey," he asked, "who is the big fellow at the bar—the stoop-shouldered man?"

"That's the guy you was asking about this morning. Ira Buckless is the name."

"When did he come?"

"Late Tuesday night."

"How did he get to Absalom's?"

"I couldn't tell you, Mister. I just see him walk in the door." The hotel-keeper's face sharpened with curiosity. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing," said Neill. "Thought I had seen him before somewhere."

As Neill made his way to the door, Buckless happened to turn and their eyes met. An ugly look came into the big man's face—hatred and defiance. That look said: Well, you know me and I know you! What are you going to do about it? And Neill had to take it. He and Janet were in this man's power.

He paused on the porch to think things through. He was not so keen now to go to Baltimore. Still, he thought, it's clear that Buckless isn't afraid of

me. He's not going to run away. I'll only be gone a few hours and I may be able to bring back the proof I need. He went down the steps.

At two o'clock Neill was deposited at the door of a handsome modern apartment house on Baltimore's finest street. The doorman and the elevator boy were negroes. Neill showed them the photographs of Fanning, but they shook their heads. Never had seen such a person, they said. After all, the photographs of a dead man do not convey much.

"I know he was a frequent visitor to somebody in this house," said Neill. "Picture a man six feet two in height, slim and broad-shouldered; black hair and eyes, rosy skin, very fine-looking. Always elegantly dressed; fond of unusual shirts and cravats."

The two negroes glanced at each other, grinning. "Miss Rayner's friend," they said.

"Who is Miss Rayner?"

"Don't you know Miss Emma Rayner, Boss? Everybody know her. One of the richest women in Baltimore. She real old now and never go out no more." They looked at the photographs again. "That's the gentleman what come to see her, all right, but he look different when he dead."

"Well, most of us do," said Neill. "What name did he give when he came here?"

"Didn't give no name."

"Don't you have to send the names up?"

"Yes, sir, Boss. But the first time he come somebody brought him, and after that we was told to show him up whenever he come."

"What other gentleman callers has Miss Rayner had recently?"

"Nobody but her lawyer, Mr. Osgood, and her agent, Mr. Barney."

Neill made a memo of these names. "Well, show me up now," he said.

The negroes hesitated, but he faced them down.

The door of Miss Rayner's apartment was opened by a neat colored maid. "Do Miss Rayner know you?" she asked.

"No."

“Tain’t no use then. Miss Rayner see no gentleman callers she don’t know.”

“Tell her it is somebody from Mr. Prescott Fanning.”

She presently returned, saying, “Please to step this way, sir.”

Neill was introduced to an immense living-room crowded from end to end with the furnishings and gimcracks that old ladies like to gather around them. Though it was a fine June day, all the windows were closed and there was a little wood fire burning. At first he thought he was alone in the room, but presently he distinguished a tiny figure buried in a deep chair before the fire. She looked about eighty, but her sunken cheeks were bravely painted and she wore an elaborately curled auburn wig.

“You come from Mr. Fanning?” she said, eagerly. “I was expecting to hear from him.”

Neill was considerably taken aback because she spoke of Fanning in the present tense. “He was a friend of yours?” he stammered.

“I knew him, certainly. What word have you brought me?”

This was uncanny. “How long have you known him?” asked Neill, sparring for time.

“Oh, several months,” she said, impatiently. “What’s that got to do with it?”

“Who introduced you to him?”

Miss Rayner sat up. “Young man, I don’t know you. I don’t propose to be cross-examined by a stranger in my own house! Who are you and what do you want?”

“Don’t you read the newspapers, Miss Rayner?”

“Certainly not. I’ve something better to read.”

“Mr. Fanning is dead.”

She took it more calmly than he expected. Death is a commonplace affair to the very old. “Dead?” she echoed, sharply. “Where? How?”

“He was found dead on his yacht in Absalom’s Harbor.”

“I didn’t know he had a yacht.”

“Murdered.”

“Bless my soul!” said the old lady. “Why do you come to me about it?”

Neill endeavored to soften his story. "We can't find out anything about him. Who his folks are, and so on. We thought perhaps you could help."

"I liked the man," said Miss Rayner, "but I was hardly what you would call a friend. We had some business dealings."

This was what Neill was after. "Who brought him to you?" he asked.

"My estate agent, Edward Barney. I have a house for sale on Linden Avenue. Mr. Fanning was thinking of buying it for a speculation, but he thought I was asking too much for it. So he persuaded Mr. Barney to bring him here. I wouldn't come down in my price, but, as I said, I liked the man; he stayed on here chatting after Mr. Barney had left, and he came to see me a number of times after that."

"Have you confidence in Mr. Barney?" asked Neill.

"Absolute. A good, faithful creature; he's too dumb to be crooked. He's only my renting agent. He knows nothing about my affairs."

"Well, about Fanning . . ."

"He was a man of large means," she went on, "and we had a common interest in our investments. He told me that he had established an investment trust in New York which paid six per cent and over on its stock. I was getting less than three on my government bonds. I am interested in many philanthropies and I need all the income I can get my hands on. So in the end I exchanged my bonds for stock in Mr. Fanning's trust. I took a little at first, and as the price continued to rise, I got more from time to time."

"Without any investigation?"

"Certainly not! I investigated it thoroughly. I received very fine references and testimonials on Mr. Fanning's behalf from New York people. I'll show them to you directly."

Neill had no interest in the testimonials because he knew in advance that they were phony. "Didn't you consult with any Baltimore business men, or with your lawyer?" he asked.

"No. I prefer to act on my own initiative."

"Do you know a man here called Horace Kettering?"

"The name is familiar."

"He's a lawyer in town."

"I've never seen the man nor had anything to do with him."

“Did Mr. Fanning ever speak of him?”

“No.”

“Did Mr. Fanning introduce you to any of his friends or associates?”

“No!”

“Did you ever hear the names Ira Buckless or David Eyster?”

“No.”

“Of course they might have gone under other names. They are peculiar-looking men.” He gave her a careful description of Eyster and Buckless.

“I don’t know any men of that sort,” she said, scornfully. “Is all this leading up to the suggestion that there is something crooked about Fanning?”

Neill didn’t answer.

“That’s ridiculous on the face of it!” said Miss Rayner. “He only promised me six per cent. A swindler would have guaranteed ten or fifteen or twenty. That’s how you know they’re swindlers!”

In spite of her confident talk, Neill had roused an ugly doubt in the old lady’s mind. Hoisting herself out of her chair, she tottered to a safe that stood open against the wall, and taking from it a portfolio, brought it back to him.

Opening it, Neill thumbed over a sheaf of beautifully-engraved certificates. Not worth the paper they had spoiled.

“Aren’t they all right? Aren’t they all right?” demanded the old lady.

He had not the heart to deliver the blow. “I reckon so,” he said. “I know nothing about such matters. How much did Fanning charge you for the stock?”

“It sells at par over the counter,” she eagerly explained. “That’s ten. He let me have it for nine and one-half.”

The certificates in the portfolio represented 125,000 shares. So Fanning had hooked her for over a million dollars. Neill inwardly gaped at the thought of such a sum. What had become of it? He handed back the portfolio.

“The first dividend was paid on the nail,” said Miss Rayner.

Naturally! thought Neill.

She brought him a sheaf of letters. “These will tell you all about Mr. Fanning. Who his associates are, and so on.”

Neill took down names and addresses in order to satisfy her, and got out as soon as he could. It made him feel a little sick to think of the brutal awakening that was in store for the frail little old lady.

In the street he thought things over. Beyond establishing the identity of Fanning’s victim, he had not got very far. The manner of Fanning’s introduction to the old lady suggested that the estate agent was in no wise implicated and Miss Rayner had confirmed it. Neill drove back downtown and called at Mr. Osgood’s office. He found him a conservative specimen of the genus Family Lawyer. Impossible to suspect such a one. Mr. Osgood claimed not to have met Fanning. He was deeply shocked to learn that Fanning had been a frequent caller on his client, Miss Rayner.

“I must look into this,” he muttered.

Neill didn’t envy him that job. Mr. Osgood said that his acquaintance with Kettering was very slight. He made it clear that he did not care for the man. “A successful criminal lawyer, I understand,” he said, condescendingly.

Before returning to Absalom’s, Neill had himself carried over to Washington. In the Department he cashed a check for all he had coming to him in order to be ready for anything. He looked in on his chief.

“Having a good time?” asked the latter.

“Swell!” said Neill. If you knew the half of it! he thought, grimly.

“I’ll have an assignment for you on Monday.”

As he started out of town, Neill bought the latest papers and found, as he had foreseen, that they were now playing up the theory that Fanning had been decoyed into the girl’s cabin and killed by a man for his money. No effort was spared to paint the crime in the blackest colors, the missing girl was depicted by suggestion as a creature without conscience or morals.

Neill flung down the sheets with a groan of helpless anger. It was their business, of course, to get the most they could out of the sensation, but what a difference it made when *you* were the goat!

It was approaching seven o’clock when he got back to Absalom’s. Lately the papers had been sent down from town as fast as issued and the latest story was already having its effect. From the crowd that pressed around the

store Neill heard a new note, a slow growling sound that, once heard, can never be forgotten.

As he crossed the porch on his way in, he overheard a snatch of talk. A man said:

“When we catch them two we ought to string them up.”

“Not the woman,” answered another. “That’s never been done.”

“Well, we can string him up and let her watch it. That would learn her!”

Neill swept a glance around. Every face bore the same dark look and he knew then what it was to be alone. Hyenas! he thought, hardening.

He found Bonniger with Sergeant Wilson and the constables in the loft over the store, and made his report.

“Good work,” said Bonniger. “It fits in with other information about Fanning that has come over the wire today. During the past four or five weeks he opened accounts with half a dozen banks in Washington, Baltimore, and New York. Large sums of money passed through these accounts. Just before he died he closed them all out and got his checks back, thus blocking our investigation of his operations.”

“Pretty slick,” said Neill.

“It’s clear that he converted his million into something easily portable,” said Bonniger. “He must have had it with him, and there’s your motive for the murder! A cool million! This case looms bigger and bigger!”

Neill noticed with considerable uneasiness that all the constables with the exception of the man guarding the yacht had been called in. He had evidently interrupted a conference. “What are you getting ready for?” he asked.

“We have not been idle while you were away,” said Bonniger. “This afternoon a fisherman called Jake Loker brought me a packet containing one hundred new five-dollar bills that he had found floating in the river.”

Neill’s heart began to sink like a piece of water-logged wood.

“He picked it up at a point off Northam’s Pavilion,” Bonniger went on, “the tide was then at half flood. The money had been in the water more than twelve hours, but not much more, because the paper was not yet pulpy. Of course the fact that the bills were bound in a tight bundle helped to protect them. Through the Merchants’ National Bank of Baltimore I established that these same bills had been drawn by Prescott Fanning last Monday.”

“So what?” asked Neill.

“Well, upon the supposition that the packet was thrown or dropped in the river last night, I started figuring the time of the tide and the rate of flow, and my calculations suggest that it had made a trip down the river and was on the way back again. If I am right the fugitives are still in the neighborhood, and they dropped this packet in the river at a point some distance north of where it was found. Well, what’s up there? Nothing but the abandoned ships. I’m getting ready to search them.”

Neill felt as if all the ground had suddenly been cut from under his feet. He had to say something, and quickly. “That’s a job!”

“You’re right. That’s what I have brought in the police for. I’m going to take half a dozen of the steadiest men in the village also. Kettering will be with us. And I’m counting on you, of course.”

Neill could not refuse to go. He drew a long breath to steady his voice. “It will soon be dark,” he objected. “You should wait until morning.”

“It’s dark anyhow inside the ships. We can search them as well by night as by day.”

There was nothing more that Neill could say.

★ XV ★

BONNIGER arranged to have his party of sixteen men carried up the road in three cars at intervals of five minutes, in order not to attract too much attention in the village. Bonniger himself and Neill went in the first car. Neill, taken by surprise and having no time to plan anything, rode like a man who has received a blow on the head. For the moment his wits had failed him.

All my own fault, he thought; if I had not pitched that money overboard in a passion Janet would still be safe.

Captain Bickel, who had been notified by telephone of their coming, was waiting on the shore. He said: "I borrowed an additional skiff from the farmer up the beach to save time."

This was another setback for Neill. If he was able to separate himself from the party he counted on using that skiff himself.

Bonniger and Neill were rowed to the *Montpelier*. Gradually the whole party assembled on the forward deck. Virgil, leathery-faced and bright-eyed, was there, chewing his cigar, also Kettering, going about and making up to everybody. It made Neill sore to see how all these men were enjoying the situation. As Virgil put it:

"A man-hunt is the greatest sport of all, boys."

Bonniger proceeded to post his men at salient points about the ships. A guard was stationed on the forward bridge of each vessel and another on the after bridge. From these positions they overlooked the lower decks. He also placed a man on each of the three gangways that connected the vessels. Everybody was provided with a powerful flashlight. Bickel and his three men brought the force up to twenty.

While they waited for Bonniger to complete these arrangements, Kettering approached Neill. "Have any luck in town?"

"None whatever," said Neill.

Kettering lowered his voice. "Gosh! I certainly feel for you in this situation, Wheatley. The strain must be awful!"

This gave Neill a nasty start. So Kettering knew, too. How many spies were there around him? Keeping his face, he said, with a puzzled air: "I don't get you, Mr. Kettering."

"Oh, you don't have to keep that up with me," said Kettering. "I'm on your side. If there's any trick we could pull off together you have only to say the word."

Neill silently cursed the man. "I don't know what you are driving at," he said.

"Well, I am sorry you won't trust me," said Kettering. "I would help you if I could." He moved away.

The men being posted, the leaders of the party went into Captain Bickel's cabin to study the plans of the ships. Bonniger said:

"We'll start searching on this ship."

"Is it likely they would hide themselves so close to me?" asked Bickel.

"The ladder is on this ship," said Bonniger. "How else could they get aboard or leave?"

Neill breathed easier when this was decided. It gave him a little time.

Bonniger spread out the cabin plans of the *Montpelier*. In addition to her public rooms she had a couple of hundred sleeping-cabins strung along the corridors on five decks.

"We need fifty men to do this right," grumbled Wilson. "It's worse than mine galleries."

"We'll do with what we have," said Bonniger. "We'll start at the top and work down. Notice that there are five sets of stairways. A guard must be put on each so that while we are going down one stairway our couple can't be running up another. Wilson, Longcope, Wheatley and I will do the actual searching. On the lower decks we'll divide forces and one pair take the starboard cabins, the other port. As we finish each deck I'll blow a whistle

and everybody will move one flight down the stairways together. Thus if they are aboard this ship we are bound to trap them on the lowest deck.”

Everybody approved this plan. It was much too good a plan to suit Neill; it quadrupled his difficulties. However, his mind had begun to work again, and a scheme was beginning to take shape. Before they left Bickel’s cabin he took a look at the plan of the *Abraham Lincoln* for his own information. He noted that the little veranda of Janet’s cabin was immediately under the twelfth window opening on the promenade deck, counting from the bow.

The *Montpelier* was searched from bridge to keel in the manner laid out by Bonniger. On the lower decks Wilson and Neill were told off together. Wilson was a good police officer, not brainy, but conscientious. No cupboard, no corner, no recess escaped his attention; he flashed his light under every bunk. Neill was bored and jumpy because the search dragged so. He thought: This cop would get a jolt if he knew that the man he was looking for was helping him look!

When they finished with the *Montpelier* and passed over to the *Montmorenci* it was about nine o’clock and as dark as it would get. Neill kept looking at his watch in such a manner that Bonniger’s attention was attracted.

“What are you worrying about the time for?” he asked.

Neill drew him aside from the others. “I’ll have to leave you for a while,” he said. “I’m sorry. I saw my chief in Washington this afternoon. Some departmental business has come up, and he said he might have to call me at nine-thirty.”

“Sorry to lose you,” said Bonniger, “but it can’t be helped. I’ll take the man off the second gangway to put in your place. You don’t mind rowing yourself ashore, do you? I don’t want to take another man off the job.”

“Sure, that’s all right.”

“Take one of the cars and get back as quick as you can.”

Meanwhile Captain Bickel had unlocked a cabin door and the search party passed into the *Montmorenci*. Neill turned the other way. The constable guarding the first gangway spoke to him as he came over.

“Are you leaving us?”

“Got to go to the village,” said Neill, casually. “Back in an hour.”

This man's beat was back and forth across the forward deck of the *Montpelier*, so that he could watch the gangway on one side and the ladder on the other. He leaned over the rail, watching while Neill ran down the ladder and cast off a skiff.

Neill headed for the shore. There was a fresh southerly breeze tonight which capped the whole surface of the water with a gentle phosphorescence. This helped Neill in one way, hindered him in another. Amidst the general phosphorescence the dip of his oars could not be distinguished; but on the other hand he realized that the skiff itself must be silhouetted against the faintly luminous water.

He went all the way to the landing. Satisfied then that he was out of sight, he rowed upriver, keeping close to the beach for a hundred yards or so, and headed back for the stern of the *Montpelier*. If the man on the after bridge caught sight of him it was all up, but Neill figured that he would be watching the ship rather than the water.

He gained the shadow of the overhanging stern without any alarm being raised. Keeping as close as possible to the vessels, he rowed on around the bow of the *Montmorenci* and into the narrow space between the second and third ships. It was like a chasm between the towering walls of steel, with a narrow slit of the night sky showing overhead.

He had chosen to board the *Montmorenci* because the two outer vessels were of a newer style of construction, built so high he could not hope to climb to the deck. The *Montmorenci* had two promenade decks and he thought he could make the lower one.

Amidships, only about four feet separated the two vessels. He softly took in his oars and pushed himself along with his hands. At intervals heavy square cribs of timber had been lowered between the vessels to keep them from chafing. Neill tied his skiff to one of these, and climbed upon it. By the aid of one of the ropes suspending it from above, he hauled himself up to the promenade deck, and crouched under the rail, listening.

All was still. Alongside ran the smooth steel hull of the *Columbia* with a row of dark portholes. Her promenade was some ten feet higher. There were eleven men stationed about the decks of the vessels but Neill had the advantage of knowing where each was placed. At the moment he was safe under cover of the promenade, but he would have to expose himself when he leaped over to the *Columbia* and again from the *Columbia* to the *Abraham Lincoln*.

Aft of where he crouched, he could see a faint radiance issuing from the windows opening on deck. It came and went. This would be the searching party inside the ship. He crept to a ladder and ascended to the upper promenade. He was now on a level with the *Columbia's* promenade. Between four and five feet separated rail from rail. He took off his boots and hung them round his neck.

He made the first leap in safety and ran noiselessly aft along the promenade of the *Columbia* and around her stern. A roof overhead shielded him from the observation of the watcher on the after bridge. The promenade deck of the *Abraham Lincoln* alongside was on the same level.

As Neill made his second leap a surprised voice from above rang out: "Hey! What's that? Halt!" and the light of a flash struck down between the vessels.

The flash didn't pick him up. He ran forward in the promenade like a deer. (The *Lincoln* was pointing upstream.) To get around the bow he had to expose himself to the watcher above, but this man had been drawn aft by the cry of alarm and Neill was not seen.

The men on the different ships were shouting back and forth to each other, and Neill could hear running feet converging on the *Lincoln*. He worked with feverish haste. First to count windows on the promenade; twelve from the bow. There was plenty of rope. He unrolled a coil and tied it in a slip knot to a stanchion opposite the twelfth window, letting both ends hang overboard.

He lowered himself over the rail. His calculations were right; he came down opposite the open window of the veranda outside Janet's suite. Swinging his legs inside, he caught hold of the top of the frame and dropped to the deck. The suite was dark but he was aware of Janet's presence. He heard her catch her breath in mortal fear, and snatch up the gun.

"Jen!" he whispered. "It's I, Neill!"

A shuddering breath escaped her and the gun dropped to the floor. Neill jerked the rope, bringing it free above, and let the whole thing fall in the river. The tide would carry it away. He caught Janet's warm body in his arms and held her close.

"Oh, Neill!" she stuttered, trying to laugh. "I thought they had me! . . . I thought they had me!"

"It's all right, Honey," he murmured.

“Why did you come that way?”

“I had no choice. They are searching the ships.”

“Searching the ships!”

He laughed to reassure her. “I’m supposed to be one of the searchers!”

“Oh, Neill!”

“It’s all right! We’ll fool them yet!”

She clung to him silently. After a moment she murmured, speaking with difficulty: “No! . . . You must go back to them, Neill!”

“What!”

“When I am found you must make out that you never saw me before.”

He laughed and rubbed his cheek in her hair. “Don’t be foolish!”

“I mean it, Neill! There is no need for you to be drawn into it. You can help me better if you are free and unsuspected.”

“I’m not going to leave you. We’re in this together!”

“But, Neill . . .!”

“Listen! Let’s see if we can’t dope out what they’re up to.”

He drew her out on the veranda and they stood listening at the open window. In the intense stillness voices came drifting down from the boat deck. They distinguished Bonniger’s voice.

“You say you saw somebody aboard this vessel?”

“I saw something, Mr. Bonniger. A shadow, like, flitting across from rail to rail. When I turned my light that way it was gone.”

Somebody else said: “I heard a splash.”

“We’ll search this vessel,” said Bonniger.

“If he was on deck he couldn’t get down below,” put in Bickel.

“There is always a way, Captain. I have already found one unlocked door, yonder. It leads into the engine-room.”

There was a silence while Bickel presumably examined the door. “Well, I’ll be darned!” he said. “I’ll rope this up right now. If he went down here he can’t get out again.”

“Forsythe,” said Bonniger, “go back to the *Montmorenci* and bring over the rest of the search party. You men who are posted on deck, go back to your stations and keep a sharp lookout. Use your flashlights.”

The voices moved away out of hearing.

“We are trapped!” murmured Janet.

“As Bonniger says, ‘there is always a way,’” said Neill with more confidence than he felt.

“Let us go down the rope ladder and swim for it.”

“Useless, Honey. The ladder would be found and we wouldn’t get far.”

“Then let us give ourselves up and be done with it. What’s the use of prolonging the agony?”

“No!”

“Have you any plan?”

“Wait! I’m not going to give up until I am forced to. . . . Quick! we’ve got to clean up this cabin. We must leave it looking exactly as we found it.”

He snapped on the flashlight and laid it on the floor. He closed the windows on the veranda and the French windows, and they set about gathering up everything they had brought into the suite: ropes, bucket, spare clothes. The remains of the food and water they put into the bread-box. It made a considerable load to divide between them. When they were ready Neill unbolted all the doors giving on the corridor, as they had been when they came. They stole out, carrying their belongings.

They crouched on the principal stairway, listening for sounds from above. A close heavy silence lay on the ship that was like a weight on their breasts. Neill searched for Janet’s hand in the dark and pressed it.

“Jen darling, I’m so sorry I got in a rage last night.”

She leaned against him. “That was nothing, Neill.”

“But it was! It was! If I hadn’t been such a fool this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Don’t!” she whispered. “I can’t bear to hear you blame yourself!”

“Everything you said was right, Jen! There *was* a man hidden in the clothes-closet of your cabin on the yacht. We found evidence of it today.”

“Then you know now that I didn’t shoot Fanning.”

“I know it. Not that it makes any difference to me.”

She kissed him.

After what seemed like an age they heard doors opening above them in the ship, and subdued voices. The searchers had entered the restaurant on A deck. They did not pause, but came down the stairs. Nor did they linger on B deck. Evidently the plan of searching the vessel had been changed. Neill and Janet had to snatch up their belongings and run on down in a hurry. At one moment Bonniger was so close to them that they heard him say:

“If we cornered them in the hold of the vessel a desperate man might shoot. It’s better to work from the bottom up. In that way we’ll force them out into the open on deck.”

Hand in hand Neill and Janet flew down the stairs as silently as if they had been on wings; to D deck and on to E deck. In the grand saloon they distributed their impedimenta amongst the other litter, hoping that it would not be too closely examined, and ran across the immense room, keeping only Janet’s clothes and the precious food and water. As the pantry door swung to behind them, Bonniger’s light showed around the bend of the stairs.

Running across the pantry, they entered the corridor between the bakery and cold-storage rooms. As they came into the galley beyond, a door on the other side opened, and a light showed through. They drew back with the cold hand of fear on their breasts.

“It’s no use!” whispered Janet. “We’re caught between them!”

“Back this way,” said Neill.

In the pantry, he switched on his light and cast it desperately around. In the middle of the room a dumbwaiter rested on a table with its ropes disappearing into a shaft overhead.

“It’s a chance!” said Neill. “Quick! Into it!”

“There’s not room for two,” gasped Janet.

“I stand on top!”

The dumbwaiter had a hinged shelf. Janet crept into it pressing the shelf up and Neill climbed on top. The contraption had never been designed to lift such a weight. If the ropes broke—good-night! Neill pulled the hoisting rope and they started to rise from the table. The whole apparatus creaked

alarmingly, but it held together. They disappeared into the closed shaft above and Neill stopped pulling.

Listening, they heard the doors swing below them. Bonniger and Bickel met in the pantry. Each had a man with him. Bickel said:

“Aft of the galley there are doors into the port and starboard engine-rooms. You and I can take one side, Wilson and Forsythe the other.”

“Lead the way,” said Bonniger. “There’s a man posted on every stairway.”

The door swung again, and there was silence below. After waiting a minute Neill whispered: “Are you all right?”

“If the stairways are watched we’re still trapped,” said Janet.

“We’re going up,” said Neill.

“Where does this thing go to?”

“Darned if I know,” he answered, with a laugh.

He started pulling again and they rose slowly. After a seemingly endless ascent up through the closed shaft, one side of it opened and they looked into a room they had not seen before. A little starlight was coming through the windows. Around the walls there were sinks, racks of dishes, heating-tables and the other appurtenances of a pantry.

Neill stepped off his perch and pulling the dumbwaiter higher, helped Janet out of her cramped position inside. He cautiously pushed out a swing door for an inch or two and found himself looking into the restaurant on the boat deck with its tall windows all around. A glass door looking astern stood open, and outside it showed the silhouette of an armed man. He yawned audibly and stretched himself, pistol in hand.

Neill placed one of his boots between door and frame so that he could continue to watch the man. Neill and Janet sat down on the floor, leaning together without saying anything, and a long time passed—or so it seemed. Suddenly the dumbwaiter gave a shake and a rattle and disappeared smartly from view. Janet almost jumped out of her skin, and Neill swallowed a laugh.

“It’s all right,” he said. “They’re searching the pantry now. They’re only making sure that we’re not hiding in the shaft.”

The noise attracted the attention of the man on deck and he turned to listen. Neill softly withdrew his boot from the door and pulled Janet away.

They heard the man coming. The pantry was L shaped. They retreated around the corner of the wall, and crept under a serving table. The man came in. His mind was on the dumbwaiter. Sticking his head in the shaft he called:

“Hello, down there!”

From deep below a voice answered: “Hello!”

“Did you just pull this thing down?”

“Sure.”

“That’s all right, then. All quiet up here.”

He went out on deck and Neill and Janet relaxed. Neill flung an arm around her to steady her trembling.

After a quarter of an hour, as near as he could judge it, Neill said: “The search must have passed beyond the pantry by now. Let’s go!”

While Janet watched the man out on deck, he very softly pulled up the dumbwaiter. They got in it as before, and he let it down inch by inch until it bumped softly on its table in the E deck pantry. All was dark and still below.

Crossing the saloon, they listened at the bottom of the main stairway. Faint sounds of the search on D deck came down. Bonniger’s signal was given and his party ascended to C deck. After a long time they heard the signal again, and the search moved up another flight. Having recovered the bucket, the rope ladder, the ball of twine, etc., Neill and Janet crept up the stairway and stole back through a corridor to the royal suite.

“Home at last!” said Neill.

They bolted the doors and enjoyed a brief let-down.

They presently went out on the veranda. Neill pulled down the heavy window (it opened from the top) and they stood beside it listening. Soon they heard the search party come out on the boat deck. Bonniger’s final signal was given, and they heard the whole party descending the ladders.

“They have gone,” he said.

“Oh, Neill!” faltered Janet. “What now?”

“I must go back and join them.”

“How can you get out of this ship if the door at the top of the engine-room shaft is fastened?”

“That’s easy. I’ll climb out on the promenade through one of the windows on B deck. You can come with me and close it after I’m out. That is, if you’re not afraid to come back alone.”

“I won’t be afraid,” said Janet. “Not after what we have already been through. . . . How will you get back without being seen?”

“I’ll climb out on the starboard side of this vessel. I’ll make sure that no one is watching from above before I try to jump across. Once on the *Montmorenci* I’m safe.”

They set out. “Remember the signal when I come back tomorrow night,” Neill said as he kissed her at the window on B deck. “Four pulls at the string when you let it down. Then a pause and four more pulls.”

He took plenty of time to make the return journey, taking care to spot each guard on the boat deck before exposing himself. The search party was now inside the *Columbia*. He slid down the rope to the crib that held the vessels apart and dropped into his skiff. He put on his boots and ten minutes later was tying his skiff to the platform at the foot of the ladder. As he ran up, the policeman’s head stuck out over the rail.

“So you’re back,” he said.

“Anything doing while I was gone?” asked Neill.

“There was an alarm raised over on the *Abraham Lincoln* that somebody had been seen, but they searched her without finding anybody. They’re in the *Columbia* now.”

“I’ll watch the middle gangway until they come back on deck,” said Neill. “Have a cigarette?”

“Thanks.”

★ XVI ★

THE search of the four ships was completed about midnight, and Bonniger grimly conceded defeat. That he was not satisfied became clear when he left six deputies behind him to coöperate with Bickel's men in watching the decks until morning. The rest of the party started for the skiffs.

Kettering, as usual, was at hand to put in his oar. "There's always some darn fool who raises an alarm," he said. "That guy was seeing things at night!"

Bonniger disregarded his chatter.

So Janet had been saved. But for how long? Neill couldn't afford to relax at all. He suddenly realized that he was pretty nearly dead beat. A long-continued strain tires a man more than any amount of physical exertion.

There was a moment when he and Kettering stood together on the platform at the foot of the ladder, waiting to get in a skiff. Kettering said softly:

"Congratulations, Wheatley! I don't know just how you worked it, but it was neat!"

Neill said: "You're talking in riddles tonight, Mr. Kettering."

"Don't be afraid," said Kettering, with a laugh. "I'm not going to give you away."

Neill was not so sure of that. They got in the skiff.

Back in the village, Bonniger asked Neill into his room to have a drink before turning in. Kettering, to Neill's relief, had gone to his tent.

Bonniger had one of the better rooms on the second floor of the hotel. He threw off coat and vest and went to the window with a woof! of

satisfaction. Bonniger's stern air, Neill had learned, was only to warn off fools and bores. When you were alone with him if he liked you, he could become very human.

"Grand air down on this point," he said. "Grand for sleeping!"

"You don't let anything get under your skin," said Neill, enviously.

"Life is too short for that," said Bonniger. "I was drafted for this work. I'm doing my best with what poor wits the Lord gave me, and when I meet with a trifling setback I'm not going to let it cast me down. A setback I have found, if you take it right, is a spring-board from which to take a longer leap. This case is a fascinating problem. I have all the lines in my hand. I shan't fail to land my fish."

"Do you still think there is somebody on the ships?" asked Neill, off-handedly.

"If there is, it's a good place for them to be," said Bonniger, with a dry smile. "I can put my hands on them easily."

This had the effect of a challenge to Neill. Oh, I don't know! he thought. He said nothing.

Bonniger looked at him full. "You seem pretty well tuckered out," he said. "You shouldn't take all this so hard."

Neill wished that he wouldn't sound the friendly note. He was getting to like the man too much. "Oh, it isn't the case," he said, lightly. "That's a welcome distraction. . . . I've got private troubles."

"Woman trouble, I reckon," said Bonniger, sagely. "Always is at your age."

"Well . . . yes," said Neill, with a wry smile.

"Lord! I have known what that was in my time," said Bonniger, smiling. "I'm thankful it's over. Really, a man gets the best out of women after he has passed forty-five. It may not be flattering, but they have confidence in you then; they open their dear little hearts to you. I have three nieces up the county who keep me young. You must come up and meet them when this is over."

"Thanks," said Neill, "but my hands are pretty full in that line."

"Well, anyhow, let's order up some beer and drink their healths."

"That would be fine."

However, the beer was not destined to be drunk.

Forsythe had just been sent off to the yacht to relieve Constable Mattingly, who had been on guard since six. Suddenly through the open window they heard Forsythe's deep voice hailing the shore.

"Ho! Sergeant Wilson!"

Wilson answered from the store next door. "Hello?"

"Come out here, sir, and bring Mr. Bonniger."

"All right."

Instantly Bonniger was the stern public officer again. He snatched up his coat and he and Neill ran downstairs. They met Wilson coming from the store. Some of the villagers had been aroused by the constable's hail, and heads were sticking out of the bedroom windows here and there. As they went out on the wharf, Virgil Longcope came running down the hill behind the store, slipping his suspenders over his shoulders. He called to them to wait for him.

Virgil's clerk, young Trueman, was on the wharf. "Gosh! I hope there ain't nothing wrong out there," he said. "If there is, reckon it's my fault."

"What do you mean?" asked Bonniger. "Come along with us."

Trueman explained while Wilson plied the oars. "About nine o'clock fellow called up and asked for Sergeant Wilson. I said he wouldn't be back until late. So the fellow he said he was Constable Pennorth stationed at King's Green twenty miles up the road."

"Did you recognize Pennorth's voice?"

"I don't know the man."

"Go ahead."

"Well, this fellow said he was Pennorth, he said a man driving up the county from Cove Point had stopped by to say that as he come around a turn in the Cove Point road he seen a couple jump out of the road into the bushes. And the girl had a pink dress and a black wrap on. Pennorth he said that Wilson had ordered him not on any account to leave the King's Green section, and he wanted to know what to do. Well, I tried a dozen times to get Wilson on the phone . . ."

"The phone is in Captain Bickel's cabin and we were away searching the ships," put in Wilson.

“So I think I’ll go out to the yacht and tell Mattingly. Mattingly and me, we talked it over and he said he’d better lock up the yacht and go up to the Cove Point road on his motor-bike. He was all excited at the thought of nabbing that pair single-handed.”

“I dare say!” said Wilson, dryly.

“So I came ashore and at ten o’clock I shut up the store and went home,” Trueman went on. “I called up the ships every little while to tell you, but there was no answer, and then . . . well, I reckon I fell asleep.”

As they drew near the yacht Forsythe said from the deck: “Mattingly is gone.”

“We know it,” answered Wilson. “What then?”

“The yacht has been ransacked from stem to stern, sir.”

“Ha!” said Bonniger, with a hard smile.

“You seem to be pleased about it,” said Wilson, sorely.

“I suspected our man was not far away, and now I know it.”

They went aboard. The lights were off. Their electric torches revealed that the doors of the forward hatch, the dining-saloon, and the after companionway had all been forced. Down below the yacht was a scene of wreckage. At first glance it appeared as if somebody had wantonly torn and smashed his way through the cabins, but upon closer examination it was clear that there had been a painstaking search for something.

Neill thought, This was Buckless!

“What was he looking for?” asked Wilson.

“Some loot that Fanning had or that the murderer thought he had,” said Bonniger. “Judging from the general ruin he didn’t find it. That’s all to the good.”

Bonniger was only one step from the truth.

“He was scared off on the night of the murder,” Bonniger went on, “and tonight he came back to look again for it.”

Forsythe said: “I think I scared him off this time, too, sir. When I was rowing out I heard oars up the inlet. But by the time I had got aboard he had landed.”

Longcope, Wilson, and Trueman rowed back to the shore, the sergeant to spread what men he had to search through the village. Bonniger and Neill remained on board to make a closer examination. It was evident that the man had worn gloves, because there were no fingerprints to be found anywhere. He had torn up the carpets, slit the mattresses, and cut open the pillows. He had even gone down into the bilge under the cabin floors. Here he ran into some grease for they found the print of a whole hand on the under side of a hatch cover.

“He was wearing gloves, sure enough,” said Bonniger, examining it. “Pigskin gloves, of all things!”

There was nothing more to be done aboard. Forsythe put Bonniger and Neill ashore in the dinghy and returned to his post. The news had spread around the village and a small crowd of men in various stages of undress was waiting on the wharf. Newspaper men and villagers. They fired questions at Bonniger. He led them across the road and into the store because he wanted to look them over under the lights.

Kettering was in the thick of the crowd and on the edge slouched the uncouth figure of Ira Buckless. Neill edged around behind the latter without attracting his notice. Buckless was closely attending to the questions the reporters were asking, and Bonniger’s answers. Neill took note of a bulge in the right-hand pocket of his jacket, and with delicate fingers pulled the pocket open a little. Inside lay the pigskin gloves stained with grease.

Neill moved away from him. He had no intention of passing on the tip to Bonniger. He could not risk a showdown until he had *proof* that Buckless was the killer.

However, Bonniger’s keen glance picked Buckless out as the only completely-dressed man in the crowd before him. “Hey, you, whatever your name is, I mean the big fellow there,” he said, sternly. “I’d like to ask you a few questions. Come back into the office with me, will you?”

Buckless looked around, scowling; made up his mind that escape was impossible, and pushing through the crowd, went with Bonniger. Neill remained in the background. Anxious as he was to keep in touch with what was going on, he knew that for him to be present at this scene would only precipitate disaster.

Virgil, uneasy about the fingers in his cracker-boxes, was shepherding the crowd out on the porch. As the floor cleared, Neill saw a pair of soiled,

trampled gloves lying there. Virgil pounced on them with a cry. "Here! Here!" he cried running back to the office with them.

Neill went into the hotel and paced his room in a torment of suspense. What was going to come of this interview? During the last two days Buckless had had reasons of his own for keeping his mouth shut about Janet, but Bonniger was pretty sure to get him in a corner. And what then?

In a few minutes there was a knock on the door. When he opened it Neill stiffened at the sight of the waiting constable. The man said: "Mr. Bonniger says he's sorry to disturb you, but will you please come down to the store."

★ XVII ★

THE crowd was still hanging around the store when Neill passed in, talking over what had happened in low voices. He saw Eyster among them with the top of his pajamas tucked in his pants. Eyster grinned at him in his crazy fashion, and nodded his head to assure Neill that he could depend on him.

Neill entered the little office at the back. Bonniger was there with Sergeant Wilson, Kettering, and the hulking Buckless. Bonniger's greeting was unchanged. So nothing serious could have happened yet. Buckless, on the other hand, was sweating and uneasy. Kettering's face wore its usual pleasant mask. The soiled gloves lay on the desk. Bonniger said:

"I picked up this fellow on suspicion of having broken into the yacht. He swears he has never been aboard her."

Neill coolly looked Buckless over. The big fellow showed his teeth.

"The gloves were picked up on the floor of the store," Bonniger continued. "Anybody in the crowd might have dropped them. I have no proof as yet that this is the man we want, but I have trapped him into an admission that he knew Fanning, and I have decided to take him into custody until I find out how much he does know."

"How can I help you?" asked Neill.

Bonniger smiled. "He has intimated that you know more about this case than you have let on."

"The usual red herring," said Neill, easily.

"Sure. But I thought you wouldn't mind confronting him."

"Certainly not. Why does he pick on me?"

“Aah! you’re a cool hand, all right,” growled Buckless. “You know what I know about you!”

There was nothing for Neill to do but brazen it out. “Well, spill it!” he said.

“This guy is a federal agent,” Buckless said to Bonniger. “I don’t know what his right name may be, but he goes in the Department by the name of Neill Tryon.”

“I know it,” said Bonniger. “So what?”

“He knows the girl in this case.”

Neill laughed out. “That’s a good one!”

Kettering led the laughter of the others. But support from this quarter only angered Neill.

“She was *his* girl,” Buckless asserted. “Fanning took her away from him, and he was looking for revenge!”

“How do you know all this?” asked Bonniger.

“Fanning hisself told me.”

“How did you know that this was the man called Neill Tryon?”

“I seen him in Fanning’s company Monday night.”

“Under what circumstances?”

“I went to Fanning’s room to report . . .”

“Just a minute. What were your relations with Fanning?”

“I worked for him.”

“In what capacity?”

“Body-guard.”

“Body-guard?”

“That’s what I said. Fanning was a slick business man and when he outsmarted a man, sometimes the fellow would get sore and lay for him, and it was my job to protect him. See?”

“Ask him what Fanning’s business was,” put in Kettering.

“You heard the question,” said Bonniger.

Buckless turned wary. “I don’t know. Fanning was a slick operator, and I was just his strong-arm guy. He never told me nothing about his business and I never asked.”

“Which may or may not be true,” remarked Bonniger. “Let’s go back a little. You say you went to his room on Monday night to report.”

“Yeah. And he says, ‘Ira,’ he says, ‘I got a guy here who’s entirely too nosey and I can’t figure what he’s after. Take a look at him through the door.’ I takes a squint and I says: ‘I never seen him before, Boss, but I bet he’s one of these college-boy federal dicks. I can smell out them buzzards.’”

Kettering laughed heartily.

“And then what?” asked Bonniger.

“That was all at the time,” said Buckless, “but I seen Fanning again couple hours later and he says to me: ‘Ira, you was right about that guy. I been through his pockets since I seen you and had a look at his papers.’ And I says to Fanning: ‘What the hell have the federals got on you, Boss?’ And he says: ‘Not a thing in the world, Ira! Its a personal matter with that guy. His doll has fallen for me. Is that my fault?’ And he laughed. He showed me a picture of the doll that he had took out of Tryon’s pocket.”

All Buckless’ hearers laughed together. Bonniger said:

“Have you any proof of this yarn?”

“Only what I’m telling you,” growled Buckless.

“Well, as the self-confessed strong-arm man for a swindler your word doesn’t carry much weight.”

“Look,” said Buckless, with an ugly grin, “Fanning was carrying that doll’s picture in his pocket. I know it wasn’t found on him after death because you never had no picture of her to publish. Maybe this guy is carrying it on him. That would be proof, wouldn’t it?”

The photograph was in Neill’s inside pocket. He felt as if he were taking a nose dive through space and waited, tense, for the crash. He became aware that Bonniger was asking with a smile:

“You don’t mind if I go through your pockets, do you?”

Neill had to think with lightning speed. “I’ll save you the trouble,” he said laughing, too. He threw the card on the desk. “That’s the photograph he’s talking about.”

It created a sensation. Kettering looked shocked; Wilson's honest eyes almost started from his head and the friendly smile on Bonniger's lips stiffened.

"Is that the photograph?" Bonniger asked Buckless.

"That's it," said Buckless, grinning.

"That," said Neill, "is the photograph of a witness wanted in a narcotic case. I have never set eyes on the original, and certainly she has nothing to do with this matter."

"How could this fellow have known that you were carrying such a photograph?" asked Bonniger.

"His room is across the corridor from mine. I have reason to believe that he had been through my things."

Bonniger nodded. "All right. I'll show this to the crew of the yacht and that will clear you."

Neill felt dizzy again. The crash was not averted but only delayed. He clenched his teeth.

"Wilson," said Bonniger, "bring down McGee, will you? He's the most intelligent of that bunch."

Wilson went out. It seemed to Neill that half a lifetime passed before he returned. Kettering kept drawing his hand over his face as if to smooth out a grin, and Neill longed to punch him. In those moments Neill learned what it was to be stretched on the rack. No man could be expected to bear it smiling. Yet smile he did.

McGee, a stolid mechanic, came in wondering why he had been sent for. He had the look of a decent family man. Bonniger pushed the card photograph towards him.

"Did you ever see that woman?"

McGee looked at the photograph without changing a muscle. Before answering he glanced from one man to another in his deliberate way and evidently made up his mind about the situation. The faintest flicker of understanding came into his eyes when they met Neill's eyes.

"No, I never seen her before. Who is she? Why do you ask me?"

Neill looked down on the floor. He wanted to sit down, but was afraid of calling attention to himself. It was only a temporary reprieve, because he

could not tell what Buckless was going to say next.

“Does that look like the woman Fanning had aboard the yacht?” asked Bonniger.

“No, sir. Nothing like!”

“Ah, you dirty liar!” Buckless burst out. “You are in cahoots with this guy. I told the boss you was a rat. And now I know you had a hand in killing him!”

“Quiet!” said Bonniger, with surprising force for such a still man.

Buckless subsided in an angry muttering. Neill glanced at him uneasily. Why didn't he say more? Afraid of incriminating himself, perhaps. Anyhow, it was clear that he was through for the moment. Neill ventured to sit down.

“That's all, McGee,” said Bonniger. “Much obliged.”

Bonniger handed the photograph back to Neill. His manner was less free than heretofore, and Neill doubted if he was as fully satisfied as he was making out to be. He turned to Buckless.

“Now, mister, I'd be obliged if you'd answer a few questions about your own movements. . . . When did you arrive at Absalom's?”

“Between ten and ten-thirty Tuesday night.”

“How did you come?”

“By automobile. A friend drove me down from Baltimore. He went back.”

“Pretty obliging friend to drive a hundred and sixty miles at night to do you a favor.”

“He was under obligations to me.”

“What sort of obligations?”

“He's a yacht broker. I bought the yacht from him for Fanning. He never saw Fanning. There was nothing shady about that deal, so you needn't look for it.”

“Well, if you ask me,” said Bonniger, “buying a yacht for the purpose of abduction is pretty shady business.”

“I didn't know there was a woman going until the night they sailed,” Buckless coolly retorted. “And for all I know she went willingly. Up until

Monday I thought the boss was going to take me with him to Cuba, but he wouldn't. We had words about it."

There was a wicked roll to Buckless' eyes which suggested that he enjoyed keeping Neill on the rack. Neill got up and went to the window.

This window looked towards the rear of the building on a space that was heaped with empty packing-cases and the litter of years. When Neill stuck his head out he discovered that there was a figure crouching under the window. Eyster's twisted face looked up at him in terror at first, then, upon recognizing Neill, with the familiar sly grin. Neill left the window.

"What brought you down here Tuesday night?" Bonniger was asking.

"The boss called me up from here about seven o'clock," Buckless answered. "Told me how he had to put in here on account of the engine broke. Well, there was some business I wanted to talk over with him, so I got the car."

"What business?"

"That I won't tell."

"Man," said Bonniger, sternly, "don't you realize that you are in a serious situation?"

"I ain't got nothing to fear," said Buckless. He looked at Neill. "I will tell everything when the right time comes."

Bonniger let it go at that. "Will you give me the name and address of the man who brought you down here?"

"Sure!" He gave it and Bonniger wrote it down. "Here's some further particulars for you. We filled up at the S.O. station on Hanover Street just before you come to the bridge. It was then twenty past eight."

"You got here a little after ten, you say. Did you see Fanning?"

"No. I didn't try to."

"Why not?"

"Well, I was told as how the crew had come ashore to the movies and I didn't know what I'd bust into if I went out there."

"Unusual delicacy!" commented Bonniger. "What did you do?"

"I just fooled around and listened to the talk outside the store, then I got a room and went to bed."

“And in the morning?”

“Didn’t want to go out to the yacht too early. While I was waiting, word came in of the killing.”

“Why didn’t you come forward at once as Fanning’s friend?”

“I wanted to find out first what had happened.”

Bonniger shrugged. “Wilson,” he said, “where can we lock this man up?”

“In the jail at King’s Green, Mr. Bonniger.”

“Too far away. I must have him convenient for questioning.”

“There is no place in this village that would serve as a lock-up.”

“Put him aboard the yacht,” said Bonniger. “There’s only one door to the forepeak, and you have to keep a man out there on guard, anyhow.”

“Okay,” said Wilson. “Here, you!” he added, producing a pair of handcuffs.

Buckless, without any protest, extended his hairy right wrist. Wilson snapped one of the bracelets around it, and the other on his own left wrist.

Buckless only had one request to make: “Can I see my lawyer?”

“Who’s your lawyer?” asked Bonniger.

“Mr. Rudy Morris.”

“What’s his address?”

“He’s here in Absalom’s. I sent for him.”

“So you reckoned you’d be needing a lawyer, eh? . . . You can’t see him tonight.”

“Can I see him in the morning?”

“All right.”

Wilson led the big fellow out. Neill looked after them in perplexity. Why did Buckless choose to hold back the most damning part of his story? As the big man went through the door he gave Neill a look of sullen meaning that the latter could not understand.

When they had gone, Bonniger’s expression hardened. He, too, showed signs of strain. “What do you think of this mug’s story?” he asked Neill.

“I think he’s lying.”

“Oh, sure! Even if the rest of it were true, after dashing down here at night to see Fanning he wouldn’t wait around until morning.”

“It’s all lies,” said Neill. “He is likely the murderer himself.”

“Sure. If he’s lying, that’s the natural inference.”

“Don’t you think he’s lying?”

“Partly. But I can’t tell at what point the truth ends and the lies begin. He doesn’t seem bright enough to have thought it all up.”

Neill had an uneasy feeling that Bonniger might be right. “Maybe the lawyer’s been prompting him,” he suggested.

“It’s a possibility. . . . This fellow’s story only confuses the issue,” he said, slowly. “He claims not to know the girl, and certainly the girl that McGee and the others have described would never have fallen for that brute!”

There was a silence. Kettering looked from one man to another and drew his hand over his face. “Well, I’ll be on my way,” he said in his hearty manner. “I reckon you two have things you want to talk over.”

“There’s nothing you shouldn’t hear,” said Bonniger.

“I’m going fishing tomorrow,” said Kettering. “Got to get some sleep.”

He left them.

When they were alone Bonniger said, without looking directly at Neill: “I took a shine to you right at the start, Neill. Your offer to help me out seemed so friendly. I said to myself: This lad has the makings of a first-rate criminologist; he’s cool; he’s keen and he’s not blinded by personal vanity.”

Neill had dreaded this moment. Bonniger was such a good fellow. When he spoke in such a friendly way Neill had an overpowering desire to blurt out the whole truth. But he couldn’t betray Janet. “Certainly is nice of you to say so,” he muttered.

“Have you anything to say to me?” asked Bonniger, fooling with a pencil on the desk.

Neill had chosen his line and he had to hew to it. “Why, no?” he said assuming a look of surprise.

“If you were interested in this girl and Fanning wronged you, you could tell me that.”

“Sure, I could tell you! But there’s nothing in it!”

“All right! . . . You came down on the bus, arriving here at seven forty-five on Tuesday, you said.”

“That’s right.”

“What did you do? Eat your dinner?”

“No. I had eaten in town. I registered at Wickese’s and sat down on the store porch to listen to the village gossip.”

“Who was there?”

“How can I tell you, Mark? It was dark and they were all strangers to me. There was one fellow I remember, whom they addressed as Jake.”

“Jake Loker. . . . How long did you stay there?”

“Not long. Half an hour. Three quarters, maybe.”

“Then where did you go?”

That question brought Neill right up against it. He thought of the crouching figure outside the window, and his offers of friendship. It was a queer note that he should count on Eyster for help. But he was in the position of the drowning man who clutches at a straw. He said to Bonniger, “Have you noticed a guy called Eyster who hangs around?”

“Sure.”

“Well, I struck up a kind of friendship with him.”

“He doesn’t seem to be a very attractive sort of man.”

“Perhaps not. But I was alone. We got to talking and afterwards he invited me up to his room for a drink. So we sat drinking and chewing the fat.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Good Lord, Mark! what do men talk about when they’re drinking? We just made a noise. I was with him until I went to bed.”

Bonniger, still avoiding Neill’s eye, called a constable and told him to see if he could find Eyster. In order to give Eyster time enough to get around to the front, Neill detained the constable by giving him a detailed description of the man.

While they waited, Bonniger and Neill discussed other aspects of the case. The old friendly feeling had gone.

Eyster sidled into the room with his insinuating grin. "You want me, Mr. Bonniger?"

"Sit down," said Bonniger. "How long have you been in Absalom's?"

"Since noon on Tuesday, Mr. Bonniger."

"How did you come here?"

"By taxicab from Baltimore." He went on to tell the same tale he had related to Neill.

"Can you give me the name of the driver or his license number or the name of the cab company?"

"Impossible, Mr. Bonniger. I never noticed."

"What have you been doing since you got here?"

"Just tapering off. Ain't touched a drop in two days now."

Bonniger indicated Neill. "When did you first meet Mr. Wheatley?"

"He come on the bus Tuesday evening. We got talking later and I asked him up to my room to crack the last bottle. We sat there drinking and chinning until this lad fell asleep in his chair. He couldn't take it. So I finished the bottle and then I woke him up and put him in his own bed."

Neill thought grimly: This guy is a better liar than I am. He has improved on the story.

"What time was this?" asked Bonniger.

"Something after two."

"All right. Much obliged. That's all."

Eyster went out with his head over his shoulder and his eyes darting inquisitively from face to face. He wanted to stay and hear more.

Bonniger rose and flung his pencil on the desk. "Let's go to bed," he said. Neill perceived that Eyster had overdone it. He was too obviously the glib and ready liar.

Tired as he was, it was impossible for Neill to sleep. He dropped in a chair in his own room to dope things out. It was clear that Bonniger did not intend to let the situation ride. His suspicions were thoroughly aroused. Morning was sure to bring a showdown.

Well, there was only one way to meet a showdown, and that was to anticipate it. He and Janet must make a break to get away. Capture was almost certain. Nevertheless, they must risk it.

As soon as he had come to this conclusion Neill felt better. He would go to Janet at once and they would get as far away as possible in the skiff before morning broke. Janet would understand. He set to work to gather together his few belongings.

Ten minutes later he started down the stairs. It was past two o'clock and the excitement had subsided. Nothing was to be heard except snores in various keys coming through the flimsy doors as he passed. There were no lights on anywhere.

It was not customary to lock the hotel doors at night. Neill paused inside the front door to take a prospect before venturing out. Across the road there was a filling station under a canopy, and a street light overhead. Neill studied the gasoline pumps. It was a natural hiding-place. Sure enough while he watched a head stuck out. It bore the cap of a state constable.

Neill felt his way softly back through the long dining-room and through the swing door into the kitchen. The kitchen had windows on three sides. He looked through first one, then another. There were so many hiding-places outside—sheds, fences—it was impossible to tell if the door was being watched. Neill tried the expedient of rattling the door handle. Instantly the top of a head appeared around the corner of a shed.

He went back upstairs with a hard grin. The decision had been taken out of his hands. What must come must come.

★ XVIII ★

ONCE again Neill and Bonniger met at the breakfast table before any of the other guests of the hotel came downstairs. Neither had had more than a couple of hours' sleep. Bonniger's manner was still outwardly friendly, but the warmth that Neill had had a glimpse of was gone. He said:

"I see that you have the same idea as I. It's the early bird that gets the ham and eggs."

"That's right," said Neill. "When the mob charges, staff-work in the kitchen breaks down."

Bonniger went on: "Our first job is to check this tough guy Buckless' alibi."

Neill was surprised. "Our" first job! Evidently Bonniger expected to catch him out by making believe that nothing was changed. Neill became wary.

"Suppose you and I make a quick trip to Baltimore for that purpose." Bonniger went on. "If we start as soon as we finish eating we can get back here almost before we are missed."

"Sure," said Neill. He thought, He doesn't mean to let me out of his sight.

They set out in one of the police cars before the village was up and doing. Constable Mattingly drove them. Mattingly, a fine physical specimen, like all his mates, was pretty sheepish as a result of his escapade up the road the night before, and anxious to make good. He drove like a streak. The handsome Maryland coat-of-arms on the radiator protected them from all questions.

From the corner of the back seat, Bonniger conversed in his grave fashion. Avoiding all reference to the case in hand, he was trying to draw Neill out as to his past life. He was like a keen-eyed surgeon scalpel in hand, and Neill, in order to protect himself, let his head nod as if he found it impossible to keep awake. Bonniger finally let him alone and Neill, with his eyes closed, mulled over his own problems. All depended on whether Buckless' alibi would stand up.

The address furnished by Buckless led them to the modest office of J. Harvey Brager, a young man who combined the occupations of yacht broker, shipping agent, and dealer in marine supplies. He was perfectly familiar with the details of the Fanning case.

"Sure I sold Ira Buckless the yacht *Nadji*," he said, "and that's where my responsibility begins and ends. I never met his principal."

He went on to describe the trip to Absalom's on Tuesday night, corroborating Buckless in every particular. "I am a methodical kind of fellow and I made note of the time. We filled up at the S.O. station on Hanover Street at eight twenty-five and I left Buckless in Absalom's at ten-twenty. I was back home in Baltimore at twelve-fifteen."

They left him. So Buckless' alibi was watertight. Neill was badly let down, and perhaps Bonniger also. As Buckless was cleared, his manner towards Neill hardened. He said:

"That eliminates Buckless. We know that the movies were out at ten-fifteen, and that the crew immediately returned aboard the yacht. Fanning was shot before Buckless arrived on the scene."

It was scarcely necessary to go to the filling station; however, they did so, and the story was confirmed.

They sat in the car to discuss their next move. Bonniger said:

"To me there is something queer in the story this fellow Eyster told. But since you and he have both testified that you spent Tuesday evening together, I reckon there's no use trying to pin anything on him."

Neill guessed from the dryness of his tone that Bonniger was only trying to draw him. He said nothing. He felt now that Eyster must be their man, but he could not say so to Bonniger.

"Anyhow, let's check up Eyster's story," said Bonniger.

This suited Neill. He didn't care if he was proved a liar so long as they obtained positive evidence against Eyster.

They went to Headquarters to enlist the assistance of the police in searching for a taxicab that had made a trip to Absalom's on the previous Tuesday.

While they were there additional information was forthcoming. It transpired that when Eyster's name was first brought into the case a Headquarters detective named Penty had been assigned to look up his antecedents. The trail had led him to Canandaigua, a town in New York State, from which he had just now returned. The Commissioner had him in to tell Bonniger what he had gathered. It was all in the day's work to Penty. He told his story without a trace of feeling.

"Eyster up to a couple years ago was a manufacturer of straw hats in New York State and doing well. He had a hard life when young and couldn't marry till he was above forty-five. He marries a girl that worked for him in the factory. A sweet, pretty, gentle kind of girl. She was poor and he gives her the nice things she never had before. For a couple of years they was as happy as a pair of clams at high water, though she was twenty-five years younger than himself. Built an elegant little home and all, with everything fixed right.

"Then she gets to running around with a slick, showy kind of guy, the usual thing. It was going on some time before Eyster gets on to it. When the showdown comes, she runs off with the slick guy, leaving Eyster flat. He went through hell. And that wasn't the worst of it, because a year later she comes back to her husband sick and ready to die. The slick fellow, it seems, was an out-and-out swine. Treated the girl something awful. The folks didn't know his name.

"He takes his wife back and gets doctors and nurses and all. But she dies, anyhow, and Eyster they says wasn't never no good after that. He sells his business and just bums around. They said when the money was spent they reckoned he would just jump off a wharf somewheres. But his sole aim and desire was to get square with that slick guy before he died."

The hard-boiled grin with which this story was told somehow gave it a sharper edge for Neill. Taken with what he knew already, it was certainly true, and his feelings towards Eyster underwent a change. He and Bonniger exchanged a look and each knew what the other was thinking.

The poor little devil! Who could blame him for shooting the man who had wronged him so?

As Bonniger and Neill proceeded to the Lord Baltimore hotel, Bonniger said:

“Had you heard any of this?”

Neill answered truthfully enough: “No details; but I had guessed there was something of this sort in his life.”

“But if it was Eyster, where does the girl come in?” said Bonniger.

Neill shook his head.

At that moment they both felt that they were about to solve their case and they were almost friends again.

In the hotel all this good feeling was shattered. In answer to Bonniger’s question, the clerk said:

“Mr. Eyster checked out at nine o’clock on Tuesday morning.”

Neill stared at him incredulously. “Are you *sure*?” he demanded.

“Absolutely. I said good-bye to him when he left.”

“Was he tight?” asked Bonniger.

“Oh, no, Mr. Bonniger! Sober as a judge.”

Bonniger had left word at Police Headquarters that he could be found at the Lord Baltimore and he was now called to the phone. Neill waited outside the booth in a state of blank discouragement. If Buckless and Eyster were both eliminated, where was he to look for the killer of Prescott Fanning?

Bonniger said, on coming out: “The police have found the taxi-driver who took Eyster down to Absalom’s on Tuesday morning.”

“So that lets Eyster out,” said Neill, dully.

“Not altogether. The taxi-driver said he was sober. Why should he lie unless he was implicated?”

“The man who shot Fanning was carried down on the yacht.”

“That’s an interesting theory,” said Bonniger. “But, after all, the crumbs of bread and tobacco are not conclusive. I’m convinced that Eyster had something to do with it.”

That didn’t help Neill any. He knew now that Eyster was innocent of the killing.

While they were talking, another bell boy came by. It was the boy that Neill had talked to on his first visit to the Lord Baltimore. The boy recognized him and grinned.

“H’are yeh, mister. Well, that big guy Fanning that you was asking me about, he got his, didn’t he? The crazy little guy that was talking to you, he beat it next day. It would be a great note, wouldn’t it, if it was him got Fanning?”

Neill stared hard at the boy. “You’ve got me wrong, kid. I never heard of Fanning until he was killed.”

The boy was too wise to press the point. “My mistake,” he said, with a grin, and started on.

But Bonniger had overheard, and Neill, without looking at him, knew how he was hardening.

“One moment,” Bonniger said to the boy. “Give me your name, please. I may want to call you later. My name’s Bonniger.”

The boy, scared now, gave his name. “I don’t know nothing,” he said.

“All right,” said Bonniger. “Beat it.”

He lost no time in obeying.

“Come on,” said Bonniger to Neill, without looking around.

During the short walk to the entrance Neill had to do some hard thinking. He knew that he was about to be arrested. Mattingly had the car at the door. When he was arrested, what would Janet do? He must make a getaway in order to be free to help her . . . but how?

In the lobby they ran into Brager, the yacht broker, coming in from the street. “Here you are,” he said. “I went down to the S.O. station after you and they said you had come here. There’s something I want to tell you that I forgot before.”

“What’s that?” asked Bonniger.

“When Buckless and I motored down to Absalom’s on Tuesday night we stopped at the hotel in King’s Green for a beer. It was then nine forty-five.”

“Much obliged,” said Bonniger, dryly.

This was a very small piece of information for the man to chase them around town with, and Neill wondered what was behind it. He soon found out.

Brager wanted to shake hands on parting from them. When he took Neill's hand he pressed a piece of paper in it, and Neill palmed it. While Brager was shaking hands with Bonniger, Neill coolly turned his back and read the paper.

Buckless just sent me a phone message to tell you to talk to him before you did anything.

Brager left them. Neill, having crumpled the paper in his hand, stood with bent head, trying to dope out the significance of this message.

“Come on,” said Bonniger, beginning to show impatience.

Neill made up his mind to see what there was in it. “Okay,” he said, following Bonniger.

★ XIX ★

THE ride back to Absalom's was not a pleasant one. Bonniger's face was stony now. He seemed more sorry than sore, and that made Neill feel like hell. Bonniger rode with Mattingly and Neill had the back seat to himself. There was no talk on the way.

When they got out in front of Longcope's store Neill faced Bonniger frankly. "Mark," he said, "I've got a favor to ask of you."

"What's that?"

"I want to talk to Buckless alone. We could see last night that he wasn't telling the whole truth, and I think maybe I can get something more out of him."

This request surprised Bonniger. He thought it over, stroking his chin. "All right," he said at last. "Mattingly will row you out."

Neill thought, He means to give me plenty of rope.

Bonniger spoke quietly to the constable and went into the store to receive the reports that had come in during his absence.

His words in the ear of Mattingly smoothed the way for Neill. The constable rowed him out to the yacht, and he and his mate remained on deck while Neill descended the fo'c'sle hatch.

Ira Buckless was sitting on a seaman's chest in the half-dark and stifling forepeak. He looked up eagerly as Neill started down the ladder, and the light from the hatch fell full in his flat and brutalized face. Neill saw the same ugly grin that had puzzled him the night before.

"So you come," he said.

"How did you get word to me?" asked Neill.

“When I heard you went to town I got my lawyer to telephone Brager. I didn’t want you to do anything foolish until you seen me.”

“Well, what do you want?”

Buckless scowled: “That cop guy will be listening on deck. Sit here beside me, and keep your voice low.”

This was the man who had tried to kill him two nights before, but Neill wasn’t going to take a dare from him. He had his gun in his pocket. He sat down beside him wondering what was coming.

Said Buckless with a hard grin:

“I only have to say one word and they could go get the girl. Room number two hundred and twelve on the *Abraham Lincoln*.”

Neill said nothing.

“If I had said that word last night, she would be locked up now instead of me.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I can still do it. But first-off I wanted to see you.”

“Well, I’m open for an offer.”

Buckless hesitated.

Neill, with the object of putting him at his ease, said as one crook to another; “Look. How did you get on to me so quick, anyhow?”

“That’s easy,” said Buckless. “All day Tuesday I was trailing you around Baltimore by Fanning’s orders. When I seen you get on the bus for Absalom’s, I let you go, because I didn’t know then that the boss was at Absalom’s. It wasn’t till after seven that evening that he called up and told me he was there. So then I gets a car as quick as I could and drives down to see what you was up to.”

“And late that night you visited the yacht and discovered that Fanning was dead and the loot gone?” suggested Neill.

Buckless scowled at him. “I’ll keep my trap shut about the girl if you go fifty-fifty,” he growled.

“Fifty-fifty what?” asked Neill.

“Aah!” growled Buckless. “Don’t try to play innocent with me. I mean Fanning’s stuff.”

“It hasn’t passed through my hands.”

“You lie! What did you kill him for, if it wasn’t for what you got out of it?”

“I didn’t kill him.”

Buckless’ upper lip turned back like a dog’s. “I’m damned well sick of sitting in this hole and I’m not going to waste words with you! You got my proposition. Take it or leave it. I’ve only got to call that cop down here.”

Neill began to sweat gently. If he *did* satisfy Buckless that he was telling the truth, Buckless would betray Janet anyhow out of sheer disappointment. His only course was to play a double game with the brute. He moved closer to Buckless and lowered his voice.

“Well, I see it is no use trying to lie to you,” he said, grinning.

“That’s what a fellow says when he’s getting ready to lie some more!” muttered Buckless, suspiciously.

“It wasn’t all lies that I told you. I didn’t kill Fanning, so help me God! I was ready to do it, but the job was done when I got aboard the yacht.”

“Expect me to believe that!”

“You can take it or leave it,” said Neill. “My cards are on the table now.” He went on to give Buckless an exact and truthful account of the finding of Fanning’s body. In spite of himself Buckless was convinced by the wealth of detail that Neill related.

“I reckon Fanning was smoked just a couple of minutes before I came aboard,” said Neill. “His body was warm. I reckon I scared away the killer by my coming, because he didn’t get the loot. I got it.”

“What was it?” demanded Buckless. “In what form I mean. What had Fanning turned it into?”

“I am not going to tell you that,” said Neill. “Something easy to carry around.”

“How much is it?”

“Over a thousand G’s.”

“O God!” groaned Buckless. “What have you done with it?”

“If I told you that you could give me and the girl up, and get away with the whole of it. You and me have got to trust each other for the present.”

“Trust!” said Buckless. “I would trust you as far as I would a rattlesnake! You fooled me once already.”

“You’ve got no choice now,” said Neill. “If you betray me or the girl nobody in the world will ever know where the stuff is hid.”

Buckless scowled, muttered, rubbed his bristly chin. “Well . . . what’s your proposition?”

Neill relaxed a little and wiped his face. “We’ve got to find the murderer,” he said. “When we produce the murderer we can all go free and enjoy the stuff.”

“Well, who was it?” asked Buckless.

“That’s what I was hoping you could tell me. You know all about Fanning’s life, who had it in for him, and all.”

Buckless shook his head dumbly. He had a simple mind.

“The man who did it was concealed aboard the yacht,” said Neill. “He came down from Baltimore.”

“A Baltimore man?”

“Can you supply any Baltimore clues?”

Buckless shook his head again. He scowled and doubled his fists. Thinking was a hard business for him. “The boss, he kept me out of this Baltimore deal,” he muttered.

“He must have had a partner or partners in that deal.”

“If he did he never let me meet them. He kept me out of Baltimore until he wanted the yacht.”

“Who gave him the lead that took him to Baltimore? Think back.”

Buckless could only shake his head. “He was already there when I first heard of it. But I knew it was something big; something classy.”

“How did you know that?”

“Well, once I hear the boss talking over the phone when I was in his room. He never let nothing drop, but I could tell he was talking to a high-tone guy.”

“Can’t you give me more than that to go on—a name, a telephone number?”

“No. The boss was too slick to mention anything like that over the phone.”

“This man that he was talking to may have been the killer.”

“How do you figure that?”

“I know that Fanning collected over a million on this deal. There is nothing to show that he divided it with anybody. If he had a partner he may have double-crossed him.”

Buckless looked at Neill with a kind of admiration. “Sure,” he said, “I wouldn’t put it past him. With the yacht handy for a quick getaway out of the country, and all.”

“Now think,” said Neill. “Go over everything in your mind that happened in Baltimore. Surely you can furnish me with a clue.”

For several seconds Buckless kept shaking his head. Then he stopped in the middle of a shake. “Only a voice,” he said. “If I heard it again I might recognize it. But how can you run down a voice?”

“Well, what did the voice say? And under what circumstances?”

“It was the same time I told you about when I hear the boss talking over the phone. The boss was in the bathroom when the phone rings and I answers it. For a second the fellow thinks he is talking to the boss, than he pulls up and asks for Fanning. So I fetches the boss.”

“What did the voice say during that one second that he thought you were Fanning?”

“He says: ‘I ran into Googly in his beer-joint accidentally on purpose.’ ”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

“Are you sure you have it right?”

“Positive.” Buckless repeated the phrase as before.

“Did you figure anything from this voice?”

“Only that the speaker was an educated guy. He didn’t talk like me.”

“What did Fanning say to him?”

“The boss just yessed him. This guy was making a report of some kind to the boss. . . . Wait a minute! I hear the boss say one thing that struck me. He says to this guy: ‘Oh, that don’t matter; she never tells him anything!’ ”

Neill studied this over.

“What do you make of it?” asked Buckless.

“Not much. Did you hear the name Googly mentioned at any other time?”

“No.”

Neill rose. “Well, I’ll follow it up,” he said. “It is all I can do.”

Buckless was scowling blackly at Neill. His brain worked so slowly that you could almost watch its movements. “God damn!” he muttered. “If you do nab the killer, how do I know you will act square by me?”

“Nobody but you knows that I’ve got the stuff,” said Neill. “If you were to split on me I would lose it. I am in your hands.”

“Maybe you ain’t got it,” growled Buckless. “Maybe this is just a cop’s trick to learn something out of me.”

“You will have to trust me,” said Neill.

“Trust hell!”

“Well, you can be damn sure of one thing; if you give the girl away you will never see a dollar of it.”

“Lookit,” growled Buckless. “You are free to go and come as you please. I’ll give you twenty-four hours. If you don’t show me that stuff by this time tomorrow I blow the works. See?”

Neill grinned hardily. In the desperate position he was in, twenty-four hours seemed a lot. “Okay,” he said.

UPON landing from the yacht Neill went direct to Bonniger in his office.

“Did you get anything?” asked Bonniger. His face was stern and watchful.

Suppressing the first part of his talk with Buckless, Neill described the clue he had obtained.

Bonniger considered it. Neill thought, Probably he doesn't believe a word I say.

“‘Ran into Googly in his beer-joint accidentally on purpose,’ ” Bonniger repeated dryly. “Sounds fantastic to me.”

“We have often to build up a case on just such scraps of overheard conversation,” said Neill. “There is Fanning's saying to put with it, ‘She never tells him anything.’ ‘She’ obviously refers to Miss Rayner. I could go to her for further information.”

Bonniger was silent.

“If you approve I'll go back to town and see what I can do with it.”

“Certainly is good of you to take all this trouble!”

Neill made believe not to notice the dryness of his tone. “Oh, that's all right. Will you come, too?”

Bonniger considered. “You can go,” he said at last, “but I've got to stay here.”

Neill thought, He is willing to appear to let me off on my own in the hope that I may lead him to something.

“Meanwhile I’ll be questioning Eyster,” Bonniger said, looking at him hard.

Neill knew that nothing would come of that.

“Mattingly will drive you,” Bonniger went on. “Get something to eat before you start.”

Neill thought, He wants time to arrange to have me trailed in town. Well, that’s all right with me.

“And by the way,” added Bonniger, “telephone me from the Lord Baltimore as soon as you arrive, so that I can let you know if anything turns up while you’re on the road.”

“Sure,” said Neill. He thought, His sleuths will be planted in the Lord Baltimore. Does he think I can’t see through all this?

As soon as he had eaten something, Neill made another breakneck dash to town with Constable Mattingly at the wheel.

In the streets of Baltimore they heard boys calling an extra in the Fanning case. Neill bought a paper and learned that Miss Emma Rayner had fallen dead from heart disease in her apartment as a result of having been told by her attorney that certain securities which she had showed him were worthless. It was rumored that she had purchased these securities from Prescott Fanning.

So that avenue of information was closed. Neill felt profoundly sorry for the unfortunate victim, and also a little sorry for himself. Every way he turned he appeared to be blocked.

Mattingly had been keeping a sharp eye on him, but when they arrived at the Lord Baltimore he was willing to let him go. Neill sent Mattingly to a garage to wait until called for, and duly called up Bonniger. Bonniger had no news; Neill told him of the death of Miss Rayner.

“Too bad,” said Bonniger. “Have you any other lead to follow?”

“Not yet. Give me an hour or two.”

“Good luck,” said Bonniger, in his driest voice.

Neill sat down in the lobby of the hotel with a cigarette, to dope out a course of action. Word by word he went over his cryptic clue. “I ran into Googly in his beer-joint accidentally on purpose.” Fanning was so extremely cautious in talking over the telephone that “Googly” was probably a code-word, and it would therefore be useless to look for somebody who was

called Googly by all. The name had no doubt been suggested by some physical peculiarity. Must he go through all the beer-joints in Baltimore to find one kept by somebody who looked like a Googly?

No. If Googly ran a beer-joint, beer-joint would have been taken for granted. The plain inference was that the beer-joint was one *frequented* by Googly. It was also clear from "accidentally on purpose" that Googly was not a member of the gang. A kind of cat's-paw perhaps. Who was this cat's-paw that Miss Rayner "didn't tell anything to"?

Leaving the puzzling words for a moment, Neill went back over his conversation with Miss Rayner as far as he could remember it. Who had introduced Fanning to Miss Rayner? Her estate agent, Barney. Neill had never given a second thought to Barney, because Miss Rayner had made it clear that Barney was not implicated in the plot. However, Barney might be the cat's-paw. Miss Rayner had spoken of him a little slightly, suggesting that Barney was one whom she "didn't tell anything to."

It was worth looking into, and Neill got busy.

Barney *might* be implicated, and, anyhow, the murder and the tragedy that had followed on it that day would make him cautious. Neill resolved to find out something about the man before going to him. But first he wanted to have a look at him. He got his office address out of the telephone book.

Neill expected to be followed when he left the hotel, and so he was. Instead of taking a taxi he walked through the streets in order to get a line on his trailers. Neill was an experienced trailer himself, and also adept in fooling trailers. At first he could spot only two of them, one on each side of the street behind. From their appearance he judged them to be Baltimore city detectives. They didn't look very bright.

After he had gone a few blocks he discovered that there was a *third* man interested in his movements. He was of an entirely different type from the other two and had no connection with them. He was watching them as well as Neill. This was a puzzling surprise. Who but Bonniger could possibly know of his trip to town?

The third man was young, strongly built, yet had an unhealthy look, his face being ashy pale and his eyes red-rimmed. He wore spectacles. He had straw-colored hair that looked almost as if it had been peroxidized, and a heavy blond mustache. Altogether a queer-looking guy. Suddenly it came to Neill that he had seen the fellow that morning when in town with Bonniger.

Making a regular business of following him, it seemed. How could he have known that Neill was going to return?

Edward Barney, the estate agent, maintained a small office in an old building on a side street off Charles. When Neill opened the door a black-haired man with protuberant eyes distorted by thick lenses arose to meet him. That was all that Neill wanted. He immediately backed out, muttering something about making a mistake. It was Googly to the life!

Thereafter for several hours, Neill, according to the methods he had learned in the Department, went about town picking up little scraps of information about Edward Barney, and piecing them together. Barney, it appeared, led an exemplary life. Lived with his wife and two children in a neat little house on the edge of Roland Park. Mrs. Barney wore the trousers, it was said, and, she being an ardent prohibitionist, Barney was forced to indulge his taste for an occasional glass away from home.

Neill led his trailers back and forth around town, out to Roland Park and back again. As yet he had no object in trying to shake them. He wanted his movements reported to Bonniger. When he went into Miller's for his supper they sat at other tables in the place. The two detectives were entirely unaware of the peroxidized young man, but he was on to them.

After supper Neill entered the Belvedere Hotel. One detective followed him in, the other remaining outside; the blond young man was not visible at the moment. Neill evaded the detective by making a quick turn through the corridors and coming back to another opening into the lobby, watched, partly concealed, to see what the man would do. The detective was standing in the lobby, looking around for Neill. He started towards the doorway where Neill was concealed. At that moment the blond young man came in from the street. He overtook the detective and Neill heard him ask:

“Say, are you trailing a tall young guy in a gray suit?”

The detective answered, “What is it to you?”

“Nothing at all, only I was coming up Charles Street just now and I saw you following him.”

“Well, what about it?”

“I just wanted to tell you that I saw him come out of the barber shop entrance on Charles Street a minute ago. He hopped a taxi. Here's the number for you.”

“Much obliged,” said the detective, hastily. Neill, looking out, saw him beat it out of the door. He picked up his partner outside, and they made off quickly. From inside the door the blond young man was watching them with a grin. Neill thought: Well, I’ll be damned! . . . What’s his game?

In the Belvedere bar Neill ran into a crony of Barney’s whom he had been told that he would find there. From him he learned that Barney was accustomed, on his way home every afternoon, to drop in for a glass of beer at Heinrich’s, a little café in the Falls Road. This was the essential piece of information he had been after.

It was a long way from the Belvedere Hotel. Neill took a taxi, and the blond young man another. Falls Road proved to be a miscellaneous sort of street leading to aristocratic Roland Park. It was lined by small stores, little frame houses occupied by colored washer-women, and so on. Heinrich’s was a neat, new saloon with mahogany panels in the show window and Neon beer signs. No view of the interior could be had from the street.

Neill went in. The blond young man didn’t follow him in, but when the swing shutter opened, Neill could see him hovering outside, trying to get a look in. The place was moderately well filled. Neill could hear that the conversation was all about the Fanning case and the death of Miss Rayner. He did not attempt to join the general group, but waited at the far end of the bar to be served.

Heinrich was the typical German beer-seller enveloped in a vast white apron. Neill said to him:

“Terrible thing about the death of the old lady today.”

“You said it, mister.”

“Fellow downtown told me that it was Edward Barney who first introduced Prescott Fanning to Miss Rayner.”

“No!” exclaimed Heinrich. “Why, Mr. Barney is a good customer of mine.”

“Is that so?” Neill made believe to look over the group of drinkers. “Is he here now?”

“No, he drops in afternoons around five-thirty.”

“Well, don’t say anything about it. Maybe there is nothing in it.”

“You’re right.”

“But it would be a funny note, wouldn’t it, if Barney and Fanning met right here?”

“Prescott Fanning’s never been in here, mister. I’ve seen his photograph and heard him described. He’s a man you wouldn’t mistake.”

“Maybe Barney met some friend of Fanning’s here; a go-between, sort of.”

“Mr. Barney has his own friends here every day. I can’t recollect him talking to a stranger. I don’t get many strangers way out here.”

“Think back. It would be quite a stunt if you and me could turn up something new in this big case. Have a beer with me.”

Heinrich drew a beer and sipped it thoughtfully. He was attracted by the suggestion of publicity for himself, and lowered his voice confidentially. “I do mind a stranger meeting up with Mr. Barney in here,” said he, slowly. “Maybe he was in a couple of times.”

“Did he pick up Barney here the first time?” asked Neill, eagerly.

“No, you could see Mr. Barney knew him before.”

“What like man?”

Heinrich shook his head heavily. “I can’t remember.”

“Was he a big fellow?”

“No.”

“A little fellow?”

“Just medium like.”

“Was he a young man?”

“No. He wasn’t old, neither. Just average age.”

“How was he dressed?”

“I didn’t notice special. Just like anybody else.”

Neill, discouraged, tried another line. “What did they drink?”

Heinrich’s eyes brightened immediately. “I can remember that, mister. Mr. Barney he had his beer as usual, but the stranger he ordered a drink that was new to me. A rum collins he called it. Made just like an ordinary collins but with rum instead of gin. It’s a good drink. I have offered it to some of my other customers and they like it.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” said Neill. “There must have been some talk about this new drink. Can you repeat it?”

“Sure. The stranger tells me how to mix it. He mentions that he had a client who was a banana-importer, and he was able to get in rum on his ships.”

Here was a real clue at last. “Good!” said Neill. He grinned and drank off his beer. Beer had never tasted better.

It was all Heinrich could tell him. “Don’t say anything about this,” Neill warned him. “I’ll be seeing you soon.” He paid his shot and left the place.

★ XXI ★

IT was now about eight-thirty, and since Maryland does not use daylight-saving time, perfectly dark. The blond young man was not visible in the street outside. There were no taxicabs cruising in this part of town, and Neill regretted that he had not told his driver to wait. However, he saw a taxicab standing at the curb across the street about a hundred yards toward town. Probably the taxi used by the blond young man. Neill crossed over. The back of the cab was empty.

“Will you take me in to town?” he asked the driver.

“Sorry, mister, I’ve got a fare.”

“Where is he?”

“Can’t tell you that. He paid me to wait.”

“I’ll pay double fare.”

“Can’t do it after taking his money. He’s got my name and number.”

“He won’t say anything,” said Neill, with a laugh. “He can’t afford to.”

“So you say. But I ain’t gonna risk my job.”

Neill returned across the street. There was a trolley line, but no car was in sight. He walked slowly back and forth as if waiting for a car, but in reality trying to spy out where his trailer was hidden.

It was a quiet neighborhood. Across the road where the taxi waited, there was a high bank not yet built upon; on Neill’s side the little houses and occasional stores were lighted up, but there was nobody moving on the sidewalk. At the corner a newly-opened street dipped down steeply and was swallowed in the dark.

Neill found his man partly hidden behind a syringa bush at the side of a house on the corner. “Good-evening,” he said, pleasantly.

“Evening,” mumbled the man, huskily. He was trying to disguise his voice; Neill had a sense that he had heard it before. Perhaps the blondined hair, the ashy cheeks, the spectacles, also constituted a disguise. Impossible to tell in the darkness.

“Nice night,” said Neill.

No answer.

“How often do these blame trolley cars run?”

“Don’t know. I’m a stranger in the neighborhood.”

The young man’s voice was shaky. He was evidently laboring under a powerful excitement. However, Neill apprehended no special danger to himself. The taxicab was almost directly across the street, and Heinrich’s with its beer drinkers not a hundred yards away. Neill aimed to quiet him by adopting a friendly air.

“Have a cigarette?” he asked.

“Don’t use them.”

“Gosh! I didn’t think that there was a fellow of your age in the country didn’t smoke ’em.”

No answer.

“Maybe you prefer a pipe.”

No answer.

“I thought, from the way you were standing here, that you belonged in the neighborhood,” said Neill.

The young man’s voice began to break. “Is it any business of yours?”

Neill looked at him steadily. “Well, yes, since you ask me. You’ve been following me around ever since I arrived in town this afternoon. Also this morning. Naturally I’m curious. What’s the idea?”

The young man made an effort to get a grip on himself. “You’re mistaken, fellow. I never saw you before until this minute.”

“Come off,” said Neill, good-naturedly. “That’s your taxi waiting across the street.”

“Wrong again, fellow.”

“What’s the use of stalling?” said Neill. “I’ve had my eye on you for five hours past. In the Belvedere I heard you sending the plain-clothes men off

on a wild-goose chase. Good comedy. . . .”

The young man’s voice broke completely. “Damn you! . . .” he cried. “Damn you . . . you know too much!” He whipped out a gun and fired at Neill, point-blank.

Neill saw the movement coming, and dropped in time. Bent almost double, he ran down the steep side street into the enveloping darkness. The man fired again, and a third time, but his aim was wild. He came charging after Neill. As in a dream, Neill heard a shout from the taxi-driver and the sounds of other people roused by the shots. Then silence. They were afraid to follow.

The street was only half a block long. It ran out on a kind of waste land where the earth from excavations had been dumped, making irregular hummocks all around. Rubbish was heaped everywhere and it was impossible to run. Neill swerved sharply to the left and dropped behind a hummock, hoping that the man would run by.

But when his pursuer came to the broken ground, he stopped, gun in hand, looking around and listening. He was only half a dozen paces away and Neill could see him perfectly well against the starry sky. Neill softly drew out his own gun, but he was resolved not to shoot the man if it could be avoided. He could hear the murmur of the crowd gathering at the top of the street.

Neill tried to edge a little further away under cover of the dark. The man heard him and fired again. Neill ran for some yards in a zigzag course and dropped again. The man had him pretty well placed now, and came creeping towards him, close to the ground. Neill figured that he would have either two or four shots left in his magazine.

“Here I am,” Neill said, to draw his fire again.

But he only kept creeping closer.

From far away Neill heard the sound of a clanging gong, rapidly drawing near. Somebody had phoned for the police. A new anxiety attacked him, for he couldn’t afford to face an investigation, even though he was the innocent victim.

The police car stopped at the head of the street. The crowd began to move down slowly. Neill arose and ran again. The man followed without attempting to shoot. Neill could hear his hoarse breathing. Neill collided with an invisible wire fence, and was flung back on the ground. The man was almost on him. There was no help for it now. Rolling over, Neill took

aim at his legs and fired. The man stumbled forward and falling almost within Neill's reach, lay there groaning. The gun had flown out of his hand.

Neill ran on as fast as he could down the hill, parallel with the fence. The police were now spreading over the hummocky ground. They had flashlights. They were moving cautiously. A wild anxiety lent Neill speed and sureness. If he were taken, everything would be wrecked. Just as he was beginning to see light ahead.

The police heard him running and began to spread downhill to cut him off. Neill put his hands on a fence post and vaulting clear of the wire, ran straight away.

His pursuers were less nimble in getting over the fence; he heard them cursing as their uniforms caught on the barbs, and he gained on them. He then had the notion of doubling and creeping back towards the fence, lower down. He wormed his way downhill close to the fence until he was stopped by a stream at the bottom. Meanwhile the police were searching the open ground above.

He climbed the fence again and, making his way upstream for a short distance came to a group of dark buildings, a mill of some sort. There was a dam over the stream with a footway. He crossed it, and struck into a road that climbed the hill on the other side. Soon he was among the streets of another poor quarter of the town. Absolutely quiet over here. Across the little valley he could see the flashlights moving back and forth like fireflies.

He kept straight on until he had risen out of the slums into a better quarter. Upon coming to a wide suburban road he turned into it, heading towards town. Presently a taxicab came bowling along, having delivered a fare in the suburbs. Neill hailed it and, sinking back in the seat, thanked God for his luck.

He changed taxis once on the way into town to baffle possible pursuers. He was still in some anxiety because he could not tell what the wounded man might say to the police. Not the truth, anyhow. To be on the safe side, he kept away from his usual haunts and made no attempt to communicate with Mattingly, who was still waiting for him at the midtown garage.

In a drug store on North Avenue Neill took possession of a booth and started phoning. From the yellow pages of the phone book it was easy to establish that the only banana-importer in Baltimore who ran his own ships was one A. Lanassa. Neill called him up at his home, and an Italian-American voice answered. It was Mr. Lanassa himself.

After giving him an agreeable spiel, Neill asked him who his lawyer was.

The voice turned wary. “What! I got all kinds of lawyers.”

“Well, who are they?”

“No information given over the phone. Come and see me in the morning.” He hung up.

This was a setback, but not a fatal one. Neill had other leads to follow. He did more telephoning, and a satisfied grin began to spread over his face. The last number he called was that given him by Johnny Tingstrom, the taxi-driver who had once shown himself his friend. He was obliged to wait beside the booth until Johnny came in from a trip and called him.

“Hello, Johnny!” said Neill. “This is the guy who passed out in your cab Monday night and whom you took to the Stafford. You came back the next morning, remember? to see how I was.”

“Sure, I remember you.”

“Are you free, Johnny? Are you free for the whole night? I want you to make a trip into the country.”

“Well, I could be,” said Johnny, hesitatingly.

“Oh, I’ll make it all right with you. I’ve got the jack.”

“Okay, then,” said Johnny.

“Good boy! Fill up your tank and meet me on some quiet corner off the center of town. You say where, and I’ll drive there in another cab.”

“Make it the corner of Lombard and Eutaw. That’s quiet enough at this hour.”

“Okay.”

Johnny was waiting for him. He greeted Neill with a grin that spread all the way across his wizened face. They shook hands heartily. Neill felt a real liking for the little fellow. He was square. When the other cab had departed, Johnny asked:

“Well, where away, Cap’n?”

“I don’t exactly know,” said Neill.

Johnny’s jaw dropped as if he thought his fare was slightly demented.

Neill laughed. “We must stop at an S.O. station and get a map of Maryland so we can pick out our route. I want you to take me down the west side of the Pocomico River. The road on the east side is watched by the state police. I’ll have to pick out the spot on the map where I want you to drop me. It’s about eighty miles.”

“Gee!” said Johnny, cheerfully. “A mystery! Give us the dope, Cap’n.”

“I can’t tell you the whole story now,” said Neill. “But I will soon. I can give you one tip; the big guy who gave me knockout drops on Monday night was Prescott Fanning.”

Johnny let out a whistle. “Well I be dogged! And was it you croaked the so-and-so?”

“Not me. Somebody saved me the trouble.”

“Well, I wouldn’t of blamed you,” said Johnny.

“Let’s go!”

Neill’s last act before leaving town was to call up Mattingly. “Look, old fellow, there’s no use you waiting for me any longer, I’ve had a clue that’s taking me to Washington.”

Neill could hear the honest constable breathing hard into the receiver. “But . . . but . . . my orders was to bring you back with me,” he objected.

“Sorry,” said Neill.

“You’ve got to come back with me.”

“I don’t know what you’re going to do about it,” said Neill, cheerfully, “because I’m on my way.” He hung up, laughing.

★ XXII ★

TWO hours later the taxicab came out on the river at a point where a side road ended at a steamboat wharf. As near as Neill could judge they were opposite the spot where the big ships were moored. The river was over a mile wide, and the opposite shore was lost in the misty darkness.

Except for the shed on the wharf there were no buildings near by except a cottage standing on the top of a grassy bank about thirty feet above. Probably the home of the wharf-tender. No light showed in any window. The heavy scent of wild-grape flowers hung on the air; there was no wind and silence brooded over the countryside that made the city driver murmur:

“Boy! It would scare you down here when you turn off the engine.”

“It’s a great country,” said Neill. “If a man could only quiet down long enough to appreciate it!”

“Do I leave you now?” asked Johnny.

“Wait until I make sure that there’s a boat.”

Neill found a skiff tied to a line running out to a post, and pulled it in. There were no oars in her, but he was beginning to learn the customs of the country now. Searching inside the gate of the wharf-tender’s yard, he found the oars in the grass, and silently brought them down.

“It’s a darn shame to lift the man’s skiff,” said Neill. “But I’ll make it up to him.”

He and Johnny shook hands. “You’ll be hearing from me,” said Neill. “Don’t start your engine until I get away from the shore. It might wake up somebody in the house.”

“Good luck,” said Johnny.

Neill rowed out on the dark river. After a minute or two he heard Johnny start his engine. The lights were switched on, and the taxi turned around and disappeared over the hill. Then silence except for the creaking and the dip of his own oars.

When he got across the river he didn't know where he was. It was clear that if the spot was new to him it must be somewhere above the stretch that he had covered before, and he rowed downstream. Before he had gone far he came to a point of the shore that he recognized, and upon rounding it saw the dim bulk of the great ships moored close in. His heart began to beat, thinking of the coming meeting with Janet. What a lot had happened during the twenty-four hours since he had left her!

He rowed softly close to the towering steel bulk of the *Abraham Lincoln*. By counting the portholes he was able to take up a position immediately below the windows of Janet's little veranda. He lay on his oars and softly whistled the meadowlark's call with lips that trembled a little. He was so keen to take her in his arms!

He looked up, watching for the weighted string to fall. Nothing came and he whistled again, a little louder. Still no answer. He supposed that Janet had fallen asleep and was divided between irritation and anxiety. How could she sleep when she knew he was coming? She had all day to sleep in. And what the devil was he to do if he couldn't waken her?

After whistling again once or twice, he rowed a little way out from the hull in order to look up at the windows. Even by starlight he could pick out the four windows of Janet's suite. They were larger than the windows on either side. Suddenly with a tightening of his breast he realized that all four windows were *closed*. There was no mistaking it; in each window the glass was faintly reflecting the star-shine. Naturally she couldn't hear his signal. Why on earth should she close the windows when she was expecting him?

Then he remembered that it was impossible for Janet to move the stiff windows.

In the first moment the bottom seemed to drop out of everything. What had happened? Had somebody been there? Had she been taken away? How could he get aboard without the ladder?

He set his teeth, and got himself under control. He rowed around the ships to the little platform at the foot of the boarding-ladder, and tied his skiff alongside the others. He didn't know if the extra guards were aboard

tonight and he didn't much care. If Janet was gone, nothing mattered. There were no lights showing in Captain Bickel's cabin.

Taking off his boots, he crept up the ladder, letting his weight down gradually on each step. At the top he peeped over the edge of the deck. No light; nobody stirring. He made his way softly aft over the promenade deck and around the stern. As on the previous occasion, he leaped across from one vessel to another.

As Neill climbed to the boat deck of the *Lincoln* he saw the regular watchman's light over on the *Monticello*, and moving the other way. No danger from him at the present. Neill hastened to the little door in the port-engine shaft that he and Janet had so often used. Here a new obstacle faced him. Staples had been bolted through the steel door and its frame, and a padlock put on.

How could he get in? Useless to lower himself over the side when the window was closed. It couldn't be opened from the outside, nor he couldn't break it because it was made of plate glass thick enough to withstand high seas. He and Janet had already satisfied themselves that there was no other way into the vessel except by this little door.

The huge ventilators that served the engine-room gave him an idea. He had seen the outlets when he had been below. Each was greater than the girth of a man, and there was plenty of rope about. He picked up a strong light line, and fastening the end to the wheel that turned the ventilator, let it fall down inside. Climbing up on the wheel, he entered the mouth of the steel tube and lowered himself hand under hand.

He came out in the engine-room. He had no flashlight with him now, and had to strike matches in order to find the bottom of the steel stairway. Once he was through the door that served the engineers' quarters on E deck, he knew his way. The interior of the ship was as black as a mine. Groping his way through the galley, the pantries, and across the great saloon, he ran up the stairway to D deck, to C deck, with his heart in his mouth.

Outside the door of the royal suite his courage failed him and he hesitated. When he tried the door it opened in his hands. "Janet! Janet!" he whispered, urgently.

Only silence.

He struck a match. The candles were still there and he lighted one. Janet was gone. Steeling his nerves, he looked around and tried to deduce what had happened.

The rooms were in disorder. Everything that he had brought her at different times, the rope ladder, the bucket, the remains of food and water, were still there. The boy's clothes lay in a heap on the floor of her bedroom; her own clothes were gone.

It was clear that the worst had not happened. If she had made away with herself, the window would be open. She had either given herself up as she had threatened to do, or she had been taken. Anyhow, the bolts on the doors of the suite were all intact and there was no evidence that a struggle had occurred.

Immediately Neill's whole idea was to get out again. It was too slow to pull himself up through the ventilator. He ran up to B deck and, unfastening a window, let himself out on the promenade. It would make no difference now if he left evidences of his visit behind him.

On deck Neill thought of rousing up Captain Bickel and demanding information. But decided against it. It was clear, from the darkness and silence enveloping the four ships, that Janet was not being kept aboard. He got back to his skiff without any alarm being raised. Putting his back to the oars, he rowed on down the river.

Reaching the village, he tied his craft to a wharf on the river side and ran across to Longcope's store. There was plenty of excitement here. Though it was nearly two o'clock, there was a crowd around the porch, and more coming every moment. Men were calling to each other:

"The girl has been found!"

"The hell you say! Where?"

"She was hidden on the big ships all the time!"

Anyhow, it was a relief to know she was there.

Neill was recognized as he came under the porch lights. "Here's the fellow! Here's the fellow!" they cried. A mutter of rage swept over the crowd. Curses were flung at Neill from out of the dark. Those behind pushed forward and the circle around him narrowed dangerously. He put his back against the door and held them with his eyes.

"Well, what about it?" he said.

Those behind were yelling, but no man within reach ventured to lay hands on him. The door opened behind him. He backed in and closed it. Virgil dropped a bar in place.

Virgil's leathery face glistened with sweat and excitement, and the cigar in his mouth was completely disintegrated. "So it was you!" he gasped. "It was you all the time!"

Neill couldn't stop for Virgil then. Further back in the store he saw the tall figure of Mark Bonniger leaning back against the counter with his head lowered. He was alone. It was extraordinary to see the self-contained Bonniger in an attitude of dejection.

"Mark!" said Neill.

Bonniger was electrified by the voice. "You! . . . *You!*" he exclaimed.

In spite of all he had on his mind, Neill had to grin. "Whom were you expecting?" he said.

Bonniger's face expressed a world of amazement. "But I thought," he said—"Mattingly said . . ."

"Mattingly told you that I had flown the coop. He was wrong."

"Well, I'm right glad to see you. Not that I would blame a man for trying to save himself. But to abandon the girl! . . ."

"Where is she?" demanded Neill. "What's going on?"

Bonniger jerked his head towards the little office at the back. The door was open and voices could be heard from inside.

"Wilson is trying to break her down," he said, scowling. "I couldn't face it. Not with a woman . . . and a woman like *that!* . . . I reckon she had a good right to shoot him. Such a one couldn't do it for money."

Neill's heart warmed toward him. "How did you find her?"

"Wilson and I have been keeping after Buckless. He's a stupid brute, and we finally tripped him up. Everything came out then. Buckless said we would find the girl in room two hundred and twelve on the *Abraham Lincoln*."

"Was there . . . any trouble?"

"No. Wilson knocked on the door and told her it was the police and she opened immediately. Asked for time to put on her own clothes, that was all. . . . By God! I don't like this job!"

"You know now what my part in it was?" ventured Neill.

Bonniger shrugged. "Buckless tried to protect you, but I could guess it."

“I suppose you blame me for it?”

Bonniger refused to commit himself, but his glance was not altogether unfriendly. “Well, anyhow, you are not a quitter,” he said, grimly.

“Thanks,” said Neill. He started back for the office. For a moment he paused outside the door, listening. He heard Wilson ask in the rasping voice of the cross-examiner:

“What man helped you?”

Janet quietly replied, “No man helped me.”

“Come now, we know there was a man in this. Who is he?”

“No man helped me,” she repeated.

“Was it Ford Wheatley?”

“I don’t know anybody by that name.”

“Who broke in the door of your cabin on the yacht?”

“Mr. Fanning.”

“Did you shoot him?”

“No, I fainted.”

“That’s not true!” rasped Wilson.

Neill could stand no more. He pushed his way in. Kettering, Sergeant Wilson, and Captain Bickel were seated in three chairs against the far wall, with the desk pulled around in front of them. This gave the place the look of a little courtroom. Janet stood facing the judges. Her head was up. The sight of her, so alone, so fragile-looking in the pink evening dress, soiled and rumpled now, hurt Neill like a stab. She was not aware of his entrance. Constable Forsythe stood behind her.

Wilson was evidently at a loss. He scowled at the prisoner and rubbed his lip. Then he turned to Kettering. “Mr. Kettering, you’re an experienced cross-examiner. See if you can make her talk.”

Kettering smiled. “I don’t think it would be proper for me to intervene, Sergeant. It’s possible I may be called upon to take part in this case. I feel the profoundest sympathy for this young lady, and I should be happy to serve as her counsel, should she so desire.”

“Janet!” said Neill, softly.

She whirled around and looked at him as at an enemy. “Who is this man?” she demanded of Forsythe.

Neill was staggered.

“Mr. Wheatley,” answered the constable.

“What right has he to address me like that?”

“*Janet!*” cried Neill, reproachfully.

“I don’t know you,” she said, looking him squarely in the eye.

Sergeant Wilson sneered. “This bit of camouflage isn’t going to do you any good, Miss. We know all about him.”

Then Neill understood. She was denying him for his own sake. A wave of feeling swept over him and, careless of everybody there, he flung an arm around her and drew her hard against his side. “Janet dear, what’s the use?” he murmured. “We’re up to our necks in this thing! For better or worse.”

She still tried to push him away. “No! No!”

“Tell the whole truth now. It is better.”

The unnatural strain relaxed. Her lips began to tremble. She clung to him and hid her face. “Oh, Neill, you shouldn’t! you shouldn’t!” she whispered. “This will ruin you!”

“If it does, it’s my own fault, dear!”

“Stand apart, please,” said Sergeant Wilson. “I’m conducting an examination here.”

Neill kept an arm around Janet. “It is all right, Sergeant,” he said, grinning. “We admit everything except the shooting of Fanning. I found Miss Emory lying in a dead faint on the yacht. I took her off; I carried her up to the ships and hid her there; I lied to all of you. So make what you must of it.”

The examination went on. Since there was to be no further browbeating of a woman witness, Bonniger returned to the office. Wilson questioned Neill as to every detail of the past three days. Neill answered with entire candor. Bonniger frowned at his attitude, and said more than once:

“Remember, anything you say now can be used against you later.”

“That’s all right,” said Neill.

When Wilson had finished, Neill said: "Is it proper for me to ask a few questions now?"

"Certainly not!" said Wilson staring. "You are one of the accused now. Buckless today was trying to shield you, but by your own confession you were back of the whole thing!"

Neill laughed.

"This flip attitude will do you no good," said Wilson, angrily.

"If he can throw any further light on the matter let him speak," said Bonniger.

The sergeant was obliged to submit. "Go ahead," he muttered.

Neill addressed Kettering. "You didn't know, did you, that on Monday night I was trying to get hold of you, and again on Tuesday before I came down here?"

"Why no! Were you?" was the smiling answer.

"Where were you?" asked Neill.

"What's that got to do with the case?" returned Kettering, laughing outright.

"Do you refuse to answer?"

"Certainly not. I don't want to waste anybody's time, that's all. Let me see: on Monday night I didn't go home to dinner. I dined in a restaurant and went over to Washington by train later, to see a client. I stayed at my client's house all night and returned to Baltimore on Tuesday afternoon."

"Do you mind telling us the name of your client?"

"I can't do that," said Kettering, politely. "The business between us is of a confidential nature."

"You dined with your family on Tuesday and spent the night at home?" Neill went on.

"Yes. That is to say the greater part of the night. My son and I got up very early to prepare for our fishing trip."

"This *is* a waste of time," put in Wilson, impatiently. "What's he driving at?"

"Oh, let him go on," said Kettering, easily. "It doesn't bother me."

The man's manner was perfect and Neill became secretly uneasy. Was he, after all, on the right track? However, he perceived that Kettering was sweating a little, and pushed him harder. "Is Mr. A. Lenassa the banana-importer a client of yours?"

"Surely; a client of many years' standing. Everybody knows that."

"Is there any other banana-importer in Baltimore?"

"No."

"Are you his only lawyer?"

Kettering didn't see any danger in this question. "No," he said, easily. "He employs others from time to time. But I'm his only personal attorney; he retains me by the year."

"What was in the little package that you mailed from Absalom's post-office on Wednesday morning?" asked Neill, suddenly.

"I have mailed no package from Absalom's at any time," answered Kettering.

He kept his easy manner, but Neill perceived signs of an inner panic and knew that he had made a strike. "I expect to produce the wrapper of the package in due course," he said, quietly.

"This is good comedy," said Kettering, laughing. "Why don't you tell us right out what you are getting at?"

He was visibly shaking now. In order to recover himself he pulled his pipe out of his waistcoat pocket and blew through it. It was clogged, and he felt in another pocket for something to clean it with.

"Mark," said Neill, quietly, "notice what he has in his right hand."

Bonniger's eyes almost started out of his head. "By God! the pipe cleaner!" he cried. Leaning forward, he snatched the tool from the astonished Kettering's hand.

"What's the matter with you?" Kettering demanded, angrily.

Feeling in his own pocket, Bonniger produced the little spoon-shaped piece they had found on the yacht. He put the two articles together with fingers that shook a little. "It fits!" he cried.

"There is your murderer," said Neill.

Kettering stared wildly and his jaw dropped. He sagged forward, then suddenly collapsed. Flinging his arms out on the desk, he dropped his head between them.

Janet broke into a nervous weeping. “Oh, Neill!” she faltered.

Wilson, Bickel, and Forsythe gaped at the stricken man. They had difficulty in taking it in. A slow smile spread across Bonniger’s face. He rose and approached Neill with outstretched hand.

“This is grand!” he said. “I *knew* you were a good fellow! You had me badly worried for a while, but after all a man can trust his instincts.”

They gripped hands.

★ XXIII ★

ONE word of the stranger's speech as reported by Heinrich, had given Neill the clue which finally led to his identification as Kettering: "He said he had a *client* who was a banana-importer."

From a servant in the Kettering home Neill had adroitly fished the information that: (a) her master had not been at home since he had left for the office Monday morning; (b) Horace, junior, and his wife lived with the old folks; (c) Horace, junior, was out of town with his father; (d) Mrs. Horace, junior, was quite well.

A filling station near the Kettering home had informed Neill that Horace, junior, had started out *alone* at five o'clock on Wednesday morning with the fishing and camping impedimenta.

The question about the package mailed from Absalom's was a shot in the dark that found its mark. Neill had deduced that the clever Kettering would dispose of the loot in this manner. After all, Uncle Sam, without intending it, is the crook's most reliable go-between.

After his primary breakdown Kettering was unable to recover his grip, and before daybreak Wilson had got the whole story out of him.

A month or two before, Kettering and his son, prominent and successful lawyers, had found themselves in money difficulties. Securities intrusted to them by clients had been hypothecated; and, faced with ruin and disgrace, they were ready to snatch at anything.

Kettering had got into conversation with Prescott Fanning on a train between Baltimore and New York. Attracted by the man's good style and frank unscrupulousness, he had followed up the acquaintance. The upshot was that Kettering told Fanning of the golden goose that awaited plucking in Baltimore. And when Fanning came to Baltimore he engineered his meeting

with Miss Rayner through the unsuspecting estate agent. Barney was guiltless of any wrong-doing.

For obvious reasons Kettering and Fanning kept their association a secret, and when they met in Baltimore it was as casual acquaintances. All their communications were by telephone. It was part of Kettering's job to keep Fanning informed of what went on in the old lady's household. Kettering never approached Miss Rayner direct, but kept lines on her lawyer, her estate agent, and her servants, all unknown to them.

Kettering's share was to have been one-third of what Fanning obtained. Towards the end he began to suspect that Fanning was deceiving him and set about watching him. Fanning made various excuses to delay handing over Kettering's share of the money. On Monday night the lawyer followed Fanning to the yacht. That was his first knowledge of the yacht. He knew, as soon as he saw it, that Fanning was preparing to double-cross him and to make a getaway.

When he thought of all he had risked to win this stake, Kettering went mad with rage. He stole down the after companionway while Fanning and his friends were dining forward, and locked himself in the clothes-closet of the principal cabin. Having had no opportunity to eat while he was following Fanning around, he had stuffed a couple of sandwiches in his pocket.

During the night, while Janet slept in her cabin and Fanning in his, Kettering prowled through the yacht, looking for the loot which he knew must be aboard. But he did not find it then. On Tuesday he was forced to remain shut up in his closet for nearly the entire day while the yacht lay at Absalom's. He could only venture out on the occasions when Janet was permitted to leave her cabin.

At evening he heard Fanning come in and lock the door. The sounds that followed told him that the girl had fainted. To a man mad with hatred the opportunity was too good to be passed up. He stole out of the closet, picked up the gun that lay on the stand (he had seen it there previously) and shot Fanning as he was laying the unconscious girl in the easy-chair.

He placed the gun in such a manner that it would appear to have fallen from Janet's hand, and put the money that he found in Fanning's wallet in the pocket of the girl's wrap. She was the daughter of a man he knew, but Kettering was not one to be deterred by that. He said in his own excuse that he was certain no jury would convict her of murder under the circumstances.

The coming of Neill forced him back into his closet. After Neill had taken the girl, Kettering searched the yacht at his leisure. Behind a secret panel in Fanning's cabin he found the little package which contained the whole takings of the swindle, and swam ashore with it.

Having wrung the water out of his clothes as well as he could, he hung around the store in the dark. When the movies let out, the store for a few minutes was crowded with customers buying soft drinks and ice-cream cones, and Kettering took advantage of it to get into the telephone booth without attracting attention. He called up his son and told him to bring down the car with a fishing and camping outfit early in the morning. He spent the night in his damp clothes, shivering in the woods. In the morning his son picked him up and they drove up to the store as Neill had seen them.

An hour later he shot the little package addressed to his wife through the slit in the post-office door. He telephoned his wife to carry the package unopened to his safe-deposit vault. This unfortunate woman was not in any way implicated in the crime. Once they had established themselves at Absalom's, Kettering sent his son back to Baltimore with instructions to disguise himself. Kettering knew that the investigation would fluctuate between Absalom's and Baltimore, and he wanted an observer in town. He kept in touch with his son by telephone. Horace, junior, was now lying in a Baltimore hospital with a bullet hole through his thigh.

On the next day when it all came out, Buckless was released from the yacht. His story was true, and the authorities had nothing against him except a possible charge of willful damage to the yacht. Having more important things on their hands, they were not likely to push that.

Since he had nothing to fear, Buckless talked freely. He said he had arrived in Absalom's on Tuesday night just as Neill was coming ashore for water. He sent his companion back and walked along the shore following the skiff part way up the river. From the farmhouse above the ships he borrowed the same skiff that Neill used later, and cruised around until he had satisfied himself that Neill had hidden the girl aboard the *Lincoln*.

Returning to Absalom's, he picked up another skiff and rowed out to the yacht. He discovered that Fanning had been killed and from that moment his whole object was to recover the loot. His first search for it on the yacht was interrupted by the waking of the crew, and he had to make a quick getaway.

On the following night he lifted a skiff in the village and rowed upriver to the ships. By sheer luck he found the rope ladder hanging down and went up. The suite was empty and he took the opportunity to search it. He made

his getaway before Neill and Janet returned. Landing near by, he waited for Neill to come ashore, and attacked him as has been described. On the next night he visited the yacht a second time to search for the loot.

As for Eyster, nothing new about him came out except that he had bribed McGee, the engineer, to keep him informed of the yacht's movements. There was ill-feeling between McGee and Buckless and the engineer, when he went to Baltimore, did not communicate with the strong-arm man. Eyster was a potential murderer of Fanning, but he lacked the courage to carry it out. As a result of his prowlings he knew Buckless, and was terrified of him, but Buckless was completely unaware of Eyster.

When everything was known and the excitement began to die down, Eyster came to Neill and offered him his hand. The crazy grin was unchanged, but a certain ease had come into the tragic eyes. "Well, good-by," he said.

Neill took his hand with a good will. "Where are you going?" he asked.

Eyster merely grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

Neill was wrenched with pity for the poor wretch. "Don't go," he said. "This ugly business will soon be over and we can all get a fresh start."

"You can," said Eyster. "I wish you luck."

"Well, anyhow, stick around for a while, and we'll talk things over."

"All right," said Eyster.

However within an hour he had disappeared. Neill never saw him again.

Since the jail at King's Green was not suitable for the confinement of so important a prisoner, Kettering was carried up to Baltimore to await trial. After he was taken away the village of Absalom's snapped back into its former calm, broken only by the arrival of week-end fishing parties. Virgil Longcope, however, had no notion of wasting the world-wide publicity of the case. Virgil and Neill made it up between them that Neill was to suppress his share in solving the case, so that the whole credit might go to Mark Bonniger.

"There is a Democratic caucus next week," said Virgil. "I'll present Mark's name as our candidate for state senator, and it will be carried with a hurrah. Not only with the Democrats, but with every voter in the county. At one and the same time we will make the Republicans look sick and get us a Bonniger for our leader, just as it used to be in the old days. After he's

elected I'm figuring that he'll see the need of getting married and carrying the family on."

"You are looking a long way ahead," said Neill, grinning.

"It's my motto," said Virgil.

When Kettering's safe-deposit box was opened and they untied the little package they found in it, a flood of shining diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and sapphires poured out. Fanning had put all his ill-gotten gains into unset jewels, as a currency easy to carry around and good the world over. All this reverted to the estate of Miss Rayner. By will she had left everything to found a home for indigent gentlewomen. So the old ladies got it. The yacht was sold and the proceeds added to the fund.

Ira Buckless left Baltimore breathing threats against Neill for having fooled him. However, Neill's business had won him many an enemy of Buckless' kidney, and he knew how to take care of himself.

At Absalom's Neill and Janet were followed by a cheering mob wherever they went. To give them a little peace, Bonniger carried them off to his old square house on a hill above the Pocomico. He locked the gate of his place, and as the gate was a mile from the house, they were not troubled by unwanted visitors.

On the evening of the day after the general showdown had taken place, the three of them sat on the porch of the old mansion, sipping mint-juleps in frosted glasses, and looking at the glorious panorama of the river and its hills. Strangely enough, they did not find much to say. It was sufficient just to be sitting there together.

After a silence Bonniger said, "Well, anyhow, one good thing has come out of this sorry business."

"What's that?" asked Neill.

"A friendship that will last as long as we do."

"Let's drink to it!"

They raised their glasses.

Bonniger said, with his dry smile:

"Virgil wants me to run for state senator."

"Well, you will, won't you?"

"Oh, I reckon so. I've got a taste for excitement now."

“This old house needs a mistress,” murmured Janet.

“Find me one,” said Bonniger. “You haven’t got a twin, I suppose.”

Pretty soon Bonniger rose with a transparently busy expression, saying that he must go look at his pigs. Everything had gone to rack and ruin during the past four days, he said. He disappeared into the house.

Neill moved closer to Janet and drew her arm under his.

“Is your yen for independence satisfied?” he asked.

“Ah, don’t make fun of me! I was such a fool!”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Neill. “If you weren’t a fool I’d be at too great a disadvantage.”

“Idiot!”

“You haven’t answered my question yet.”

“What have you in mind for me?”

“Marriage.”

Janet looked away, but he could still see the edge of a smile in her cheek. “Not a half-bad idea,” she said, airily.

“Janet!” he cried. “You *will*! I thought it only meant another argument.”

“I’m not going to argue any more.”

“Oh, don’t say that. I’d miss it.”

“Well . . . just as you like.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Dark Ships* by Hulbert Footner]