

WIDOW'S MITE



**Elizabeth Sanxay
Holding**

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Widow's Mite

Date of first publication: 1953

Author: Elisabeth Sanxay Holding (-1955)

Date first posted: Aug. 14, 2021

Date last updated: Oct. 5, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210831

This eBook was produced by: Stephen Hutcheson & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

WIDOW'S MITE

BY

ELISABETH SANXAY HOLDING

Copyright, 1952, 1953
by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of these books may be reproduced in any form without permission in
writing from the publishers

Published by special arrangement with Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Published for the
DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB
by Walter J. Black
NEW YORK, N. Y.

Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER ONE

Tilly MacDonald glanced at her wrist watch, and it showed nearly half-past five, the dreaded hour. She was sitting on the grass, in a little grove of silver birch trees, with her small son Robert playing near her with a set of wooden blocks. His dark brows were drawn together; he was growing angry because, on this uneven ground, his buildings kept falling down. The slender trees hid them from view of the house, but Tilly could see it, watch it. She had to do that.

And then her cousin Sibyl Fleming came out onto the terrace, a handsome auburn-haired woman, a little too flamboyant, her slacks and her tight pink jersey very unbecoming to her stout figure and her ruddy face. A maid followed her, with a tray bearing a giant cocktail shaker and a cluster of glasses.

Maybe somebody else is coming, Tilly thought. Oh, if only somebody else will come! For, if nobody came, she would have to go up to the terrace and sit with Sibyl, and it would be miserable. After a drink or two, Sibyl would either cry, about the ingratitude, the treachery, the intrigues against her, or she would become arrogant and domineering. Whatever her mood she did not want to be alone; if no one else came, it had to be Tilly. She and Robert had only been here a week, but already there was a pattern to everything that went on in this house.

Then out sauntered Howard Fleming, Sibyl's husband. If he'll only stay, thought Tilly. Sometimes they would talk for a long time about stocks and bonds and debentures, their broker and their lawyer, whom they distrusted, as they did their doctor. Sometimes they had a neighborhood scandal to dissect.

But this time it was not to be like that. He poured himself a cocktail, and sipped it, standing, a long, lean man, fastidiously dressed, with a disagreeable face, and smooth blond hair which Sibyl, in a rage, had told Tilly was a toupee. Bald as an egg, she had told Tilly. One time, down at the beach, when he was ignoring me *utterly*, and being simply too suave and fascinating to some girl, I simply tweaked it off, and there he was. Everybody simply roared.

Tilly was too far away to hear their words, but from their attitude, the way Sibyl sat up straight in her chair, the way he stared over her head, never looking at her, she knew they were quarreling. In a few moments, Howard set down his empty glass on the table, and strolled back into the house.

I'll have to go, Tilly thought. Sibyl had invited her and Robert to spend the summer, and it had been a godsend; she had sublet their dingy little apartment on Tenth Street; she would have the money coming in, and no expenses here, and she needed money desperately. And it was good for Robert to be in the country.

Her husband Ian had come back uninjured from the war, and, as far as she could see, unaffected by it. He was happy, almost wildly happy, about everything, above all, when he

knew they were going to have a child. He, or she, is going to get all the breaks, he had said. Watch my dust. So happy, so gay, so confident. They had had three months of married life when he came back, then he had gone down to Florida to see a millionaire about a “deal.” He wouldn’t tell her about it. But it’s in the bag, sugar, he had said. We’ll be on top of the world. She had waited two weeks, alone, in the dingy little apartment, and then she had learned that Ian was dead. He had gone out in a motor-cruiser with his millionaire and a party, and something had happened, an explosion; she had never quite understood. Only that Ian and two other people had been killed. Not the millionaire. He had written Tilly a nice letter, grave and sympathetic, but he had made it clear that Ian had been in charge of the engine, and that the fatal accident had been his fault. Reckless, he had called him. I understand, he had written, that the families of our war-heroes are adequately provided for, but if you should, at an time, be in need of financial assistance, please do not hesitate to call upon me.

All right! Tilly thought. Maybe I’m just a bad manager. For what she got was not “adequate,” and as Robert grew older, and went to school and to college, it would be less and less so. I’ve got to do the best I can with Sibyl, she thought. After all, she isn’t *my* cousin, she’s Ian’s cousin. It’s very *nice* of her. If she ever gets furious at me, she’ll send us away, and, with the apartment sublet, I don’t know where we could go.

“Robert,” she said, “you’ll play right here till Mommy comes back, won’t you?”

“Yes, I *will*, Mommy!” he said, with energy, and he meant it. But he was only five, and the grounds were so large, he always wandered away.

“You promise me you won’t go out in the road, or down on the beach?”

“Yes, Mommy.”

He was so little, in his shorts and striped jersey, his dark cropped hair, his brilliant, eager eyes, he wanted so to learn about the world he lived in, to look at everything, to feel everything, to try what strength he had. He was affectionate and good, and he meant to do what she told him, but anything would distract him.

She had to go to Sibyl. Ian’s ten thousand dollar insurance had dwindled away, during these five years, and when it was all gone. . . . She rose, a tall girl, broad-shouldered and slender and long-limbed, with a proudly set blond head, clear, fine features, a rich, full mouth, long, brilliant blue eyes. She was a notable beauty, but she did not know it. She was proud, but it was pride of her Massachusetts family, her college, proud of having been Ian’s wife, proud of behaving properly, proud about her little son. She dressed neatly, and that was all, a black faille skirt, a blue bargain blouse too big for her.

As she mounted the steps of the terrace, Sibyl was pouring herself another drink; in silence she poured it, and pushed it across the table to Tilly, and there was an ominous, sullen look on her flushed face.

“Well, no, thanks, Sibyl.”

“If you did take a drink now and then,” said Sibyl, “you might be a little less gloomy and forbidding. If you’d even smoke a cigarette.”

“I’m sorry.”

“But there’s one thing you’ve simply *got* to do. I’ve some people coming in to dinner, and you’ve *got* to be decently dressed.”

“I have the pretty nylon blouse you gave me.”

“*No!*” said Sibyl. “You can *not* come down to dinner in that. You’re my cousin’s wife, and you’re staying with me. I know you like to pose as a poor, forlorn young widow, but it reflects on *me*. Now, when I go upstairs, I want you to come with me, and I’ll send for Pauline, and we’ll pick out one of my dresses, and she can make any little changes you want.”

“But, Sibyl . . . Anyhow, Sibyl, there wouldn’t be time for her to do any sewing before dinner.”

“Really, Tilly, you’re so willful and stubborn. You object to *everything*. No wonder people say that Robert’s such an unattractive child—”

“*Who said that?*”

“I certainly shan’t give you any names, but quantities of people. He’s not a bit affectionate and friendly, and he

doesn't get on with other children—”

“You mean those horrible Graham children? They're almost the only ones he ever sees here. If there were any *nice* children for him to play with, you'd see.”

Sibyl poured herself another cocktail.

“Well, my dear,” she said, “if it's so miserable here for Robert, and if you feel so ill-used—”

No! Tilly thought. She *mustn't* send us away now. The apartment's sublet and we haven't any place to go, and I've got to save money to start Robert in a good school.

“Robert isn't a bit miserable, Sibyl,” she said. “He loves the beach, and he loves the gardener's cats. And I don't think I'm ill-used. It's just that I'm—not awfully social.”

“I wanted you both to be so happy . . . ,” said Sibyl, with tears flooding her eyes. “When I saw you in that absolute slum in New York, living on that *tiny* insurance Ian left . . . How *could* he have left you like that?”

She took a handkerchief out of her purse and dried her eyes, but more tears were flowing.

Tilly was silent for a moment, rigid; she had a queer feeling as if she were somehow holding her heart, to stop it from leaping with pain and anger.

“Well, you know,” she said, presently, “Ian was only twenty-three when he went into the Air Force. He hadn't had much

time—to make a fortune, or to save a lot. He did—the best he could.”

“O God!” said Sibyl. “The ruined lives . . . ! War *affects* me so—I mean, I suffer so, for others. . . .”

Tilly had heard this before, and she did not feel obliged to listen carefully. She could think, just for a few moments, of her few months of marriage with Ian, and their happiness.

“I’ve *tried* to do so *much* for you and Robert . . . ,” said Sibyl, pouring herself another drink. “Of course, I have to support Howard *completely* now; he never even *thinks* of trying to earn anything. He *says* he’s working on a book, but . . . And there’s Taylor in school. He never—” She wept again. “He never writes to me—unless he wants—more money.”

Taylor Price was her fifteen-year-old son by a former marriage. He was now in boarding school, and, Tilly thought, a very unlikable child.

“I’m going upstairs to rest now,” Sibyl said, rising. “*Are* you or are you *not* coming with me to get a dress?”

She was very haughty and cold now, and that was dangerous. She could send us away, Tilly thought; she could even imagine the words. Tilly, I really do *not* see any point in your staying here any longer. You *obviously dislike* me. . . .

“Of course I’m coming,” she said. “I’ll just run and get Robert and leave him with Gloria.”

“My dear,” said Sibyl, drying her eyes, “I *think* I’ve reminded you *many* times before that Gloria is a *cook*, and *not* a nursemaid.”

“Oh, she doesn’t mind him in the kitchen. She’ll give him a bowl of bread and milk—”

“You know *perfectly* well that she won’t. She’ll fix a whole supper for him—neglecting her own proper work.”

But he’s only five! Tilly cried to herself. I can’t leave him wandering around outdoors alone, when it will soon begin to grow dark. He ought to have his supper at six. He ought to get to bed early. . . .

“I’m going upstairs now,” said Sibyl, still cold and haughty. “You can either come up with me, and we’ll pick out something decent for you to wear, or you can disgrace me—at my own table.”

Sibyl’s room was all Sibyl; a wide bed of green lacquer, covered with green taffeta and heaped with pillows, a chaise longue all white, wallpaper with a Chinese design in green and white and brown, a dressing-table with a mirror flanked by lights for various purposes, a jade-green rug, white venetian blinds. It was a large and airy room with the look, the over-elaborate look that Sibyl’s clothes had.

Sibyl, a little unsteady on her feet, went over to the big bed, and stretched out on it.

“Ring for Pauline, will you please?” she asked.

Tilly pressed the bell that rang in Pauline's room upstairs, and Pauline was knocking at the door in a surprisingly short time.

“*Entrez!*” called Sibyl, and began at once to talk to Pauline in French, with a hectic fluency. She was extremely pleased with having a French maid, and she took Pauline with her whenever she could; she took her to New York when she went shopping, she took her along when she made week-end visits to friends who had sufficient accommodations, took her to hotels, to doctors' offices, always took her when they made a trip on the cabin cruiser. Certainly Pauline made herself very useful; she gave Sibyl manicures, shampoos, wave-sets; she altered and mended her clothes, and kept them in perfect order; she went on errands, she telephoned to cancel any engagements Sibyl decided not to keep.

She was a stocky little woman, with light hair growing gray, and stout legs with a jerky walk; she was always amiable and obliging, always courteous to Tilly, and a great favorite with Robert. She wanted to teach him French songs, and he liked that. He made little or no attempt to learn them; simply, he liked the way she sang them, with so many gestures. *Les beaux messieurs font comme ça*, she would sing, in her flat and nasal voice, and bend her stiff little body and sweep her arms as if brushing the ground with a cavalier's fine plumed hat.

She listened to Sibyl's torrent of French, with her head politely bent to one side; then she went into the dressing-room, and returned with a black dress. Tilly knew little French, but she understood Sibyl's objection.

“No, madame,” said Pauline, in English. “For her, black is best. If you will please put this on, Madame MacDonald.”

Tilly put on the dress, and Pauline knelt, rose, went round and round her, putting in pins deftly and very quickly.

“*Bien*, Madame MacDonald,” she said. “In one hour I bring it to your room.”

“Thank you,” Tilly said.

Now I can go and find Robert, she thought. I’ll speak to Jenny, and she’ll bring him some supper on a tray. I’ll give him his bath, and he’ll eat, and I’ll put him to bed, and read to him, till the last minute. And when she said to him, Robert, darling, Cousin Sibyl wants me now, he would accept that without protest. He knew, in a child’s unfathomable way, that Cousin Sibyl had to be obeyed and indulged.

“Will you take a little nap now, Sibyl?” she asked.

“I *need* a nap. Please get one of my pills.”

“Couldn’t you manage without, Sibyl? I’m sure they’re not good for you.”

“You don’t know anything about it,” said Sibyl. “You’re so absolutely phlegmatic and unemotional, you simply can’t understand high-strung people. People who *suffer*. Please get me my pill and a glass of water, and stop preaching sermons.”

Tilly went into the bathroom, and took from the cabinet the long, narrow bottle that always stood in a certain place at the end of a glass shelf.

“There’s only this *one* left, Sibyl,” she said.

“I’ll get more tomorrow,” said Sibyl. “Doctor Crowdie never leaves me without them. He knows the frightful state of my nerves.”

Tilly put the brilliant yellow capsule and a glass of water on the table.

“Now if you’ll *kindly* pull down the venetian blinds,” said Sibyl. “And then if you’ll *please* go downstairs as soon as you can, to help Howard. The dinner guests will have cocktails until I come.”

The venetian blinds were old-fashioned, and Tilly was not very deft with them; one came down lopsided and had to be pulled up again; they both rattled. This always annoyed Sibyl, and Tilly expected a sharp expostulation, or at least a loud, angry sigh. But today she was silent and still. She never goes to sleep as quickly as that, Tilly thought. Maybe she’s just furious.

She went over to the bedside and saw that the capsule was gone, and a swallow of water. Sibyl lay with her face buried in the pillow and her knees drawn up, wrinkling the green taffeta spread. But she always lies stretched out, Tilly thought. I don’t believe she’s asleep.

“Sibyl . . . ,” she said. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

There was no answer. Shall I call Howard? But if she's asleep and he wakes her, they'll have a frightful quarrel, and be nasty to each other all evening. And anyhow, she always does go to sleep soon after she's taken her horrible pill. They must be bad for her, and maybe the effect grows worse and worse. Or maybe she drank more than usual, I don't know. . .

.

Then, through the open windows, came the sound of hounds baying, deep and savage. Robert! she thought. She had never heard them before, never seen any here. I've heard frightful stories . . . , she thought. I've got to get Robert. Then I'll come back and look at Sibyl.

She tiptoed across the room, and closed the door softly. She ran down the stairs, and it seemed to her that a hound was loping behind her. I'm running away, she thought. Away from Sibyl.

CHAPTER TWO

She ran down the steps of the terrace, with the sense of panic she always had when Robert was not in sight. She would tell him to stay in one place, and he meant to do what she said, but when she was gone, his five-year-old mind forgot; he would see a squirrel run scampering for a tree and he would run after it; he would run after the birds, after some sound he heard, or imagined; best of all, he liked to find a big toad, and he would poke at it cautiously with a twig until it would begin to hop.

“I like toads,” he told his mother. “I like them the best of anything. Better than cats or dogs or horses or birds, or anything.”

“I don’t think they like people,” Tilly had answered.

“I don’t care,” he said. “I like them, and I like frogs, and polliwogs the best.”

Such a strange little boy, never lonely, never bored; he lived in a world of his own, of interest, excitement, and tranquil happiness; she had often heard him singing to himself, some formless, tuneless air.

But he could climb the stone wall, and there was the highway, with trucks and cars speeding by; he was so

friendly, he might get into a car if a stranger asked him; he might wander all the way to Sibyl's private beach, where the surf came with a deadly undertow.

"Robert!" she called. "Robert!"

He was nowhere in the glade; she ran across the lush grass, and found him sitting under a noble old oak tree with a pile of leaves beside him that he was patiently tearing into shreds; a dark, lean little bullet-headed boy, with almond-shaped deep blue eyes, dressed in dark shorts and a tan jersey.

"Robert, I called you," said Tilly.

"Well . . . I thought maybe I answered," he said. "Look, Mommy! These are vallons."

"What are 'vallons,' darling?"

"These!" he said, holding up two lacy fragments of leaves.

"I see! But what *are* they, darling?"

"They're *vallons*," he repeated, loudly and a little severely. "I make them for the birds, and they like them. They make dresses out of them, and nests and—" He thought a moment. "And they make salad," he said.

"It's very nice of you to do all that for the birds," said Tilly. "But now we'll have to hurry back to the house, Robert."

He got up, and took her hand, something he very seldom did. If she took his hand, he would pull it away. He did not want to be caressed or held, even to have his hard little black head stroked. But sometimes he would get up on her lap and put his head on her shoulder; sometimes he would rush at her and seize her round the knees.

He looked up at her now. “You look like a beautiful queen of fairies,” he said.

“Thank you, Robert. That makes me very happy.”

He still kept her hand, walking beside her.

“A bad, bad boy came,” he said. “And he killed a bird and a chipmint.”

“Chipmunk. What d’you mean, dear? Did he shoot them?”

“No, he just caught them with a rope, and then he put something in their mouths, like a drop of water, and they died that *minute*. And he said he could do it to me, and I ran away and hid, till he got in a car.”

“Robert,” she said, “is this—true, darling, or just an interesting story?”

“It’s really *truly*,” he said, vehemently. “The bird and the chipmint are still right there. And he said he could be the king of the whole world, if he wanted, and I ran away and I climbed up a ’normous tree, and I climbed and I climbed, and I got in a eagle’s nest, and he had a gun—”

“What did this boy look like, Robert?”

“He was a ’normous boy, with black hair and black eyes, and I *think*,” said Robert, “that he had a black tongue.”

“What sort of car did he get into, Robert? A truck? A delivery van? A private car?”

Robert had to think about that. “It was a big, big car,” he said. “No. It was a little *tiny* car.”

“Show me the dead chipmunk and the bird.”

He did not know himself what was truth and what was fantasy; he believed it all.

“Here!” he said, and pulled her by the hand. “He threw them in those bushes.”

There was a clump of rhododendron, and Tilly parted the stems, with no expectation of finding anything. But there was a little dead bird there, claws and beak upturned, and near it lay a fat old chipmunk, he too on his back, his short legs curled.

“You—thought this boy killed them, darling?”

“Yes, he did. He had a thing like you put those drops up my nose, and then they died. Quick! Right that minute. Well . . .” said Robert, in a calm, philosophical tone, “they didn’t mind. And I guess they went up to Heaven.”

“Oh, yes!” Tilly said, in haste, and started toward the house. “Robert, don’t *ever* go near that boy any more. If you see him, go inside. Keep away from him.”

“I will, Mommy,” he said, with amiable indifference.

They entered the house, by the back door, into the big kitchen, where Gloria was busy at the electric range, and Jenny, the housemaid, was arranging cut fruits in silver cups. Gloria was a stout, gray-haired Irishwoman, fond of the little boy, and cheerful and rollicking with him. But she was, like many another good cook, very temperamental, especially after a few drinks, and Tilly was always a little uneasy for fear that she might grow irritated with the child.

“Do you mind if I take up a bowl of milk and some graham crackers on a tray, Gloria?” she asked.

“For His Nibs, is it?” Gloria demanded.

“*Yes!*” cried Robert. He liked that name she had for him; he liked her, and he had no hesitation in asking her for anything. “I don’t want *that* supper.”

“And you’ll not have it,” said Gloria. “Jenny’ll bring you up a nice, fine tray.”

“With *cake?*”

“Wait and you’ll see,” said Gloria.

They went out of the kitchen and through the dining room, where the table was already partly set, glasses and silver

glittering in the late sun, into the hall, and up the broad, winding staircase. Robert went first, as she had trained him, but his silence she had never taught him, or even suggested. It seemed to be natural, as if the strange silence of the house affected him. It was like this almost all day. Gloria very seldom left the kitchen; when Jenny went up to do the chamber work, she used the closed-in back stairs; if Sibyl and Howard were at home, they seemed never to move about; Sibyl would be lying on the chaise longue in the bedroom, reading, or perhaps talking to some house-guest; Howard was always downstairs, in the library if it rained, on the terrace in fine weather, sometimes with some man he had brought home from the Country Club, but usually alone, leaning back in a chair, looking relaxed, and, Tilly thought, very vacant. Taylor was away almost all the time, in boarding school, at a summer camp now. A silent house, a lifeless house, Tilly thought.

Robert had turned the corner of the stairway, and as Tilly followed him, she thought she saw Sibyl's door close. Howard had gone in there, maybe, or Pauline. She pushed Robert ahead of her along the hall; she was nervous now about his bath. He had what was called a "youth's bed" in her room, and they shared a bathroom with any guest who might be next to them. There might be someone in there now, someone setting her hair, taking ages. Sibyl never told her if anyone were coming.

There was no provision made for the child. It was a big house with several spare rooms and baths, but he had not a corner to play in; Sibyl forbade play on the terrace, in any of the rooms downstairs.

“My *dear* Tilly,” she had said, often enough, “with *three* servants in the house—of course, it’s really not enough, and I always used to have another upstairs girl, but you simply can’t *get* them—but anyhow, I honestly *cannot* see what you have to complain about. If you want anything for the child, simply *ask* for it. Only *please* don’t let him drag that fire engine thing over your room when there are people downstairs. And please *never* let him sail that airplane thing down the stairs. It might *hurt* someone.”

Tilly knocked on the bathroom door, and there was no answer; she tried the knob, and the door was not locked from the inside; she opened the door, cautiously, and there was no one there, and no trace of the things to be expected from a guest of Sibyl’s, no lotions, bath-crystals, hair-pins on the floor, cigarette ashes in the wash-basin, perfume heavy in the air. She started a bath running, and then pulled Robert’s jersey off, over his head. He could manage all the rest of his dressing and undressing himself, and he was proud of it. He went off, a brown, thin, naked little thing, and just as he left, Pauline knocked on the door with the black dress over her arm.

“Try it!” she said.

“I want to look in on Mrs. Fleming first.”

“But I am just there, madame! She is sleeping very nicely.”

“You’re *sure*, Pauline?”

“But how not, madame? I look at her. It is every day the same, at this hour, only on some days, perhaps more of those cocktails. Now please try this, madame! Ah! . . . Madame! Now wait! I have found this silver belt! Only look! *Madame!*”

As Tilly turned to the long mirror in the door, there was another knock on the hall door; it was red-haired Jenny with her sharp nose and her tight lips.

“Gloria told me to bring this up,” she said. No “ma’am” for this poor relation; she set the tray down on the table and flounced away, leaving the door wide open.

Pauline closed it.

“Ah! That pig!” she said. “Now, madame, sit down, and I feex our hair.”

“Thanks, Pauline, but I—”

“Sit here, madame,” said Pauline, and pinned a towel around her shoulders.

She was very quick and deft about the hair-dressing.

“I should like more time,” she said. “But already two guests arrive, and Mistaire Fleming is—he does not like to entertain alone, no?”

“I’ll have to get Robert out of his bath.”

“I will do that, madame. I will give him supper. I will sing to him, I will get him into his bed very happy. Madame, look once more how you are beautiful!”

Tilly looked again in the long mirror; she saw herself, tall and straight, broad-shouldered and slender, long-limbed, her blond hair shining and smooth, in the long, graceful black dress, a wide silver girdle round her waist. She was beautiful, and she knew it, but it caused her little pleasure or interest. Ian was gone, and Robert didn't care.

As she went down the stairs, she heard a sound of voices from the drawing-room. Howard stood behind the portable bar, pouring, and before him stood three guests. There was a very pretty little blond girl, Carola Dexter. There was a vaguely familiar man, the type Howard brought home from the Club, handsome, hearty, ruddy; and there was another man, young, skeleton-thin, with a dark, hollow-cheeked face, and dark, narrow eyes.

“You know Carola Dexter and Dick Cantrell, Tilly,” said Howard. “But you haven't met Sam Osborne. This is Sibyl's cousin, Tilly MacDonald.”

“Miss MacDonald,” Osborne repeated, polite.

“Mrs.,” said Howard.

“Howard,” Tilly said, very low, “I didn't think Sibyl looked—well.”

He gave a little laugh, like a snort.

“I was up there a little while ago,” he said. “She’s all right.” He turned towards his other guests. “Osborne here has been holding forth against detective stories,” he said. “He hates ’em.”

“I didn’t say that,” Osborne protested. “Only we used to get such a lot of them in the hospital, with those fool girls in them.”

“*What* fool girls, Sammy darling?” Carola asked, looking up at him with her sweet blue eyes.

“Those dim-wits,” he said. “The ones that always keep something back from the police or the famous detective. The girls that see a man coming out of the summer-house where the body is found later, and never tell. The girls that see the good-for-nothing nephew sneaking something into Auntie’s tea, but never say a word when Auntie drops dead.”

“They’re trying to protect someone they like, Sammy darling.”

“Or themselves,” said Cantrell. “Can’t blame ’em for *that*. This girl, say, is in love with the murdered woman’s husband, and the other fellow has those letters. Tells her he’ll show ’em, if she doesn’t shut up about seeing him.”

“It’s all damn nonsense,” said Osborne, “and it never works. If anyone’s in any way mixed up in a police case, the only thing to do is to tell the truth about what you know, and tell it quick.”

“Of course, you *know* so much more about it all, lambie,” said Carola. “But, honestly, I can’t help believing that sometimes the police do suspect innocent people, and even arrest them.”

“They do,” said Osborne. “And put them in jail, and electrocute them, and hang them. But not very often.”

“Once would be enough for me,” said Cantrell, with a loud and jolly laugh. “Believe me, if I’d done anything I thought might make the police suspect me of any sort of crime, I’d never tell ’em one word, if I could keep it hidden.”

“You’d be a perfect suspect, Dickie,” said Carola. “I mean, so jolly and *un*-suspicious. I’d solve you in the first chapter.”

“That’s another irritating thing in a lot of those mystery stories,” said Osborne. “The writer makes a damned effort to give you the most unlikely criminal. A benevolent old gent in a wheel-chair, an old maid always feeding birds, someone who hasn’t any apparent motive. It isn’t like that in life.”

“Another drink?” asked Howard.

“No, thanks,” Osborne answered. “But Mrs. MacDonald—?”

“Never drinks,” said Howard. “Never smokes.”

Osborne glanced at Tilly, still standing near him.

“But you sit down sometimes, don’t you?” he asked, and pushed an armchair forward a little.

“Thanks,” she said, with a smile, and he remained beside her.

“Well!” Howard said. “*I’m* going to have another. It may be the one too many, but Sibyl’s so late.” He glanced at his watch. “Half an hour late! That’s not like her. Jenny, run up and ask Mrs. Fleming when she’ll be down.”

“Yes, sir,” said Jenny, and her heels went tapping up the polished stairs.

She came down in a wild rush, sliding, catching herself by the rail; she stumbled over a rug, and fell on her knees before the portable bar.

“Oh, Mr. Fleming! Oh, Mr. Fleming! Oh, Mr.—”

“What’s the matter?” cried Howard.

“Oh, go and see! Oh, Mr. Fleming! Her hand—oh! Just as cold as ice! Oh . . . !”

“Here! Drink this!” said Howard. “Now go out to the kitchen and—keep quiet.”

He poured himself another drink and gulped it down.

“Want me to come with you, Howard?” Cantrell asked.

“Not—n-now,” Howard answered. “I’ll let you know.”

He was certainly drunk. Tilly heard him stumbling slowly up the stairs; his footsteps were heavy overhead. Then there was no sound.

“Well, of course . . . ,” Cantrell said, with a grave and anxious frown, “he probably doesn’t want anyone to see her if she’s—well—*you* know. Happens to all of us, now and then. . . . Let her sleep it off, that’s the best thing.”

No one answered him, and in that silence, Tilly sat forward in her chair, cold with that terror that had come loping after her before. She thought of the little dead chipmunk, and the dead bird, and she rose.

“I’ll just run up and see how—Robert’s getting along,” she said.

Then she sat down again, with a smile she knew was vague and silly.

“Well, no . . . ,” she said, “Pauline’s with him. There’s really no sense”

She ought to be showing some concern about Sibyl. Not Robert.

“Howard’s been gone a long time, hasn’t he?” she asked.

“Too long,” said Osborne.

“I think I’ll just run up and see if—there’s anything I can do,” she said, rising again.

There was no objection, and she went up the stairs. All the doors were closed, and it was dark now; she turned on a switch, and a shaded wall lamp came alight.

I'll look in at Robert first, she thought. No! No, I won't! He might try to make me stay. No! Sibyl first.

She knocked at Sibyl's door, and there was no answer, no sound; she went to Howard's door and knocked, and there was no answer. She went back to Sibyl's door, gave one more knock, and turned the knob. A table lamp was on, mustard yellow with a parchment shade painted with a Chinese scene, giving a soft and mellow light. Sibyl lay stiffly stretched out on the big bed, her eyes staring open, and Howard lay on the floor beside her, face down.

It's . . . O God! It's like the chipmunk and the bird. . . . No, no! Stop! *Do* something. . . . Wake them up. . . . O God! I've *got* to see if Robert . . . I've *got* to . . .

She went down the hall and opened the door without knocking. Robert sat at a small table, dawdling contentedly over his supper, with a queer little silky dog in his lap.

"Ah, madame!" cried Pauline. "Now you discover our secret!"

Tilly stepped back and closed the door without a word. At the head of the stairs she stopped; the stairway seemed a steep and glassy precipice at her feet.

"Mr. Osborne!" she called. "Mr. Cantrell!"

When they came running up, she was still standing there, leaning against the wall.

“There!” she said, pointing to the open door of Sibyl’s room.
“In there. Both dead. Poisoned.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Sit down!” Sam Osborne was saying to her. “*Sit down!*”

“I—no . . . I don’t want to,” she said.

He opened the door of Howard’s room, and pulled her in there by the arm, pushed her down into a chair.

“They’re both dead,” she told him. “Both poisoned.”

“Shut up!” he said.

“You mustn’t . . . !” she cried, startled by his loud, rough tone.

“Pull yourself together,” he said. “Show a little sense. Don’t mention poison again. Remember that.”

“But they—are they both—dead?”

“Fleming isn’t dead,” he said. “Now go and stay with your child until the police come.”

“I’d rather not,” she said. “There’s someone with him—to take care of him. I’d rather—stay alone—for a little while.”

“All right. But get this into your head. When the police come, answer their questions truthfully. *And don’t do*

anything else. Don't tell them any suspicions you may have, any theories. Understand?"

"You're—pretty rude," she said.

"I can be a lot worse than this," he said.

"Are you some kind of policeman?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "Now remember what I've told you. All of it. Answer what you're asked, and nothing else. Keep your theories and opinions to yourself. And try not to tell any lies."

"I'm not in the habit of telling lies," she said, curtly.

"Everybody tells lies to policemen," he said. "Keep to a minimum."

Cantrell had come to the doorway of the room.

"I got hold of Doctor Crowdie," he said. "He told me not to touch Howard, not even get him into bed. He'll be right along."

"Is he going to notify the police?" Osborne asked.

"Wants to see things for himself first."

Osborne went out of the room, and Cantrell sat down heavily on the window-seat and lit a cigarette.

"God!" he said. "You can hardly believe it! Old Howard . . ."

“But Mr. Osborne says he’s not—”

“Doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I don’t like that fellow; never did. He and Sibyl . . . Well, *you* know. A good many times I felt like telling Howard. Because he never noticed a thing. He’s too *decent*.”

Tilly got up, holding to the back of the chair for a moment.

“Don’t talk about her, now,” she said. “Not now.”

She went out of the room, and as she went along the hall, the door of her own room opened, and Pauline came out, with the silky little brown dog nestled in one arm. She raised a forefinger to her lips, with a mischievous smile.

“My secret . . . ,” she whispered. “Only Robert knows. Madame does not like dogs, but he is here now since a month, and she knows nothing. Sometimes he cries, only so softly—like that, no more. Early in the morning, I take him out, then also in the night. He runs over the grass, he springs in the air. Only look! Eyes like stars, no?”

She parted the little creature’s long hair, and two soft, sad, amber eyes looked up at Tilly; the tip of its plummy tail twitched.

“So good!” said Pauline. “I name him Coco. He sleeps always on the foot of my bed—”

She went on, and Tilly stood before her, in a daze. Doesn’t she know . . . ? she thought. Can’t she—*feel* it? . . .

“Now the little Robert is going to sleep,” said Pauline.
“He is very content. Perhaps it is better if madame does not enter just now? The dinner is downstairs, is it not?”

The doorbell rang downstairs.

“Some other guest they all awaited,” said Pauline.

But this newcomer was not a guest; he was mounting the stairs.

“I must hide Coco!” whispered Pauline, and stepped back into the bedroom, leaving the door a little open.

“The doctor . . . ?” she said. “But, madame, please! Who is ill?”

“Mrs. Fleming. She’s—it’s very serious,” Tilly said.

“Wait! I put Coco up in my room, and then I return!”

Tilly went into the bedroom then; it was dark and close; for Pauline distrusted too much fresh air. Tilly moved cautiously toward the window, but Robert heard her.

“Mommy?” he said. “Mommy, is everything all right?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Will the birds come and get their vallons?”

“If they have time. But they might have to go to a party.”

“Mommy! Don’t open the window so wide! I don’t want the birds to come in here!”

“They *can’t*, dear. Not with the screens.”

“They can, if they’re magic,” he said. “Mommy, sit down a little while. Please!”

“If you’ll close your eyes and not talk, darling.”

“All right!” he agreed, and she drew a chair close to the bed.

And now, in the dark, with the sweet air blowing in, she began to think; the daze, the numbness were lifting, like a fog.

Face it. I know Sibyl is dead. I think she was dead, before I even left the room. But *could* it be that way? So fast? Yes. You hear of things like that, people dropping dead. Strokes. Heart attacks. If I’d got the doctor *then*, perhaps—

But I couldn’t do that, without consulting Howard. And he said he’d seen her, just a little while ago, and she was all right. Pauline said she’d just seen her. . . . Perhaps I should have stayed with her longer, felt her pulse, turned her a little, so that I could see her face. . . . Only, when I heard those hounds baying. . . . I’ve read about children torn to pieces by a pack of dogs. I *had* to see about Robert. But I could have hurried back, much sooner.

Don’t be a fool. I’m not guilty of anything, anything at all. If Sibyl had a stroke, or a heart attack, I couldn’t know. I’d have done anything I could, if I’d known. . . .

I *didn't* know . . . I just felt . . . It was simply the way she was lying. And that didn't seem enough reason to disturb her or to bring Howard upstairs. It's so horrible when they fight.

There was a light rap on the door, but it did not disturb the child's calm breathing. She crossed the room on tiptoe, and found Cantrell standing there.

"Howard—," he began.

"Hush!" she whispered, and came out, closing the door behind her. "Robert's just fallen asleep."

Cantrell's mouth was a little open, his blue eyes round and wide; he seemed short of breath as she took his arm and led him a little way down the hall.

"Howard . . . ," he said again. "Doctor says—Howard will live."

"Sibyl?"

"Dead," Cantrell answered. "Poisoned. Both of them poisoned. Poisoned, in their own house."

"Is the doctor sure . . . ?"

"He's sure. And the police will be along any minute now. My God! Howard, good old Howard, poisoned, in his own house. . . ."

"It's Sibyl's house," said Tilly.

It seemed to her shocking that he should so carelessly brush aside Sibyl's death, and speak only of Howard, who was recovering.

“How does the doctor think it happened?”

“Doesn't know. Can't imagine. Some damned accident. *My* idea is something got into the bottle of Scotch Sibyl had in the room. I mean, maid spilt some cleaning fluid into it, and didn't want to tell.”

“Sibyl didn't drink anything after she came upstairs.”

“You couldn't know that. You weren't there all the time.”

“But she was asleep when I left her.”

“Could have waked up, taken a swig. Then when poor old Howard saw how she looked, he took a drink, to pull himself together. And it knocked him right out. There! That must be the police now.”

There were footsteps and voices in the hall below, and Tilly felt afraid of them. They could accuse innocent people; they could do anything.

“Where's Mr. Osborne?” she asked.

“He's been having a hell of a time with Carola,” he answered. “She got hysterical, wanted to go home, and Sam wouldn't let her. He said she'd have to stay until the police came; said they'd want to see everyone who'd been in the house while—all this happened. Fact is, he kept

her by force; held her by the arm. She fought like a tiger. Kicked him, scratched him—”

He stopped and turned toward the stairs, and Tilly did so, too. Osborne came first, and after him came another young man, tall as he, and lean, but heavier in the shoulders, bigger altogether, big hawk nose, big ears, big dark eyes a little slanted, rather like a figure from an Egyptian frieze. After him came an older man, short, with thin, fair hair and a sharp, anxious face. He was carrying a doctor’s bag.

“Where’s Doctor Crowdie?” he asked.

Osborne opened Sibyl’s door; he followed the doctor and the other tall young man, and closed the door after them. Where shall I go? Tilly thought. What ought I to do?

“I wonder if Carola’s still here?” she asked aloud.

“Wouldn’t know,” said Cantrell. “I shouldn’t think they’d bother much with her. She didn’t come upstairs at all. Couldn’t have poisoned that Scotch.”

“I think I’ll go down and see,” said Tilly.

Then her familiar obsession rose up in her, her irrational, panic fear for Robert. If a policeman came bursting into his room . . . , she thought. If they dragged him out of bed, and asked him questions . . . I’d better lock him in.

But the bathroom . . . Anyone can get in through there. And if I locked that door, Sibyl would be angry. No. Sibyl would never be angry again. For the first time tears came to her

eyes, and pity into her heart for that luckless woman. Oh, I'm *sorry*, Sibyl! she said to herself.

Going through the dark bedroom, she locked the bathroom door to the adjoining room; she took the key out of the bedroom door, and locked it from the outside.

"I'm going to wait here, right where I am," said Cantrell. "I want to catch those two medics when they come out, and tell 'em to get that whiskey analyzed."

"But don't you think they'll do that anyhow?"

"I do not," said Cantrell. "I could tell you some things about doctors that might surprise you."

"I'm sure . . . ," said Tilly, vaguely, and started down the stairs.

There was a uniformed policeman standing in the doorway of the living room, but he glanced at Tilly without interest and she went on past him. Carola was sitting upright on a sofa, her arms folded; her face was tear-stained, raddled, haggard, her blond hair fell limply. Tilly, who had thought of her vaguely as "a girl," saw now that she was a woman very close to middle-age.

"I thought I'd come and talk to you for a while," she said.

"No," said Carola. "I don't want to talk. Let me alone."

It wouldn't somehow be right or fitting to go to the kitchen and talk to Gloria. Or to go up to Pauline on the third floor.

I'll go and collect the "vallons," she thought. I'll make up a nice story for Robert about them.

It was night now, and, standing on the terrace, the little glade looked to her black and thick as a forest. There were two police cars in the driveway, and three others, Doctor Crowdie's, she thought, and Cantrell's, and Carola's; only the police cars had parking lights; the others were dark. A dark world; she could not find the "vallons" now. Sibyl, I'm *sorry*, she was saying to herself. I'm sorry.

"Very unusual case, don't you think?" asked Osborne's voice, a little behind her.

"Well, I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Man and his wife both poisoned on the same afternoon. Who d'you think would want to do that?"

"But—it was an accident! It must have been. Mr. Cantrell—"

"I've heard Cantrell's theory. But there's one rather baffling flaw in it. Sibyl's dose was fatal, and Howard's wasn't."

"Then she took more than he did."

"The gimmick is," said Osborne, "that they each got an entirely different poison."

"*What?*" Tilly asked.

"They each got a dose of a different poison," Osborne said. "Sibyl died of hers. She must have been dead for an hour

more or less before Howard went up there. Then he falls down, unconscious, as soon as he gets up there. Poisoned. Now, what's *your* theory?"

"I—haven't any," she said.

"Think about it," he said. "And remember what I told you. Don't—"

A young policeman in uniform came out on the terrace.

"Lieutenant Levy wants to see you now," he said.

Think! Tilly told herself. Stop wanting to cry about Sibyl. Stop remembering that dead bird and the dead chipmunk. Stop being one of those emotional idiots Sam Osborne was talking about. Stop worrying about Robert, locked in there alone. You've *got* to think. Stop being afraid. You haven't done anything wrong.

But she was afraid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lieutenant Levy was in the library, an impressive room, lined to the ceiling with shelves of books, fine old leatherbound books that Howard's father had left him, along with the best-sellers Sibyl had been buying for twenty years, all intermingled and equally unread now. It was a room Tilly had always admired, for its space and calm dignity, but today Lieutenant Levy had made it sinister.

She gave him the blame, because he was so obviously in charge; a long polished mahogany table had been drawn up to one end of the room, and he sat behind it. Presiding, Tilly thought. A grave young policeman sat beside but a little behind him; Carola sat on a sofa, as she had in the other room; and in armchairs here and there sat Pauline, Gloria, Jenny, and Mr. Cantrell. Tilly sat down beside Carola, Osborne slumped into a chair, with his long legs stretched out.

"I'd like to see you all together at first," Levy said, very amiably. "Then you can check with one another about times, sequences, and so on. While it's fresh in your mind. You'd be surprised, if you knew how quickly a witness forgets. Or remembers things a little wrong. I've already questioned some of you." He paused a moment. "You understand that you are not obliged to answer any of my questions. But I take it for granted that all of you are ready to co-operate with us."

He looked around at them, with a pleasant smile.

“Doctor’s ordered Mr. Fleming to stay in bed until tomorrow,” he said. “But I had a brief talk with him.” He looked at the open notebook before him. “Mr. Fleming states that when he entered Mrs. Fleming’s room, he was alarmed by her appearance. He spoke to her, and got no reply. He took her hand, and when he found it cold, he collapsed. Fainted, he said.”

He waited a moment.

“The police doctor says he was drugged, probably with chloral hydrates,” he said.

He waited again.

“Mrs. Fleming was undoubtedly dead when he entered the room. Both doctors, our police surgeon, and her private physician, agree that Mrs. Fleming died at approximately six-thirty.”

No! Tilly thought. No! I was there . . .

“Mr. Fleming states that he took no sort of drug, or medicine, to his knowledge. He states that he was in the living room, drinking cocktails with his friends, until approximately eight o’clock. He further stated that it was his wife’s habit to retire to her room at six-thirty, and to sleep for an hour, with the aid of a pill prescribed by her personal physician, Doctor Crowdie. Doctor Crowdie states that more than a month ago he had refused to renew her prescription for these pills, and

that she could not obtain them without a prescription. Legally.”

I gave her that pill, Tilly thought. If he asks me, I’ll tell him. I won’t be a fool.

“Miss Duval,” he said, looking at Pauline, “you say that you entered Mrs. Fleming’s room at approximately half-past seven?”

“*Exactly* half-past seven,” said Pauline. “Madame gave me that order. I knock. No answer. I enter. Madame! I say. She make no reply. I shake on her shoulder a little, then I say, to myself, eh, *bien!* Today she wish to sleep longer, and I go.”

“How did she look to you, Miss Duval?”

“Her face is turned away, and I don’t see. Only that she lies there, and does not reply. So I go.”

“You didn’t think there was anything wrong?”

“And why, monsieur? I think that—but I don’t wish to say.”

“You’ll help us, if you do say, Miss Duval.”

Pauline began to cry.

“To me,” she said, “Madame Fleming was always the most kind. If now she has gone—I don’t *wish* to say—anything.”

“Miss Duval, if you feel any affection for Mrs. Fleming,” said Levy, “you’ll tell us everything you can that might

help us clear up her murder.”

“Murder?” cried Pauline, in a screech.

“There’s no doubt about that,” said Levy. “At six-thirty, or close to that, she got a dose of potassium cyanide, and she died in a few seconds.”

“Ah . . . ! *Mon Dieu!*” cried Pauline. “Who does such a thing?”

“Well,” Levy said, “there’s always the possibility of suicide.”

“With her? Never! She liked too much to be alive. Suicide, never!”

“Beside yourself, did anyone, to your knowledge, go into her room?”

“Nobody! But nobody!”

“Mrs. Callaghan?”

Gloria stood up, like a child in school.

“Can you give us any information as to who went upstairs today at six-thirty, or later?”

“I cannot, sir,” she said. “I was in the kitchen, and there I stayed.”

“Did anyone enter the kitchen?”

“Jenny did,” said Gloria. “And she’d a right to, the way she had work to do there.”

“Anyone else?”

Gloria’s stout, healthy face suddenly became ugly and sullen.

“Mrs. MacDonald and the little boy came in,” she said. “Like they did every day. Poor Mrs. MacDonald, she was all the time trying to keep the poor little child out of the way, for there were those in the house couldn’t stand the sight of him. He is a fine little feller, but—”

“Thanks,” said Levy. “What time did they come in, Mrs. Callaghan?”

“I could not tell you, sir.”

“When you’re cooking, Mrs. Callaghan, don’t you have to time the things? Watch a clock?”

“That’s the way I like to do,” said Gloria. “But in this house I cannot. I cannot make them a soufflé, or anything like that. Eight o’clock dinner, says she—” She stopped, and crossed herself. “God rest her. It is what she used to say. But it would be eight-thirty, nine o’clock, and them sitting in there with drinks. Drink, drink, drink. And I’d have my good dinner keeping warm, in the oven, it might be, or the double boiler. There was few nights I could serve my dinner right. And with all them drinks, they’d have no interest—”

“Thanks,” said Levy. “But about what time did Mrs. MacDonald and her child come into the kitchen?”

“I cannot tell you,” said Gloria, “for I did not look at the clock, at all.”

“Thanks. Miss Bascom?”

Gloria sat down, and Jenny stood up, angular and severe, in her black uniform, a frilled cap too far forward on her sandy hair.

“Ten minutes to seven, it was, when Mrs. MacDonald and the child come in,” she said, in her rasping nasal voice. “It was ten after when I brought up a tray for the child. And Mrs. MacDonald was in the room with him, and Pauline fixing her up in an old dress of Mrs. Fleming’s.”

“It is *not* old!” cried Pauline. “It is—”

“Thanks,” said Levy. “When you took up the tray, Miss Bascom, did you at any time enter Mrs. Fleming’s room?”

“I did not,” said Jenny. “Why would I? I only went in her room to fix it, and make the bed—when she got out of it. She spent the most of her life lying in that bed. No telephone calls, she wouldn’t take them. You darsen’t even bring up a telegram. There she’d lie—”

“Thanks,” said Levy, but Jenny remained standing, breathing fast, as if the spite and malice were almost beyond restraint.

“Thank you,” said Levy, definitely. “Miss Dexter.”

“It’s *Mrs.* Dexter,” said Cantrell.

Carola still sat upright on the sofa, not even glancing at Levy.

“Mrs. Dexter,” Levy repeated. “Will you tell me what time you arrived this afternoon?”

“I don’t know,” she answered.

“Almost on the dot of six,” said Cantrell. “I’m what you might call time-conscious. Always checking. Looking at my watch. Almost on the dot of six she came. I came about five minutes before her, and Howard was here. Mrs. Fleming was out on the terrace then, talking to Mrs. MacDonald. I didn’t want to—er—disturb them, and I came in by the side door, and so did Mrs. Dexter.”

“Don’t *call* me ‘Mrs. Dexter’!” said Carola, suddenly. “I don’t *want* Richard’s name. Call me Miss Allison.”

“Miss Allison,” said Levy, still polite and patient. “Did you, at any time, go up to Mrs. Fleming’s room?”

“No,” she said.

“Now, Lieutenant,” said Cantrell, “I’ve told you, and Fleming’s told you that Carola—Miss Allison—never left this room from the moment she arrived—”

“Suppose we let Miss Allison answer my questions herself,” said Levy. “Miss Allison, why were you so anxious to leave the house without speaking to us?”

“Why *not*?” she cried, leaning forward. “Good God! Sibyl was my friend. We went to school together. When I heard . . .

I wanted to get away. To get *home*. I *knew*—how miserable she was. I thought—she'd killed herself. I wanted—to *go*. . . .”

“She never left this room,” said Cantrell. “She’s had a good deal of trouble lately. . . . Why don’t you let her go?”

“I’m conducting this inquiry, Mr. Cantrell,” said Levy, still amiable. “I’m not making any unnecessary trouble for anyone. Miss Allison, did you notice anything out of the way, anything at all extraordinary in Mr. Fleming’s behavior this afternoon?”

“No,” she said.

“And you state, Mr. Cantrell, that you didn’t?”

“I didn’t,” said Cantrell. “He might have had one over the eight, but—well, he was normal. Perfectly sound.”

“And you, Mrs. MacDonald? Did you notice anything peculiar in Mr. Fleming?”

“No,” Tilly said.

“I *told* you!” said Cantrell, his face flushed with anger. “I figured out from the start what had happened. And Howard will bear me out. He was all right until he went into her room. There he saw something was wrong, and he . . . Well, on the table beside her bed he saw a bottle of whiskey, and a glass half full. He drank what was in the glass, and then he blacked out. It was poison. Same poison that killed poor Sibyl.”

There was no glass of whiskey on the table beside Sibyl, Tilly thought. She never took a drink after she went upstairs. And anyhow, she was . . . she was asleep.

“It wasn’t the same poison, Mr. Cantrell,” said Levy.

“*Has* to be,” said Cantrell, frowning. “Your doctors haven’t had a chance to analyze, and so on.”

“They’re both fairly well agreed, Mr. Cantrell. Mr. Fleming had had a dose of a certain preparation, often used to induce sleep, but which—” He paused. “Which doesn’t mix well with alcohol. However, it wasn’t a lethal dose. He might have remained unconscious for some time, but he would—unless complications set in—he would have recovered, even without medical care.”

“Well,” said Cantrell then, “Sibyl took more of the stuff.”

“Mrs. Fleming’s death was caused by potassium cyanide,” said Levy. “It acts in a matter of seconds.”

“Seconds?” Cantrell repeated, startled.

“Our doctor and Doctor Crowdie don’t care to be too definite before the autopsy,” said Levy, “but they are both fairly certain that Mrs. Fleming was dead at approximately six-thirty.”

While I was there in her room, Tilly thought. Alone with her. I gave her that pill.

Levy turned toward her now.

“I understand that you went up to Mrs. Fleming’s room with her, a little before seven?” he asked.

“Yes,” Tilly answered, “I often did. And this time—today—”

Someone else came into the room, very quietly, even on tiptoe, a soldierly young man in a neat, well-fitting chauffeur’s uniform, cap in hand; his light hair, running straight back from his forehead, still showed the marks of a vigorously used wet comb; his manner was correct, and amiable but he was no more capable of a respectful look than a brownie; he had a long, sharp nose, merry little eyes, a thin mouth, very wide, with curved lines at both corners that gave the effect of a perpetual clown’s grin.

“Jensen, sir,” he said, with a smart salute. “The chauffeur. I just came on an errand, and there was a cop outside told me to come in here.”

“Sit down, Mr. Jensen,” said Levy.

“Thank you, sir,” said Jensen, “but I’d rather stand up, if it’s all right. I do a lot of sitting down, sir,” he explained.

“What was your errand, Mr. Jensen?”

“Mrs. Fleming sent me to Stevensport to see a lady—Mrs. Brown—and ask her where I could buy this poison—”

“What!” cried Cantrell.

“Mrs. Brown used this poison, and she said it worked fine. So I went to the drugstore and got some from this fellow that

invented it.”

“*What!*” Cantrell cried again. “Poison.”

He had risen, in his shocked agitation, but Levy seemed in no way excited.

“Weed-killer?” he asked. “Something like that?”

“No, sir. It’s called Invisible Fence, and it’s to keep out dogs.”

“To poison the little dogs?” Pauline demanded.

“No,” said Jensen. “They don’t eat it. They just don’t like the smell of it, and they won’t pass it.”

“Then why do you say ‘poison’?”

“Says ‘poison’ on the label,” Jensen answered. “If taken internally. Only you see, the animals don’t eat it. Smells enough. Phew! Phew!”

“You brought this home to Mrs. Fleming?”

Jensen was silent for a moment.

“Yes, sir,” and if his face still had its brownie grin, his manner was very sober. “I didn’t know all that happened. Mrs. Fleming, she said don’t hurry, and I didn’t. She said she could sort of smell a dog right in the house, and we’d try the stuff tomorrow. A spray, it is. So I didn’t hurry. I stopped at the gas station for a check-up and talk. I stopped at a diner,

and I got me some coffee and a cheeseburger. I didn't know a thing that happened here till the gardener told me, down at the gate-house. She's dead, he said. Somebody cut her head off."

"It wasn't exactly that," said Levy. "Where's your Invisible Fence?"

"Left it in the car, sir, in the garage."

"Go and get it," said Levy, "and put it into my car. There's a policeman at the wheel."

"Yes, sir," said Jensen. "Only thing is, the label says 'flammable.'"

"That's all right," said Levy. "So is my cop. You go and get the stuff shifted. And Mrs. Callaghan and Miss Bascom, you'd better go and get something together for these people to eat."

"It is too late," said Gloria, sternly. "My dinner is spoiled, entirely."

"Give 'em some hot coffee," said Levy. "Open a can of something. Feed them something."

She rose majestically, and Jenny after her; the two women, followed by Jensen, went out of the room.

"I don't want to keep any of you much longer," Levy said. "You're all tired, hungry. All upset. Mrs. MacDonald, you

state that you went up to Mrs. Fleming's room before seven?"

"I didn't notice the time, especially," said Tilly. "I usually did go with her. And this time she particularly wanted me to come, and try on a dress." She paused a moment. "This dress," she said.

"How long were you there, Mrs. MacDonald?"

"I didn't notice the time. I pulled down the venetian blinds, as Sibyl—Mrs. Fleming asked me to do. Then I left."

"In what condition was Mrs. Fleming when you left?"

"I thought she was asleep."

"Did she often fall asleep so quickly?"

"I never knew," said Tilly. "She'd lie down and close her eyes, and not speak, and I never knew whether or not she was sleeping. I just knew she wanted to be let alone."

"I understand that you then went into the garden—grounds—estate, to look for your child?"

"Yes, I did."

"And I understand that when you brought the child into the house and left him in your room, you returned to Mrs. Fleming's room. Is that the fact?"

"Yes. I just wanted to see—how she was."

“Why did you do that, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“I wanted to see if she was all right. I often did.”

“Why? What did you think might have happened?”

“She—slept so soundly, so very soundly. I was afraid she might fall off the bed. Roll off.”

“Had this ever happened?”

“Well . . . Yes,” she said.

She remembered that she had found Sibyl on the floor, wrapped round and round with the green taffeta spread, sound asleep on the floor. She had called Pauline to help her.

“But no!” Pauline had said. “We place under her some little pillow, and we leave her. She is not hurt; she breathes quietly; she is comfortable. I shall lock the door, I shall sit in here. If anyone knocks, psst! Madame sleeps, I say. In a short time, she wakes, she takes a bath, dresses, she descends, all as usual.” And that was how it had been.

Levy was looking down at his notebook, and in the silence, Tilly turned her head away from the sound of Carola’s breathing, so quick and gasping. She caught sight of herself then in a mirror across the room, a thin, tall girl leaning back on the sofa, her knees crossed, the long, pleated skirt draped gracefully over her long legs, her blond head set proudly on her long neck, her face enigmatic, no sign or trace of dread or nervousness or tremor. Although she knew very well what was coming, what must come.

“Mrs. MacDonald,” said Levy, “while you were in the room with Mrs. Fleming, did you see her take any sort of medicament?”

“No,” said Tilly.

“Any pill, powder, even an aspirin?”

“No,” Tilly said again.

“Did you see her drink any whiskey? Anything at all?”

“No.”

“When you left the room, you state that you believed Mrs. Fleming to be asleep?”

“Yes. I touched her shoulder. I spoke to her, but she didn’t answer.”

“Do you think it possible that your cousin was feigning sleep, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“I don’t know.”

“Mrs. MacDonald, would it have been possible for any other person to have entered your cousin’s room, unobserved, directly after you had left, and persuaded her to take some draft, or pill, something of the sort?”

“I don’t know,” Tilly said.

“Well, *I* do,” said Cantrell. “You couldn’t see the stairs where we were having cocktails. Tilly was shut in the room with her child, at the end of the hall. Jenny took the tray up the back stairs. Why, half a dozen people could have gone up there without being seen.”

“Thanks, Mr. Cantrell,” said Levy. “I shan’t keep you any longer, any of you. But—er—of course—”

He left the phrase unfinished, but the meaning was clear enough. But this is going on and on, be sure of that.

CHAPTER FIVE

Levy rose, and with him the young uniformed policeman.

“Now—can I go home?” Carola said.

“Certainly!” said Levy. “You have your car here?”

“No,” she said. “I mean—it’s here, but there’s something the matter with it. Can Jensen drive me home?”

“One of my men will take you home,” said Levy.

He took her arm, and led her out onto the terrace. Cantrell, Osborne, Pauline, and Tilly sat where they were, and presently there was the sound of a car starting.

“I think we should eat something,” said Cantrell. “Some little thing. Time like this you’ve got to keep your strength.”

“I fix it,” said Pauline, hastening out of the room.

Osborne came and sat beside Tilly.

“Congratulations!” he said.

“For what?” she asked.

“For keeping your dignity and your sense,” he said. “For doing what I told you. And also,” he said, “for looking like a queen.”

“Thanks,” she said, with a smile. But even in this lovely dress with the wide silver belt, she had no feeling of queenliness, only a sick discomfort. Perhaps that poison—what was it—cyanide something—was in the capsule I gave her? Who else could have got into the room and forced her to take—something? She was asleep. Or . . . A matter of seconds. All right! Perhaps she was dead. I didn’t know. I couldn’t know. The capsule I gave her was exactly like the dozens and dozens of others, little yellow ones. It was in the same bottle; the same drugstore, Dr. Crowdie’s prescription.

I couldn’t know. But if I’d given her the capsule, and they can’t find any other she could have got . . . I don’t mean they’d have suspected me of murder, but I’d have been—involved, naturally. I’d have had to stay here, and I want to get Robert away, where? I don’t know. I’ll take all the money I’ve saved and go to a cheap boarding-house.

“I think I’ll go upstairs and open Robert’s door,” she said. “I left him locked in.”

“Couldn’t do better than to leave him locked in,” said Osborne. “I could think of a lot of good things.” His hollow face became alight. “We could have the murderer creeping into the child’s room on all fours, to hide the poison cache. We could have a trained hound, very savage, trained to seize the child and carry him off to a cave—”

“Stop!” said Tilly. “You’re—brutal.”

“Just a test,” he said. “You did so well with Levy. I was looking for the weak point. And I’ve got it.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Your child,” he said. “You’d lie, you’d steal, you’d murder for that child.”

“You think I’ve done something like that?” she asked, looking steadily at him.

“Me?” he said, raising his brows in a look of startled innocence. “I don’t think. I just look around. Just listen. And then—” He paused. “I have extra-sensory perception.”

“What is that?” she asked.

“I know things,” he said. “I see things, hear things—not through my senses.”

“What, for instance?” asked Tilly.

“We don’t know yet,” he said. “It may be an electric current between two minds. It may be something—more than that.”

“What more?” asked Tilly.

“There’s a great deal we don’t know, Mrs. MacDonald. We have strange flashes of intuition, in which we know that someone dear to us is in trouble or danger.”

“I don’t,” said Tilly. “When my husband was killed in the explosion, I was making lemon cookies, and I didn’t feel anything wrong.”

“We have horrible dreams, of disaster and loss.”

“I don’t,” said Tilly. “I don’t have anything but silly dreams—like chipmunks taking away my best tea-cups.”

“You’re suppressing,” said Osborne. “You’re frightened, all the time. About your child. About life, in general. You don’t know how you’re going to live.”

“I don’t feel that way,” she said.

“You’re frightened now,” he said.

“No,” she said, evenly.

“About your little boy,” he said. “About the vallons.”

“*What?* How d’you—I mean—what d’you mean?”

He did not answer.

“What are you?” she asked.

“What? What you see here. Any other answer?”

“Yes,” she said. “What do you do for a living? That seems to me the best answer.”

“That’s damn good!” he said, a light coming into his face.
“That’s a damn good way to judge anyone.”

“All right. What *do* you do?”

“I’m a famous crook,” he said. “I’m a blackmailer, I’m a forger. I’m a murderer.” He smiled a little. “But I’m nice to nice girls. Very nice. What are you, now? What do *you* do for a living?”

Me? I’m nobody. Nothing. I’ve never had a job or earned a penny in my life. I’m not able to support my own child. I’m not a really good housekeeper or cook. I can’t sew. I’ve got friends, and I love them, girls I went to school with, but they’re not important, dazzling people. Just dear and nice. I’ve had beaus, the average number, but never anyone like Ian. Never anyone with such charm and wit; never anyone so handsome and debonair. Only that little, little time together—and now I haven’t anything. I’m nobody.

No! That’s disgusting. That’s shocking. I *am* somebody. I’m Robert’s mother, and I was Ian’s wife, and I made him happy. I made my parents happy. I’m not mean or cruel or dishonest, and I’m *not* stupid.

“I’m—me,” she said.

“That seems good enough to me,” he said. “I knew it, before this, because, you see, I have an extraordinary amount of ESP.”

“What’s that?”

“Extra-sensory perception,” he explained. “I see things, hear things, know things that are happening, or are going to happen, without needing to use the ordinary five senses.”

He was cheerful and easy, but Tilly had a stern look in her eyes.

“For instance,” he went on, “if I wanted to, I could see what the set-up would be in the Kremlin a year from now, and—”

“Then you must know what’s happened here tonight,” she said. “It doesn’t seem amusing to me. Sorry. Good-night.”

“Good-night!” he said. “I think I’ll go up, too.” As she started up the stairs, he followed her.

Before she was half-way up, she heard Robert’s voice, calling her desperately.

“Mommy! Mommy! *Mommy!* Mommy, come and get me!”

She began to run then, up the stairs, along the corridor. She unlocked the door of his room, but it was dark and empty. She closed it and ran to the bathroom, where a line of light shone under the door. He was beating on the door of the next room, which she had left locked; he was barefoot and in his blue pajamas, his dark hair wildly ruffled; there was panic in his eyes.

“Stop now, Robert,” she said, drawing him close to her side. “Stop, dear. Here I am.”

“They—got in . . . ,” he said. His voice was broken, panting; his face was wet with tears. But he had stopped crying; it seemed to her almost unbearably touching to see his effort to breathe evenly, to recover his baby pride.

“They—got in,” he said. “I was asleep, and they got in, and they waked me up and the light wouldn’t go on, and I couldn’t get out in the hall, and I called you.”

“What did you think had got in, darling?”

“I *saw* them, in the dark, flying round and round in the room, and there was—a thing—a sort of cold thing—in my bed. I—called you. Because I couldn’t get out.”

“What were they, dear?”

“They were birds,” he said. “They got in. They wanted to find the vallons.”

It was a dream, she thought, with a deep breath of relief. A horrible nightmare.

“They weren’t real, darling,” she said. “Only in a dream. We’ll go and look together.”

“No!” he said. “I don’t *want* to.”

“Come on,” she said. “We don’t mind things together.”

He took her hand then, and they entered the dark bedroom. And something was there; something flying round and round, high up, near the ceiling; one gave a little cheep, a squeak.

“Mommy!” he cried. “What’s those birds?”

The bulb had been taken out of his bedside lamp, but the lamp on the chest of drawers came alight.

“Mommy! You see! They’re—birds with fur! Take ’em away!”

“They’re only bats, darling. Perfectly harmless.”

“Take ’em away!” he cried.

The screen had been taken out of one window; she took up a newspaper and flapped at the two bats until they flew out, and she closed the window.

“Now they’re gone, darling. They—just eat insects. They’re perfectly harmless.”

“Well, why did they come in *here*, Mommy? Who took my screen away?”

“It fell out, darling. They sometimes do, you know.”

“But who locked me all in, Mommy?”

“You’re not locked in now, dear little boy. See!”

She opened the door to the hall, and Osborne was standing there, leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets. She pretended not to notice him, and closed the door.

“I saw a man out there!” Robert said. “A *bad* man.”

“He’s not bad, dear. He’s just visiting Cousin Howard. Now we’re all right and cozy. You get back into bed, and I’ll sit here beside you—”

“No!” he cried. “I *told* you that thing was in my bed!”

“We’ll look,” she said. “We’ll take all the covers off. . . . See? Like this—see?”

A thin, gray snake slid under the pillow, and for perhaps the first time in her life, Tilly screamed, and fell forward on her knees, half-unconscious, her head swirling.

“Robert . . . !” she said. “Robert . . . Go away. . . . Downstairs. Quick!”

With a dream-like effort, she pulled herself to her feet. She looked around the room, and on the bookcase stood a red iron fire engine of Robert’s. She took it to the bed, and stood for a moment. What must I do? she thought. Squash it? Squash—its head? And throw it—out the window? It’s—idiotic—to be so—terrified of snakes. . . . Only—I always was. . . . I can’t wait. It might crawl away—and hide. . . . Go ahead!

She turned the pillow over with a quick flip, and there it lay, not coiled, as she had expected from pictures, but lying stretched straight, like a rope. You must! she told herself. Quick!

A hand reached over her shoulder and snatched up the snake by the tail, whirled it round with a snap, and disappeared into the bathroom. It was Osborne.

“Want to see?” he asked Robert, and the child dropped his mother’s hand and ran eagerly after him.

“He’s swimming!” he cried.

“It won’t be long,” Osborne said. “Sometimes you can kill them with a snap—break their necks. But this time I didn’t work it. Well, sorry, old boy!”

The water flushed.

“Will he come back?” Robert asked.

“No. Never.”

“Well, snakes are awful bad, aren’t they?”

“No. There aren’t any bad snakes, or animals, or birds, or insects.”

“Well, they eat you,” said Robert.

“That’s not bad, when *they* do it,” said Osborne. “The thing is—”

There was a knock on the bedroom door, and Tilly opened it. Jenny stood there, her cap very crooked, her eyes sleepy, her face blotched and cross.

“That Lieutenant Levy, he says he wants to speak to you, ma’am. I said I thought you’d went to bed, but he says sorry, but I want to speak to her a moment. Speak! The way he’s been talking . . . ! You’d think his tongue’d fall out.”

“I’ll come,” said Tilly, and went to the bathroom, where Robert stood looking up into Osborne’s face, listening to him, enchanted. “Will you stay with Robert, till I come back?”

“Very glad,” he answered, and she went out into the hall where Jenny still waited.

“They took *her* away,” Jenny said, very low, as they started down the stairs. “In a kind of long basket, all covered with a sheet. Kind of sagging down, because she was real heavy and ___”

“Don’t, please!” Tilly interrupted.

This affronted Jenny.

“Well, I thought you’d like to hear, ma’am, with her your husband’s cousin, and all.”

“Thanks, but not now, Jenny. Thank you.”

Levy was alone in the library, except for a uniformed policeman; there was only one green-shaded lamp alight on the desk, and the room looked enormous and black as a cavern. It seemed to her that she could not cross that vast dark space.

“Lieutenant Levy . . . ,” she said. “I—I’m afraid I—can’t talk—now. I . . . It’s been . . . think I’ll telephone a taxi, and take my little boy to the Inn, just for tonight. Then tomorrow morning, as early as you like—”

“Chair, Ryan,” said Levy, and the policeman carried a chair to where she stood. She sat down, half the big room distant from Levy. “I’m sorry,” he said, in his mild, even voice, “but it wouldn’t do for you to leave the house tonight, Mrs. MacDonald.”

“But—but *why*? You let Mrs. Dexter go. And Mr. Cantrell. Why not us, my child and I? I—we *can’t* sleep here.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. MacDonald. But, you see, we have what seems to us sufficient evidence—at present—that neither Mr. Cantrell nor Mrs. Dexter left the ground floor at any time. They were at all times under observation.”

“Well . . . ?”

“As I understand it, Mrs. MacDonald, you went up to the room of the late Mrs. Fleming?”

“Yes. Yes, I did.”

“I understand that the maid, Miss Duval, entered the room while you were there, and that deceased spoke to her. Right?”

“Yes. . . .”

“Did you leave Miss Duval alone in the room, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“No. No, I didn’t. She left first.”

“The housemaid and Miss Duval state that they both entered deceased’s room later in the afternoon. They both state that they spoke to deceased, but receiving no answer, believed her to be asleep. Mrs. MacDonald, to the best of your knowledge and belief, did the late Mrs. Fleming ever speak again to anyone, after you left her room?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t hear anything from my room.”

“To the best of your knowledge, Mrs. MacDonald, the late Mrs. Fleming never spoke to anyone after you?”

“I don’t *know!*”

“To the best of your knowledge, Mrs. MacDonald.”

“I never heard her.”

“When you left the room, Mrs. MacDonald, was deceased asleep, or did she appear to be asleep?”

“Asleep.”

“Was it your impression that deceased had fallen asleep very quickly?”

“Well . . . A little. But she often did, for her nap.”

“Mrs. MacDonald, you are not obliged to answer this question. But you’ll understand it’s to your own advantage to co-operate with us, I’m sure.”

“I see!” said Tilly.

Oh, God, if I only could see! I haven't told him any lies. Only kept things back from him. I *can't* be put in jail. I haven't done anything wrong. They can't take me away from Robert. But Levy's working around—to something.

He was sitting with his arms spread on the arms of the chair, his broad shoulders a little hunched, head down, his long black lashes lowered. There was nothing hostile in his face, nothing crafty, or cruel. But she was cold with fear of him. This is the moment, she thought. Ian had been what he called "*aficionado*," loved to see bull-fights, to read books about them. There came always the Moment of Truth when matador and bull faced each other, and one or the other must die. And so, it seemed to her, she and Levy faced each other.

"You were accustomed to go upstairs with the late Mrs. Fleming, when she took her before-dinner nap?"

"Yes."

"And was deceased in the habit of taking any sort of sedatives to induce sleep?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"This afternoon . . .," said Levy. "I must ask you again. And please think carefully. Did you see deceased take any sort of pill, capsule, powder? Any sort of medication?"

"No," Tilly answered, readily and evenly.

"You state that deceased was asleep before you left the room?"

“Yes.”

“You weren’t surprised at her falling asleep so quickly, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“No. It was a hot day, and she’d had some cocktails, and I thought she was—tired.”

“Had this ever happened before, Mrs. MacDonald? I mean, had deceased ever fallen asleep so suddenly before?”

“Oh, yes!” said Tilly, almost cheerfully.

“So that you found no cause for alarm?”

“No.”

“I see!” said Levy. “Thank you. I won’t keep you any longer, Mrs. MacDonald.”

Then, as she rose: “If anything occurs to you later, Mrs. MacDonald,” he said, rising himself, “if you recall anything you may have observed in the late Mrs. Fleming’s room, for example, you’ll let us know?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Thank you,” he said, again.

CHAPTER SIX

Now it was done. The Moment of Truth had come, and she had faced it with a lie.

But I'm not sorry, she thought. If I'd told him I'd given Sibyl that capsule, they'd have gone on and on asking me questions; perhaps they'd have taken me to the police station, or the District Attorney's office, or whatever it is they do, for more questioning. Making me leave Robert here—in this horrible house. I *can't* leave him. I *won't*.

She found him sitting on his bed, with Osborne beside him, and they were chatting; that was the only word for it, both of them relaxed and enjoying their conversation. Osborne rose, slowly, with a faint sigh.

“Mommy, *you* didn't ever know anything about the lemmings!” said Robert. “The way they run *right into* the ocean, hundreds and hundreds and millions.”

“No, I didn't, Robert.”

“Sam is very interesting,” said Robert.

“Mr. Osborne, dear.”

“He *said* call him Sam.”

“Well, good-night,” said Osborne, moving toward the doorway where Tilly stood. “By the way, that snake was an absolutely harmless species. Nothing to worry about.”

“Thank you,” Tilly said, and closed the door after him.

Nothing to worry about. A snake in the child’s bed, bats flying about his dark room; the dead chipmunk, the dead bird. Somebody’s deliberately trying to frighten him, she thought. Or—harm him? But who? Who could possibly want to do any harm to Robert? If Lieutenant Levy will only, only let us go away tomorrow. I don’t know where, but I’ll think of something. . . .

She undressed and got into bed; she stretched out her arm to turn off the lamp.

“No, Mommy!” cried Robert. “Let’s not make it all dark.”

“But the light will keep you awake, darling.”

“I don’t want to go to sleep,” he said, and knelt in his bed, across the room from her. “I want to talk to you, Mommy. Mommy, you’d better buy a dog tomorrow, a great, big, *big* dog, and then if that bad boy comes back after my vallons, our dog will chase him, and bite him and bite him. . . .”

She left the light burning, she let Robert go on talking, hearing not his words but the sound of his high little voice, going on and on, in a sort of desperate volubility; he got on his feet and bounced up and down. Let him alone, she thought. It’s better for him to wear himself out, and then he’ll go to sleep. He’s had too much to bear today. The “bad boy,”

who threatened him, who killed the chipmunk and the bird . . .

I'll tell Lieutenant Levy about that. Because Robert might be —might really be in danger. There might be some criminally insane boy in the neighborhood. . . . Why didn't I tell the Lieutenant before?

Because he wanted to talk about Sibyl. And I've forgotten her. I haven't thought of her since I came into this room. Not once. Let me think about her now; that's the least I can do.

“Mommy! Hey, Mommy!”

Robert flounced down in the bed, with his head buried in the pillow, and his rear end elevated.

“I'm a lemming!” he told her. “See? But *I'm* not going to jump in the ocean and get all drowned. I'm going to stay here in the sand. D'you *see*, Mommy?”

“I see, darling,” she said.

He went on talking, his voice muffled by the pillow, but he was growing drowsy; in a little while he went to sleep, as often before, in that preposterous attitude.

Now let me think about Sibyl, Tilly thought. She was Ian's cousin—and she did mean to be kind, asking us here for the summer. She did mean to be nice, only . . . Well her life hasn't been happy. Her first marriage was miserable—and she was so romantic about Neville, in the beginning. I don't know whether she was happy with Howard, or not.

Sometimes she was furious at him, but other times, lots of other times, she said very nice things about him. Howard's such a comfort to me, she had often said. He's such a thorough *gentleman*, you can always count on him. Especially when we're entertaining.

Of course, Taylor's been a disappointment to her, Tilly thought. He's not a bit affectionate to her. He's got a really hateful manner toward her, scornful and rude. But then, the way she brought him up, one moment simply doting on him, and the next moment flying at him. When he was a little boy, I saw her slap him in the face. Stop! Don't remember things like that about her. Remember how she paid for poor old Uncle Edward in that home for years. Remember . . .

Remember the bats. I didn't know they squeaked. Remember the snake. . . . Robert! Robert! Don't go near your vallons! The snake's underneath them. I can see him! But he was going nearer and nearer to the little heap of stripped leaves, and she was far away, on a hilltop, and she could not move. Not one step. *Robert!* she cried, with all her strength. *Rawbert!* called a jeering voice beside her, and she turned her head to see the Bad Boy. He was as tall as a man, and very bony, but he was dressed like a child, in dark-blue shorts and a middy blouse and a sailor's cap with ribbons streaming down his back. *He can't hear,* he told her. And she could not move; her feet were sunk in clay, in mud, and she was sinking deeper, up to her knees now. Please . . . ! Please . . . ! she cried.

Then she opened her eyes, and sat up to look at Robert. He had stretched out now, his face turned sideways on the

pillow, tranquilly sleeping. The lamp still burned, but there was a pearly brightness in the sky; the night was over. I'm going to get those poor things, she thought.

She put on her slippers and the rather marvelous negligee that Sibyl had grown tired of and given to her; Nile-green chiffon, with long sleeves and a collar buttoned with tiny white pearl flowers; it was far too large for her; she had to hold up the voluminous skirt as she went quietly out of the room, with a bathtowel over her arm.

She had trouble with the bolt on the front door, and when at last she pushed it back, it grated loudly. She stepped out onto the terrace, and for a moment she paused, spellbound by the world she saw. The birds were twittering in the trees, but she saw none flying; the light breeze stirred the delicate flowers planted beside the driveway, pink, yellow, white, so that they looked as if they too were ready to fly, when the sun came. There ought to be music when it comes, she thought; trumpets, and clarions.

Then she remembered her errand, and ran down the steps and across the grass that was wet with dew. I hate doing this, she thought. I hate to pick up those poor dead creatures. But I want to show them to Lieutenant Levy, before . . . Before what? Before something eats them. Before someone takes them away.

But they still lay there, side by side, and they were horrible and piteous. Something had been plucking at the bird's feathers, digging into its breast; half of the chipmunk's alert little face was eaten away. With a corner of the towel, she

pushed them into the middle of it, rolled the towel, over and over, and picked it up by the ends. If Lieutenant Levy sees this, she thought, if I tell him about the bats. And the snake . . . He'll do something to protect Robert.

Then she saw Osborne standing on the terrace, in a belted black shantung dressing-gown over his trousers. He came down the steps and met her as she was crossing the lawn.

“So you're a witch,” he said.

“No, I'm not!”

“Has to be so. Who else would be out before sunrise, gathering—I don't know what.”

“Some toys Robert had left out all night. I wanted to get them before he waked up. I wanted to see if they were mouldy, or damaged, so that I could fix them up.”

“And they were,” said Osborne. “They were awful.”

“Why do you think so?”

“By the way you carry your bundle. As if it made you sick. Let me take it for you, Mrs. MacDonald.”

“No, thank you. Never mind. It's not a bit heavy.”

“It's a leprechaun. Dead?”

She smiled, as best she could.

“I’ll have to hurry. Because Robert would hate to wake up and find me gone.”

She tried to go forward, but he moved to block her way.

“Mrs. MacDonald,” he said, “I’d like to help you.”

“Thank you,” said Tilly, “but I don’t need any help.”

“Remember the talk we were having yesterday? About detective stories? About how popular it is to have a girl, the heroine, of course, who tries to mislead the police? She doesn’t tell them something she knows, or she—shades some fact a little.”

“Lies, you mean,” said Tilly.

“That’s your word, not mine.”

“Then you think I’ve been lying to the police?”

“I didn’t say that, either. Only I wanted to advise you—”

“Are you a detective, or a policeman?” she asked again, and she felt her cheeks grow hot. He—*bothers* me, she thought.

“No,” he answered. “Just unusually clever. Insight. Perseverance.”

“Just what *are* you, Mr. Osborne?”

“I’m an expert, Mrs. MacDonald.”

“An expert in what?”

“I don’t exactly know, Mrs. MacDonald. But it seems, at the moment, to be the Far East. Japan, China, Korea. I sell articles to newspapers and magazines. Authoritative articles, they’re called.”

In this pearly light, his dark, bony face had, she thought, a different look, strained, tired, and somehow dangerous. Nothing could stop him, she told herself.

“Have you really been in the Far East?” she asked.

“Eight years,” he said. “I was sent over with a zoological expedition, to study the animal life. But that doesn’t seem to pay. My articles about animals didn’t sell. Except now and then to very choice magazines that paid what you could well call a ‘pittance.’ But I looked at the people, too, you know, and that’s what brings in the shekels. My Life with a Chinese Concubine. Three Months with a Geisha Girl.”

“Is that how you lived?” she asked, with distaste.

“No. Very much otherwise,” he said. “That’s just my wit. But, jester though I may be, please let me give you my word of advice. I’ve known Levy for a long time, and he’s a good deal smarter than you think. He’s a bit slow, but that’s because he doesn’t make snap judgments. And he doesn’t make mistakes. When he makes a charge, it sticks. Don’t hold out on him, Mrs. MacDonald. Don’t—”

“Don’t lie to him, you mean?”

“It wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Why do you think I have? Why did you come here now?”

“I heard the bolt being drawn on the front door, and I thought I’d take a look.”

“I can’t see what concern *you* have in this affair,” she said, curtly.

“You,” said Osborne, and stepped aside.

She went on toward the house, carrying her repellent bundle, and she was startled and very much troubled. Me? she thought. Why did he pick *me* out as the one who—hasn’t told the truth? And why does he care? She ran up the stairs, holding up the voluminous skirt; she opened the bedroom door, and when she saw Robert lying there, still quietly sleeping, she began to cry.

She despised that; she frowned, but she could not stop. She put the bundle on the top shelf of the closet, where Robert could not get at it, and the tears were still raining down her face. She lay down on the bed, still in the green negligee, still crying, and she fell asleep.

“Hi, Mommy!” called Robert.

He was standing beside her, and the sun was shining into the room.

“You look very nice and pretty and like a fairy queen,” he said. “Only your face is dirty, Mommy.”

“You go and take your shower,” she said, “and then I’ll have mine.”

It was only two days ago that he had learned to turn on the shower for himself, and he was vain-glorious about it. She heard the water come pattering down, and he began to sing. “Home on the Range.” Singing—in this house . . . He doesn’t seem to know about Sibyl. Maybe I ought to tell him. But I don’t know. . . . Maybe I’d better wait till he asks.

Sibyl had never come down to breakfast, yet the dining room seemed bleakly empty without her; the whole house seemed empty. If only Lieutenant Levy will let us go today. . . . Howard will probably want to close the house, anyhow. Perhaps the Lieutenant has found out already who did that horrible thing—put that deadly poison in her capsule. I’ve given her lots of them, dozens. But I never really looked at the bottle. It was a prescription, but I never looked at the doctor’s name, or the name of the drugstore. I’d like one of my yellow goof-balls, she used to say. This looked exactly the same. But if I told Levy I gave her something and never looked at the label, he’d think—I don’t know what.

Who did it? Anyone could have got into the bathroom through Howard’s room, or her own, when they weren’t there. The capsule could have been put there in the morning, when Howard was out riding and Sibyl was asleep. But who would *want* to kill her? I suppose people will say it was Howard, because he wanted her money. But Howard’s just not like that. And anyhow, she gave him everything he wanted. He’s not a murderer.

Would you know a murderer, if you saw one? Think of all the people in the house yesterday. Not Carola, not Howard, certainly not Mr. Cantrell. Jenny's pretty bad-tempered, but what would she have to gain? Or Jensen? Or Gloria? No. . . . The only two who look one bit sinister are Pauline and Sam Osborne. It's hard to think of any motive they could have, but they're both more—subtle than the others.

“Well!” said Robert, cheerfully, as he finished his cup of cocoa. “Cousin Sibyl's gone, for ever and ever, I guess.”

“Robert! Who told you?”

“Sam did.”

“You mustn't call him Sam. Say Mr. Osborne.”

“He *said* call him Sam. He said Cousin Sibyl was all dead, and I have to be extra good today and not worry you. So I *will* be. Only after breakfast will you let me go and see if the birds took my vallons?”

“We'll see, later on, dear.”

“Good-morning,” said Howard, from the doorway.

He looked pale and ill, very neat in a dark suit and black tie.

“There's so much to be done . . . ,” he said, still standing in the doorway. “They made the autopsy last night—”

“Robert, run in and see Gloria,” said Tilly. But Robert did not move.

“They’ll get the reports now, and the District Attorney is allowing us to have the—” He paused. “The ceremony,” he said. “Tomorrow. In Brookline. That’s what she—what she—what Sibyl always said she wanted. I telephoned the school camp, and they’re sending Taylor here, at once. We’re leaving—this afternoon. They’re sending policemen with us, to be sure we’ll all come back. I know Sibyl—would want you to come, Tilly. Pauline says she’ll stay and look after Robert.”

“Howard, I *couldn’t*! I—can’t leave Robert. . . .”

“You can bring him, then.”

“Howard, he’s too little. Howard, I—can’t.”

“You don’t *care* what Sibyl wants?” he asked.

Sibyl doesn’t want anything now, or ever any more, Tilly thought. But she would not say that to this stricken and suffering man.

“Howard, I’ve got to think of my child,” she said. “Sibyl would understand that.”

“I *want* you to come,” he said. “I need you, Tilly.”

She was surprised, startled.

“But, Howard . . . !”

“I’m alone,” he said. “I need you, Tilly.”

That was almost too much for Tilly. But still Robert came first.

“I’m so sorry, Howard,” she said. “But—”

The doorbell rang, and they were both silent while Jenny went hurrying along the hall. She made no announcement; the two arrivals came at once into the dining room. One of them was Taylor Price, Sibyl’s son, a handsome, dark boy, very tall for his sixteen years, and with him was a short, stocky little man with a high crest of gray hair.

“Mr. Fleming?” he said. “My name is Abbott. The school—the camp—sent me to bring Taylor here. We—er—it’s a rule. . . . We don’t care to—er—have our boys travel alone.”

“He’s the one!” cried Robert, springing up, and oversetting the chair. “He’s the one!” he cried again, pointing at Taylor. “He’s the bad big boy that killed the bird and the chipmink—and the little lemming.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Robert, with his black brows drawn together, was pointing his forefinger straight at Taylor. But Taylor glanced at him with scornful indifference, and the pompous young man who had accompanied him, and Howard, too, paid no attention to the child.

“*He’s* the bad big boy that killed the—”

“Hush, darling!” Tilly said to him, in a whisper so serious that it impressed him; he let his accusing finger drop.

“Taylor, m’boy . . . ,” Howard said. His mouth twitched; he blinked his eyes rapidly. “I know—you must believe that I know . . . The shock—the—the—all of it.”

“Oh, thanks!” said Taylor.

Well, at least you can’t call him a hypocrite, thought Tilly. He doesn’t even pretend to care about Sibyl—his own mother. I never liked him, even when he was little, and I certainly don’t think he’s improved.

“Er—my name is Abbott, sir,” said the pompous young man.

“*Wilfred* Abbott,” said Taylor.

“Sit down, Mr. Abbott,” said Howard.

“Thank you, Mr. Fleming, but I won’t intrude on you—at this time of—this time. I came, because Mr. Bailey has, as you no doubt know, a strict regulation about any of the boys from the school, or from our summer camp, traveling alone. So I was glad—” He stopped a moment, his sun-browned face turned a deep red. “I—er—that was certainly not the word I intended, sir. . . . I volunteered to come with Taylor, because I had had the—privilege of meeting the—meeting Mrs. Fleming on two or three occasions at the school. I’ve engaged a room at the little inn here, and I’ll be waiting there. . . . Any time. . . . Anything.”

“But he *is* the boy that came yesterday,” said Robert, suddenly. The conversation, the atmosphere, the entire lack of attention he was getting bored him, and made him rebellious.

“Er—may I ask . . . ?” said Abbott. “Er—madam—”

“Tilly, Mr. Abbott. Mr. Abbott, Mrs. MacDonald.”

Abbott made a clumsy bow, like a youth in a dancing school.

“Mrs. MacDonald, do I understand that the—your son? Thank you! That your son is saying he saw Taylor here yesterday?”

“Did, too, see him,” said Robert. “And he—”

“It’s quite impossible, Mrs. MacDonald. The boys never leave the camp unattended, and you may be sure that any long absence on Taylor’s part would have been noticed and checked.”

“I see!” said Tilly, politely. “Now, Robert, you’ve finished your breakfast, and we’ll go out in the sunshine.”

“Just a moment, Tilly,” said Howard. “This is—I’ll have to explain . . . They made the—the autopsy last night, and, although they’re waiting for—for some sort of reports from the laboratory, the Medical Officer is—he feels definite. In any case, Levy’s given us all permission to take a train to Boston at noon. For the—the ceremony. He won’t let us drive there, and there’ll be plainclothesmen on the train, but—in any case—”

“But—but—but . . . ,” said Robert, softly.

“In any case, it’s . . . That’s where Sibyl would want—to rest.”

“Is Cousin Sibyl going in the train?” Robert asked, with interest. “Are you going to sit her up and—?”

“Hush, Robert!” said Tilly, sternly. “Yes, Howard?”

“We’ll be back tomorrow morning. And you can safely leave Robert in Pauline’s charge.”

“Howard, I can’t!” she cried. “I’m sorry, but—really I don’t want to leave him.”

“Tilly, I consider it would be—*most* unsuitable to take the child with us. He—I’m sorry to say this, but he’s not a—a very well-behaved child. I don’t blame you, Tilly. No woman alone can bring up a boy.”

“Mrs. MacDonald,” said Abbott, “I’d be very pleased to undertake the lad’s care, while you’re absent. I—naturally, I’ve had considerable experience with boys. We can go swimming, rowing, a ramble through the woods.”

“No,” said Robert. “I’d rather stay with Sam.”

He really was behaving badly this morning, but, Tilly thought it was the atmosphere of the house, it was Howard’s nervous stammer, it was, beyond anything else, his belief that Taylor was the “bad, big boy” of yesterday.

“Sam?” said Howard, with a frown of surprise. “Does he mean Osborne? Well, Mr. Osborne’s coming with us. Naturally. I’ve known him and his family for twenty, thirty years. And now he’s—” He stopped short. “He’s helping me with—some work.” He paused again. “If Mr. Abbott will be good enough to stay here, in the house, and there’ll be Pauline and the two maids—”

“I want to stay with my mother!” Robert cried. “There was a snake in my bed—”

“Hush!” Tilly said, again. “I can’t leave him, Howard. Really I can’t.”

“I think,” said Howard, deliberately and sternly, “that in view of the circumstances, it’s your duty to come with us, Tilly. Even if it’s simply to—to—keep up appearances. I mean, everyone knows she was Ian’s cousin, you and your child were guests. Everyone would consider it—well, to say the

least, unfeeling of you. I mean—pay your last respects. Not much to ask.”

It really isn't much, Tilly said to herself. It really would look heartless—and queer, if I don't go. Only I won't leave Robert in this house.

“All right, Howard,” she said. “But I'd rather Robert went to the Inn with Mr. Abbott. It would be a little change for him.”

“A change?” Howard repeated. “I can't see why the child should need a change.”

“I *want* him to go to the Inn!” said Tilly, so vehemently that Howard's brows twitched in surprise, and a certain alarm.

“Now, now!” he said. “You're—overwrought, Tilly. You must—” He frowned, thinking of what it was she must do. “A little brandy,” he said.

“At breakfast time!” she cried. “It's a horrible idea!”

She knew very well that she was speaking too loudly. I don't care! she thought. I'd like to stamp my foot. I'd like to—yell.

“What's more,” she said, “*I'm* going to take him to the Inn, before we leave.”

“But Tilly . . . ! Mr. Abbott will—”

“I'm going with him *myself*. I will! I'm going to get his room there—and everything. I will!”

“Why not?” said Osborne’s slow, almost languid voice from the doorway. “You and Mr. Abbott and Robert and I can stroll down there now, and get the kid settled. It’s a nice place, Robert. You’ll like it. They have a little dock there, and boats, and maybe Mr. Abbott will take you out rowing.”

“I will, indeed!” said Abbott, earnestly.

“Then I’ll pack his bag,” said Tilly.

“Pauline can do that,” said Osborne. “The chauffeur can take it later, in the car.”

“I want *all* my things!” said Robert. “I want my express wagon, and my blocks, and—and *everything*.”

“You’ll get ’em,” said Osborne. “Ready, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“You mean—*now*? This moment?”

“Why not?” Osborne asked.

Tilly looked at him for a moment.

“All right!” she said. “I’ll be back in a very little while, Howard.”

“I beg of you not to let anything delay you,” said Howard. “We leave the house at eleven-thirty, sharp. It’s been—it’s very complicated. Railway tickets, hotel reservations, and then . . . Fortunately, I have a half-brother living in Boston. I got him on the telephone, and he’s being most helpful.

Getting in touch with Sibyl's people, arranging for the— ceremony. Her family plot. The music. He—”

“I won't be late, Howard,” said Tilly.

It was ill-mannered, and perhaps even unkind to interrupt him. But I couldn't listen to him for one single second longer, she thought.

They went out of the house, into a sparkling morning with a steady breeze.

“Can I just go and look at my vallons?” Robert asked.

He had suddenly grown quiet, almost meek. When she said they had no time to stop now, he accepted it without protest.

* * * * *

The Seafarers' Inn was an old-fashioned wooden building, set flush with the road; on one side was a well-kept lawn, with wrought-iron chairs and tables, shaded by fine old trees, and in back there was a little sun-bleached dock on a quiet inlet from the sea.

“But if Robert went out of the front door, he'd be right in the road, with all the traffic!” said Tilly.

“Mrs. MacDonald,” said Abbott, a little hurt, a little offended. “I'm accustomed to taking charge of groups of boys, and you can be assured—”

“Yes!” said Osborne. “Go ahead and be assured, Tilly. Abbott will look after your kid.”

The landlady was an odd-looking woman, with dyed black hair and a fretful face; she was very stout, but her legs were very thin, and in the rear, just below what waist she had, was a great protuberance, which gave her the look of some sort of fantastic wading-bird.

“I’d like my little boy to have a room connecting with Mr. Abbott’s,” Tilly said.

“We don’t *have* no connecting rooms any more,” said the landlady. “And we’re not going to, neither. We had ’em, and it led to immoralness. And that’s something I won’t put up with.”

“Well, a room and bath, as near Mr. Abbott—”

“No baths,” said the landlady. “Except there’s an accommodation on every floor, and a bathtub, too. But if you want any hot water for a tub bath, it’s thirty-five cents, because of how prices have went up. In *my* day, we kept ourselves real clean and neat, without no bathtubs and hot water. And no connecting rooms.”

“But you see,” said Tilly, “my son’s only five. And I have to go to a funeral in Boston.”

“Mrs. Fleming’s?” asked the landlady. “My, that’s a dreadful thing. But the way those society people carry on . . . Only five? He’s real tall. Well, I brought up six of my own, and I guess I can look after him.”

She looked at Robert, and her fretful face was completely changed; it had a look of tenderness and compassion. She opened the door of a clean, sparsely-furnished little room, and turned to Robert. “Now, if you’ll be real good,” she said, “I’ll bring my radio up here. But eight o’clock, it goes off, and out goes your light. That agreed, young feller?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Robert, obviously delighted by the prospect of a room alone, a radio under his own control.

“I like kids,” said the landlady. “You don’t have to worry about him. My! That was a terrible thing, about poor Mrs. Fleming. Suicide, do you think?”

“I don’t know anything about it,” said Tilly. “But please don’t let my little boy hear any talk—”

“He’ll get his meals up in his own room,” said the landlady, “or else outdoors with that teacher feller. But I’ll see he doesn’t get downstairs with those society people that got yachts and drink till they’re blue in the face. No. Don’t you worry.”

“No, don’t,” said Osborne. “Come along now, Tilly. Your child’s in good hands.”

Robert kissed her good-bye, absent-mindedly.

“I’d like to go out in a rowboat,” he said. “And maybe I could catch a lot of fishes.”

“Maybe you could,” said Tilly. “Well . . . See you tomorrow darling. And you’ll be good, and do whatever Mr. Abbott

says, won't you?"

"Ah reckon so," said Robert, still absent-minded.

"Better come along, Mrs. MacDonald," said Osborne. "You don't want to be late."

She set off with him along the road that was so commonplace, so much at variance with Sibyl's luxurious estate. There was a filling-station, a diner, a beer-garden; there was a stream of cars going to the public beach, most of them filled with the sort of people Sibyl couldn't endure. She had had built a graceful but forbidding iron fence, tall and spiked, all along her grounds, to keep her safe. . . .

"Look, will you?" said Osborne.

They had come to the entrance of the driveway, and in front of the house seven cars were parked.

"The cortege," said Osborne. "It's going to be a fine, first-class production. It's pathetic, in a way. I don't think there's one soul on God's earth who'll miss her," he said.

"But—Howard . . . ?" Tilly said, and it was only half a question.

"He was born to be a widower," said Osborne. "He'll go every year to put flowers on her grave. He'll have a big framed picture of her in his room, and he'll carry a small one in his pocket. He'll—"

“Stop!” said Tilly. “It’s—horrible. Anyhow, maybe Taylor cares more than anyone realizes.”

“Maybe he does,” said Osborne. “Nice idea. And maybe Sibyl cared more for Taylor than I ever realized.”

“I think it’s a great mistake to be cynical,” said Tilly.

“Much less painful than being gullible,” said Osborne. “You don’t get hurt so often. Or so badly.”

“Do you mean you think *I’m* ‘gullible’?”

“Let’s call it ‘trusting.’ Innocent. Artless.”

“And in just what way?” she demanded, and she was angry now.

“You’ve been living in a house with a murderer,” said Osborne. “And you’re not even very curious to know who the murderer is. I don’t think you care, particularly. You have a sort of no-use-crying-over-spilt-milk attitude about the whole thing. Sibyl was murdered. Too bad. But nothing can bring her back, so why not drop all this upsetting business about investigating, and so on.”

“You mean I ought to be thinking about justice, and vengeance, and so on, all the time?”

“No,” he said. “Let’s use a word I’m sure will appeal to you. Let’s say ‘duty.’”

“Duty—to Sibyl? To the State? To—?”

“No. Just to your fellow-creatures. If anyone commits a murder, and gets away with it, he—or she—is always likely to do it again. Anyhow, he—or she—remains a person who’s capable of murder. Not a good idea, to leave a killer loose in the world.”

“You’re talking as if *I* knew who did it. As if *I* could help.”

“Maybe you could help,” he said. “Anyhow, you don’t need to hinder. Levy’s a good man, intelligent, honest. And very, very persevering. The chances are that he’ll get the murderer—in the end. But I’d say, the sooner the better. Before anything else happens.”

“Naturally,” said Tilly, cold and curt.

“All right. Then tell Levy everything. Tell him the truth.”

“Are you implying that I haven’t? That I’m a liar?”

She looked straight at him.

Her dark eyes were blazing; there was a hot color in her cheeks. But Osborne looked back at her, with no sign of contrition.

“A very nice one,” he said. “You mean well.”

In her anger, she walked faster, and Osborne let her draw ahead of him. She had been brought up to look upon a quarrel as ill-bred, and disgraceful. Keep your temper, she had been taught, and she was doing that. But it was like something churning inside her, and it came into her mind that

maybe it would be better to let it out, to tell Osborne what she thought of him. Impertinent. Meddlesome. *Odious*. Calling me a liar. Practically accusing me of protecting a murderer. *Odious*. Impertinent.

She went up the steps to the terrace, and Jenny opened the door.

“Lieutenant Levy says he wants to see you, ma’am, and Mr. Osborne, too. In the library, right away, he says,” she said, in a tone of spiteful triumph.

Tilly’s anger was in an instant smothered by cold dread and dismay, like a fire quenched by icy rain. She was afraid of Levy, as she had never before in her life been afraid of anyone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

If he's found out that I did give Sibyl that capsule . . . , she thought. It'll be worse now, after I've lied about it. Because I did tell him a lie. Suppose he arrests me? Takes me away for questioning, or whatever they do? What will happen to Robert? That Mr. Abbott *seems* very nice, and trustworthy, but, after all, I don't really know him.

As they went down the hall, she saw four or five people in the drawing-room, all silent, sitting erect in their chairs, the women in black. They went on, to the library, where Levy sat behind the desk, holding a letter-scale between his two big hands. Wasn't there an Egyptian god that weighed souls? Tilly asked herself. That's what he looks like.

He put down the scale and rose when they entered, and he seemed toweringly tall. Howard was sitting on a sofa beside Taylor; Carola was here, and Dick Cantrell, and Pauline, wearing a black hat tilted raffishly to one side, very incongruous with her pale, displeased face.

"I shan't detain you now," said Levy. "But there are a few things . . ."

His voice, as usual, was quiet, but not mild now.

“You understand,” he said, “that this is a very unusual privilege. To allow all the persons who were in this house at the time of Mrs. Fleming’s death to leave not only the premises but the state. However, at the request of the Governor, the District Attorney has given his consent. But —”

He paused, he bent his head, and pushed the letterscale back and forth.

“You will be accompanied by four members of our force, three men and one woman. In plainclothes. They have their instructions, and they will do nothing to embarrass or inconvenience. *But—*” He paused. “Any attempt to evade their supervision, or to hamper them in any way whatever, by any person or persons, will result in immediate arrest.”

“Me, too?” asked Taylor, with a look of bright interest.

Levy ignored him.

“The funeral is to take place at eleven o’clock tomorrow morning,” he went on. “This, too, is very unusual in a case like this, but the County Medical Officer, as well as Doctor Crowdie and the laboratory experts, are all completely agreed upon the cause of death, and so on. After the funeral, you’ll take a train leaving at approximately one o’clock, and change at Grand Central for a train that will bring you here. I shall want to see all of you as soon as you return. Is that clear?”

“Very clear,” said Cantrell, earnestly. “Very fair. I think I can say that we all appreciate—”

“We’ll have to leave at once,” Howard interrupted, looking at his watch.

Everyone rose, and they filed out into the hall. Howard nodded at the silent group in the drawing-room, and they too rose, and joined the rest. Howard brought a small notebook out of his pocket, and read aloud from it. Second car, Cantrell, Mr. and Mrs. Berkley, and Eloise. As their names were called, each of them moved forward, down the steps, and into one of the cars.

“Tilly,” said Howard, “you’ll be in the first car, with Carola and Taylor and myself.”

The cars all started. But where’s Sibyl? Tilly thought. She had imagined that the cortege would be led by a hearse, but there was none; nor, as far as she could tell, any police cars. The police must have been just put in with other people, she thought. Perhaps they’ll get clues from things they hear. . . .

“Sit up straight, Taylor,” said Howard, severely.

But Taylor remained as he was, slouched down on the folding seat, his knees crossed, almost level with his chin.

“Why?” he asked.

“It’s not respectful, to loll that way.”

“Respectful to whom?” Taylor asked.

“To your mother. Sit up straight.”

“Oh, she won’t mind,” said Taylor.

“*Sit up!*” said Howard, more loudly.

“Oh, don’t!” said Carola. “Please don’t. We shouldn’t think of anything now—but Sibyl—and our memories.”

Tears were running down her cheeks, but they did not disfigure her. She’s really very, very pretty, Tilly thought. And maybe she’s nice. Maybe she’s sincere. I don’t know. She paid no more attention to Tilly now than she had ever done in the past; she was polite enough, but completely indifferent. She leaned forward now, and took Taylor’s hand.

“Oh, Taylor!” she said. “If you only knew how your mother used to talk about you. We met—you know—on board a ship—going to France. We’d both just got our divorces—and it’s such a miserable feeling. We both felt the same . . . I mean—just after a divorce—you have that feeling that you haven’t—any *home*. It’s so terribly forlorn. . . . We used to talk about—where we’d live when we went home. . . . And Sibyl used to say—any place would be like a home to her, as long as she had her Boykins there. That’s what she used to call—Ouch! Taylor! You’re hurting me!”

“Am I?” Taylor asked, raising his brows, with a look of innocent surprise.

“You simply *crushed* my hand!”

“I don’t realize my own strength,” said Taylor.

“Apologize to Mrs. Dexter, at once!” said Howard.

“I apologize, Mrs. Dexter,” said Taylor. “Where was I when my mother went to Paris?”

“Where . . . ?” Carola said, at a loss. “Some place where you were happy and well looked after. I can’t quite remember the *name* of—whoever it was.”

“I can,” said Taylor. “Her name was Molly Monaghan, and she’d been one of my mother’s servants. She lived in a dirty little house, with three dirty kids of her own, and she and her husband were drunk all the time. But my mother said Molly was ‘devoted,’ and—”

“That’ll do, Taylor,” said Howard.

“Yes, sir,” said Taylor, with exaggerated respect. “She said it would be a ‘home atmosphere.’”

They reached the railway station, just before the train arrived; they all got on board. Such a lot of us! Tilly thought. There was no parlor car, so they sat where they could; some of them went into the smoker; Tilly sat down beside a woman who belonged to their party, but whom Tilly had either never met or had forgotten, a thin and dour woman in a black hat and a black suit too heavy for this weather. Could she be the policewoman? Tilly asked herself.

They all got out at Grand Central; they followed Howard across the great rotunda, all keeping rather close together, in a sort of swarm. There were parlor-car reservations for them on this train, and they settled themselves, a little more

relaxed, some of them talked in low voices. I don't want to talk, Tilly thought. Not to anyone. Not to the people she knew, and any of the strangers might belong to the police. And you might say something, just some little thing, that would give you away.

I've got to stop being so nervous and—frightened, she thought. I'm not a criminal. I haven't done anything so terrible. Except to tell Lieutenant Levy that I didn't give Sibyl a capsule, or see her take one. I'm pretty sure it's not perjury, unless you've taken an oath. I don't think they could do anything to me for that.

Except suspect me. Except suspect and disbelieve everything I say. Except think I know other things. . . . But what good would it have done, if I had told him I gave Sibyl the capsule? I didn't know it was poison, and I'm sure Sibyl didn't know, either. I don't know how a poisoned capsule got there. I can't even imagine who'd put it there. The people in the house when it happened were Howard, and Carola, and Mr. Cantrell, and myself, and the servants. Oh, and Sam Osborne. And how did *he* know I'd told a lie to Lieutenant Levy?

Did he *see* me? she thought. If he'd been in Howard's room, and opened the bathroom door even a crack, he could have seen me. And has he told Lieutenant Levy that he saw me?

I don't think he'd do that. I don't know why, but I just don't think he would. Maybe nobody will ever find out that I gave her that capsule. Oh, if only it would be like that, and I could take Robert and get away. . . .

She was growing a little drowsy, and it would, she thought, be a blessed thing if she could sleep through even a little part of this interminable journey. She took off her hat, and leaned back; she closed her eyes.

*“Dare to be true. Nothing can need a lie.
The sin that needs it most grows two thereby.”*

That was her grandmother speaking.

*“Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive.”*

Lying is a sin. And be sure thy sin will find thee out. You'll have to be punished for your sin. But not yet. Please, please, not yet. Wait till Robert's grown up. He's only five. Please wait. . . .

It was growing dark when they reached Boston, and, in the Back Bay station, Howard addressed the little swarm.

“I did the best I could, with the hotel,” he said. “But there's some sort of convention here, and I couldn't manage as I wanted. I'm afraid some of you will have to share bathrooms. I've arranged that dinner shall be sent up to all of you. Unless, of course, you prefer to go down to the public restaurant. Breakfast will be served in your rooms at nine o'clock, and we'll assemble in the lobby at ten-thirty. I most earnestly request that *no one* be late.”

Tilly was young, and healthy, and she was hungry. As soon as she got into her room, she called room service, and ordered clam chowder, and fried chicken with two

vegetables, and peach ice-cream. Robert would love this, she thought. All right. He'll have plenty of dinners like this. I'll see him tomorrow, and maybe the next day they'll let us go.

Go where? The couple who are subletting our apartment won't be gone until the first of October, and it's only early in July now. I haven't enough money to pay for us in a hotel.

Her dinner came up then, on a wheeled table, and it was delicious. It does you good to eat, she thought. She telephoned to the desk for an evening newspaper; she undressed, and in Sibyl's marvelous negligee, she lay down on the bed to read.

But almost at once the bathroom door opened, and Carola came into her room, barefoot, in a pale yellow, lace-trimmed slip. She was crying again, and there was a strong smell of liquor about her.

"I've *got* to talk . . .," she said. "I've *got* to talk—to someone. Sibyl . . . Sibyl and I saw each other—every day. I *hate* the country—but I got Ricky to buy me that house there, *only* because I'd be near Sibyl. The alimony Ricky sends me is so *miserly*, I don't know how to live on it. I only have one servant, and she's horrible. Only a cheap little car, a thousand years old, and no chauffeur. And there's Ricky, absolutely *rolling* in money . . ."

She sat down in an armchair, crossing her bare knees.

“I haven’t *anyone*,” she said. “I’m all alone. If I had a child, like yours . . .”

Leave Robert out of this! Tilly thought.

“My parents are dead, and I never had any brothers or sisters. I haven’t *anyone*. . . . If I’d had a child . . . Only, Sibyl said it was the most *awful* experience. She said that when she came out of the ether, and they showed her the baby, she screamed, and then she fainted. She said the baby was so hideous and weird, all red and wrinkled, and his mouth open, like a fish. Anyhow, Neville—that was her first husband, you know—Neville was *cruel* to her. I don’t think she ever got over the shock of the whole thing. She did admit that Howard was wonderfully kind to her, but she never quite realized how understanding and wonderful he was to her.”

Tilly was, by training and by nature, courteous and long-suffering. She let this most unwelcome visitor go on and on, because she could see how genuinely wretched and disturbed Carola was. But it was hard, very hard.

“I’m not going to this—funeral tomorrow,” Carola said. “I couldn’t take it.”

“But, Carola—,” Tilly said, and it was the first time she had used Mrs. Dexter’s first name. “If you don’t go, the police might—”

“The *police!*” said Carola, with infinite scorn. “Everybody *knows* it was suicide.”

“I don’t think so,” said Tilly.’

“Well, *I* do,” said Carola. “*I know* she wanted to die. She told me so.”

But people like Sibyl—and like you—are always saying that, Tilly thought. Always saying, when the least thing goes wrong, I wish I was dead. In her fatigue, her dread, she scarcely heard Carola any more, but from time to time she glanced at her, with great compassion. She looked lovely in her lemon-colored slip, her blond hair loose on her shoulders, but she looked forlorn; she was too thin. She hasn’t anything, Tilly thought. And I’ve got Robert. My son. My son child. My own darling, my life. Perhaps he’ll be—a famous naturalist. . . .

He was. She saw him standing on a platform, tall, lean, dark, entirely at ease, giving a lecture. The true significance of vallons, he said, lies—

“*Tilly!*” cried Carola. “Are you asleep?”

“No,” Tilly answered, rousing herself with an effort. “But I am pretty tired, Carola.”

Carola sprang to her feet.

“Oh, you’re tired, are you?” she said. “A hell of a lot *you’ve* got to be tired about. You simply lived there, sponging on Sibyl, you and your child. You gave her all kinds of dope. You were cold—and horrible to her. She told me so. You worked on Howard; Sibyl told me so. You felt sure Howard would look after you, and that brat of yours. You *knew* you could get more out of Howard than you could from Sibyl. If

it *was* murder—” She paused a moment, looking at Tilly with her eyes narrowed. “If it *was* murder,” she said, “*you* did it.”

She went out then, through the connecting bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

I’m going to sleep, Tilly told herself. I don’t care what Carola said. I’m going to sleep, and tomorrow I’ll get back to Robert.

She did get to sleep, so suddenly that she did not wash, or brush her teeth, or go through any of her usual routine. When she waked, the lamp on the bedside table was still lighted, she was still wearing Sibyl’s negligee. And someone was knocking at the door. She got up, unsteady with drowsiness, and opened the door, and it was a waiter with her breakfast. If you can eat, Tilly told herself, and if you can sleep, you can get through almost anything.

It was a good breakfast, and she did eat, leisurely. She took a bath, and dressed, and she was down in the lobby well before ten-thirty. Howard was there, and Cantrell, and Osborne, and many of the group that she did not know. Funny, she thought, some of them must be Ian’s relatives, too. She was suddenly glad that there hadn’t been, in the few short months of her marriage, a chance to meet them. Ian had never talked about them. Sibyl was the only one she had known. Tilly waited, until she saw Howard glance at his watch; then she went up to Osborne.

“Carola . . . ,” she said. “Mrs. Dexter . . . Do you think I’d better go upstairs and see if she’s ready?”

“She’s not coming with us,” said Osborne. “She’s too high-strung. That’s all right with Howard.”

The whole thing was much less of an ordeal than Tilly had expected. They all went, again in a cortege of cars, to the funeral parlor, where there were many other people waiting for them; they all went to look at Sibyl, and, in a frilled white negligee, she looked calm, even majestic, handsomer than ever Tilly had seen her in life.

“Beautiful,” said Cantrell, beside her. “At peace now—after all the storms of life.”

His eyes were misty with tears; many in the assemblage were crying; one or two sobbed loudly. But Tilly had no tears; she felt nothing but an affectionate regret. Poor Sibyl! she thought. I’m sorry.

But her thoughts were all fixed upon Robert now. She listened with respectful attention while the clergyman read the service; she listened to his eulogy of Sibyl. A noble and generous woman . . . , he said. Our hearts go out in sympathy to her husband, and her son. . . .

She glanced at Taylor and she found him looking at her, his eyes narrowed, and a faint smile on his face so malicious that it startled her. Never mind! she told herself. It’s over now. I’ll get Robert, and we’ll go away.

When the service was over, there was another of those mass movements, like a swarm, a crowd of people moving along together in silence. Howard took her arm and stopped in the wide tiled hall.

“I’m not even able to go to the cemetery,” he said. “Levy insisted upon my taking this train. But thank God, Sibyl had relations and old friends in Boston who will go. Who will take my wreath . . . ?”

Carola was waiting for them at the station, pale, but very chic and charming in her black linen suit. She sat next to Tilly in the parlor-car; from time to time she cried a little; from time to time she talked to Tilly, in a friendly, almost intimate way. Has she forgotten? Tilly thought. Forgotten that last night she accused me of murdering Sibyl?

Let it go. I’ll see Robert in a few hours, she thought, and we’ll get away. It’s over. If Lieutenant Levy has found out that I gave Sibyl the capsule, I’ll admit it. It can’t make any difference. He can find out for himself that I couldn’t possibly have got that poison—cyanide potassium—something like that. He couldn’t dream up any motive for me. No. It’s over. I don’t care how poor we are. I’ll take Robert away—somewhere. Maybe I could be a housekeeper—or a cook—and keep him with me. No. It’s over.

They all got out at Grand Central; they all went in a swarm after Howard to the local train; they all got out at the station, where a line of cars waited for them.

“Tilly,” Howard said, “you’ll come with Taylor, and Carola, and myself. This way.”

“Just a moment, please,” said Lieutenant Levy.

He wore a uniform now, dark-gray, with a broad black belt.

“I’d like to see Mrs. MacDonald in my office first,” he said.

“Look here!” Howard began.

“I’ll see you presently, Mr. Fleming. At your house. This way, Mrs. MacDonald.”

She went with him, to a coupé driven by a policeman in uniform; she got in beside Levy.

“What is it *now*?” she asked.

“I’ll have to—get some information from you, Mrs. MacDonald,” he said. “We’ll wait until we get to my office.”

I’m riding in a police car, thought Tilly, dazed. What does it mean?

“Are you—is it going to be long, Lieutenant?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Mrs. MacDonald.”

“Then couldn’t we stop at the Inn, and get my little boy?”

“Not just now, Mrs. MacDonald.”

“But—why are you taking me away like this? Aren’t you supposed to tell me? Or—or have a warrant, or something?”

“You’re not under arrest, Mrs. MacDonald. There are some questions I want answered, that’s all.”

“But why just me? I do want to get my little boy. Can’t you please—?”

The car stopped then, before a big, old-fashioned wooden house on a side street in the town. It had a veranda, a neat lawn in front; it could have been anyone’s home. Except that at the entrance to the steps there were two green lights, clear in the dusk, illuminating a sign over the doorway. Horton County Police Station.

“I don’t want to go—in here!” she said.

“I’m sorry,” said Levy.

He helped her out of the car, and kept her arm in a firm hold. They mounted the steps to the veranda, and a policeman in uniform opened the door. They entered a bleak, bare room, where a burly, red-faced policeman sat at a desk, speaking on the telephone; on a bench against the wall sat two policemen, who rose as Levy entered. They passed through this room, down a narrow hall, and he opened the door of another room, closing it as she entered.

The first thing she noticed was a sickly stench of corruption, overlaid with the smell of some drug or antiseptic. And on the desk, on thickly-folded paper, lay the dead bird and the dead chipmunk, decomposed into wretched little heaps.

“I found these yesterday on the shelf of the closet in your room, Mrs. MacDonald,” he said. “The Medical Officer is making further tests, but he says he is quite sure they were killed by potassium cyanide. Can you explain their presence in your room, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“No,” Tilly said.

Because if I tell him the truth, he’ll get Robert into it. Without any warning. Without me. I was going to tell him, but I wanted to talk to Robert first. Because Robert can’t just answer questions, from a stranger. He’s so little, he doesn’t really know the difference between the truth, and the things he makes up. He’d be worried and confused, and heaven knows what he’d say.

She remembered how he had pointed at Taylor, and said he was the bad big boy who had killed those little creatures. He believed it, too, but it wasn’t so. Taylor had been in the school camp with Mr. Abbott.

“Someone must have put them in my room, while I was away.”

“That’s not possible, Mrs. MacDonald. I had men stationed in the house. The only person who entered your room—besides myself—during your absence was Miss Duval.”

“Oh, not Pauline!”

“She was in your room. She packed a bag for your son. But one of my men was in the room with her all the time.”

“Someone put them there the day before, when I was downstairs, or out of the house.”

“You must have opened that closet several times during the day, Mrs. MacDonald. Do you wish to state that you never noticed that good-sized bundle on the shelf?”

She was silent for a time, sitting in a chair, facing Levy behind his desk. The smell of corruption seemed to grow heavier, smothering. The bird and the chipmunk were almost shapeless now, as if they were melting.

This is a serious, a horrible thing, she thought. And I’m making it worse, by lying. I’m making myself worse, by lying, and I’m making myself contemptible and shameful. How can I bring up Robert to be honorable and decent, if I’m a liar?

She looked up at Levy. It was a shock, to see his face so stern, but she was not to be deflected now.

“No . . . ,” she said. “I haven’t been telling you the truth.”

“I knew that,” he said.

CHAPTER NINE

“I did give Mrs. Fleming a capsule,” she said. “She asked me to bring it, and I did.”

“Approximately how many capsules were left in the bottle after you gave this one to Mrs. Fleming?”

“It was the only one left.”

“And you replaced this empty bottle in the cabinet?”

“I don’t remember. Maybe I just took the capsule and brought it to her. I don’t remember.”

“What was the label on the bottle?”

“I didn’t look. Sibyl—Mrs. Fleming—told me there was only one left.”

“If you didn’t look at the label, how did you know this capsule was what Mrs. Fleming wanted?”

“Because it looked just like the others.”

“You’d given her other capsules?”

“Yes, and I’d seen her get the bottle and take them herself.”

“What was your reason for not telling me this when I first asked you, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“I thought maybe I’d be taken away, and questioned, and I didn’t want to leave my little boy.”

“How long did you remain in the room, after you had given Mrs. Fleming the capsule?”

“Only a little while. I just pulled down the venetian blinds.”

“Five minutes?”

“I don’t know. One of the blinds stuck a little. It could have been five minutes, but certainly not more.”

“Did you look at Mrs. Fleming, before you left the room?”

“Well, yes. Yes, I did.”

“Did you notice anything unusual about her appearance?”

“Well, I just thought she’d gone to sleep very quickly.”

“If you were in the room for five minutes, or less, Mrs. Fleming was undoubtedly dead when you left. You had no suspicion of that?”

“No, I didn’t! I didn’t!”

“Why did you return to the room shortly afterward?”

“But I told you. Sibyl had gone to sleep—I mean that! I thought—so very quickly, it—worried me a little.”

“And when you saw her this second time?”

“I thought she was still asleep.”

“Did you put the flask of whiskey on the table beside Mrs. Fleming’s bed?”

“No. I don’t remember its being there when I first left her.”

“And when you returned?”

“I didn’t notice any flask there.”

“And when Mrs. Fleming was late in coming down to dinner, were you alarmed?”

“No, I wasn’t. It had happened before.”

“I see!” he said, and was silent for a moment. “And these?” he said, with a loose-wristed, back-hand gesture toward the dead creatures on the desk. “How did they get into your closet, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“I put them there. The day before yesterday, I went out into the grounds, to bring my little boy in for his supper. He was playing there, sitting under a tree. And he showed me these two dead things. He told me a ‘big bad boy’ had come, and threatened him, and killed the poor little creatures.”

“Why did you bring them into the house, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“I did that early yesterday morning. Because I wanted to show them to you. Because something very horrible happened that night.”

“What happened, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“The screen was out of our bedroom window, and there were bats flying around in the room. And—there was a snake in my little boy’s bed.”

“What did you do then, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“Mr. Osborne was in the hall, and he came in and killed the snake.”

“I see!” said Levy.

It was clear now to Tilly that he did not believe her, perhaps not a word that she had said. It’s too late, she thought. If I’d told him everything, from the beginning—

“We’ll have to ask your child if he can identify these animals,” said Levy.

“Oh, no! Oh, please, *please* don’t drag Robert into this! I beg you!”

“He’s not going to be frightened or hurt in any way. What’s more, nothing he says will be taken too seriously. But I want his story, for what it’s worth.”

“No, please! He’ll only tell you what he told me. This big boy killed the little creatures with a syringe, Robert said, but

it might have been a needle, a hypodermic needle. . . . He's so young—he wouldn't know. . . .”

“They weren't killed by injections, Mrs. MacDonald. They swallowed potassium cyanide—no doubt by force. It's a thing that even a very young child could do.”

“*Oh, God!*” cried Tilly. For a moment there was a whirling blackness; she could not see, could not hear.

“Mrs. MacDonald! Drink this!”

Levy was holding a small glass before her.

“What—what is it?” she asked.

“It's Scotch.”

“No. No, thank you. No . . . I never—no, thank you.”

“Mrs. MacDonald, we've sent for your son—”

“Oh, no! Oh, please don't!”

He took her arm and pulled her up; he led her to a divan covered with dark leather. “Lie down!” he said, and put a big, hard leather cushion under her head. “Mrs. MacDonald,” he said, standing beside her, “it's necessary to go through with this. It's—unfortunate, if anyone has to be hurt. But you must bear in mind that Mrs. Fleming was murdered.”

“No—,” Tilly said. “No. You can't—be sure.”

“We’re very sure, Mrs. MacDonald.”

He crossed the room, with his limber stride, and opened the door.

“Miss Duval,” he said, and Pauline entered.

“Madame!” she cried. “You are ill? Madame—so pale—”

“All right,” said Levy. “We’ll look after Mrs. MacDonald. Sit down, Miss Duval.”

But Pauline remained at Tilly’s side; she stroked her forehead, she pushed her hair back from her temple.

“Miss Duval,” said Levy. “*Sit down.*”

She could not mistake that tone, and she moved away, to take the chair before the desk which Levy had indicated. Levy had already seated himself.

“Miss Duval. On the day of Mrs. Fleming’s death, did you see any yellow capsules in her bathroom cabinet?”

“Monsieur,” said Pauline, earnestly, “I cannot say. The maid—that Jenny—she was the one who attended to the bathroom. Me, I open the little cabinet only if there is something to put away. Perhaps Mr. Fleming’s razor, perhaps tooth-paste, anything I find not in order. About that day I could not tell you. I was in a hurry; I did not look. But on other days . . .”

“Go on,” said Levy.

“Other days, many, many other days, I see these capsules. The label says Doctor Crowdie and Beale’s Pharmacy. It says cannot be renewed or a copy given.”

“Have you seen any of the capsules recently?”

“Monsieur, it is so difficult to say, when you are accustomed to see something. I don’t know what day, but I know it was a long time.”

“A week?”

“Oh, I think not a week. Maybe three days—four days. You understand, monsieur, I *cannot* say. Because one day is not so different from another.”

“I understand. Miss Duval, are you prepared to sign a statement that you have several times within the past three months seen these yellow capsules in the bathroom cabinet?”

“Yes!”

“Within the last week?”

She bit her lip, and frowned, and was silent for a moment.

“Yes, monsieur,” she said. “It must be so. Because almost every day, when I go up before dinner to help madame dress, there is something I put away in the cabinet. And always I look at that bottle. Because I think it is very bad, those pills. Sometimes it is full, sometimes half-full. But never do I see it empty.”

“And you can’t suggest anyone who might have removed the bottle, after Mrs. Fleming—”

“No, monsieur. But I have thought—”

“What have you thought?”

“Monsieur, I have seen nothing, heard nothing. It is only a thought.”

“I’d like to hear it, Miss Duval.”

“Don’t you think, monsieur, that perhaps Doctor Crowdie himself may drop the bottle into his pocket? If he did not wish anyone to know that he is giving these bad pills?”

“That’s not at all likely, Miss Duval,” said Levy. “Crowdie’s a reputable doctor; he wouldn’t prescribe anything he thought would discredit him. In the second place, we’ve questioned Beale and everyone employed by him for the last year. He’s willing to take an oath that no one in this house has brought him a prescription for any sort of narcotic for three months, and that his stock hadn’t been tampered with. They’re kept locked. Miss Duval, did anyone in the house go frequently to Beale’s, or the other local drugstores?”

“Me, I have been in there. As to the others, how shall I know, monsieur, where they went when they left the house?”

“No. Of course not.”

He had taken up the letter-weight again, and was looking at it with deep attention.

“Miss Duval,” he said, “I understand that every week Jensen went in to New York, and brought back a supply of drugs for anyone here who’d asked him—”

“Who tells you this?” Pauline cried, her eyes flashing, her voice louder. “He does not bring ‘drugs.’ He is very kind, very obliging. He’s very good. Madame permitted him to visit his aged father every week, and near the subway station is a large shop, where he would buy for us tooth-powder, a lotion, a cold cream, aspirin, things like that, *very* much cheaper than we can buy here. But not drugs. He is a very good young man. He is always kind to my little Coco, and Coco she is devoted to him. And, monsieur, that is always a sign. The dogs know who is good.”

“Well . . . ,” said Levy, with a shadow of a smile. “I’ve met some pretty bad characters whose dogs were fond of them.”

“Jensen is very *good*. He is honest, he is kind—”

“I see! Now, one more question, Miss Duval. Have you ever known of anyone, either living in this house, or coming here as a visitor, who has ever attempted to frighten or to hurt Mrs. MacDonald’s child?”

“The little Robert?” Pauline asked, startled.

“No!” said Tilly.

“Just a moment, Mrs. MacDonald. Now, if you’ll answer my question, Miss Duval—”

“But nobody!” Pauline said. “Everybody here—” She paused for a moment. “If anyone has done such a thing, it is that Jenny,” she said. “I *know* it is she has told you that poor Jensen brings us ‘drugs.’ One day she steps on the foot of my little dog, and she cries, and what does Jenny do? Laugh, laugh, laugh! She is cruel! She is bad—”

“I see!” said Levy. “Have you ever heard her threaten the child? Ever seen her hurt or frighten him?”

“I have seen this, no. But I tell you she is capable of—”

“Thank you, Miss Duval.”

There was a knock on the door, and a policeman entered and went up to the desk and spoke to Levy, too low for Tilly to hear.

“All right. Bring him in,” said Levy. “That’s all for the present, Miss Duval. Thanks.”

She moved toward the door, with obvious reluctance, and before she reached it, Robert entered, alone.

“Ah, *mon petit!*” cried Pauline. “You are well?”

She put her hand on his round little head, but he drew away from her. He glanced at his mother, but he did not smile or speak. The policeman followed Pauline into the hall, closing the door after them, and Robert stood, very straight, in the middle of the long room.

“Sit down,” said Levy, pointing at a chair before the desk near Tilly’s. But Robert clasped his hands behind his back and stood where he was.

“I’d like very much to hear about this boy who came the other day,” said Levy.

“He came,” said Robert, briefly.

“What did he do when he came?”

“He killed lots and lots—of lemmings.”

“Lemons?” Levy asked.

“*Lemmings*,” Robert repeated, loudly and angrily.

“How did he kill them?”

“With a little tiny, tiny, *tiny* gun.”

“Did you know this boy?”

“No. But he was *bad*.”

Levy rose and crossed the room, and opened the door.

“Price!” he said, and Taylor entered.

“Yes!” said Robert, and as Taylor advanced, Robert moved, a little nearer to Tilly; he gave her a quick sidelong glance, unsmiling, unfriendly. But he wants to be sure I’m here, she thought. Oh, *why* don’t they let him alone? What’s the use in asking him questions? He’s so little . . . He

doesn't remember. He imagines things, makes them up, and then he believes them. He's afraid of Taylor. He's a little afraid of Lieutenant Levy, too, sitting there at the desk, in uniform, asking him questions. Oh, poor little thing! He doesn't know what it's all about.

"Yeah . . . ," Taylor said, and sat down on the arm of a chair. "The kid told me that, too. He told me he saw me, the morning of the day my mother died, and I was killing lemmings." He smiled, sneeringly. "Shooting them. I told him there weren't any lemmings in this part of the world. And I told him I wasn't here, anyhow. I was away, in camp. Mr. Abbott can tell you that."

"Now, Robert," said Levy, and he spoke gently to the child. "When you saw this boy, how was he dressed?"

Robert looked around the room, and Tilly could see that he was trying, not to remember, but to think of something, anything, that he would find dramatic.

"Like that!" he said, pointing to a framed photograph on a table, of a Scot in a kilt.

"Did you see any of these dead—animals?"

"Yes, I did! I did see them!"

"Come up to the desk, now," said Levy, "and tell me if you think these are the dead animals you saw."

"Oh, no!" cried Tilly. "Please no!"

“I’m sorry,” said Levy. “But it’s necessary.”

She had not noticed that the dead creatures were covered with a newspaper now. They must, she thought, have been so covered when Pauline came in, or Pauline would have made some remark. No, Pauline would have screamed.

“*Please* don’t!” she entreated, remembering the condition of the creatures.

But Robert wanted to see them, and as he approached the desk, Levy lifted the newspaper, and a sickly smell arose. Robert stood looking at them, his lips parted, his eyes wide.

“No!” he cried, almost in a scream. “No, no! They’re not! They’re not!”

He backed away, and ran to Tilly; he put his arms round her neck, and with his little hard head against her shoulder, he began to cry. He very seldom cried, and he had never cried like this before, frantically, with wrenching sobs.

“It’s *not*—my lemming . . . ! Take it *away*!”

Levy wrapped the dead creatures in the newspaper and put them on the floor under the desk.

“They’re gone now, Robert,” he said. “Nothing to cry about. Can’t you quiet him, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“No,” said Tilly, holding him close to her.

Levy rose and went over to him; he patted Robert on the shoulder.

“Come now! Come!” he said. “You’re not a baby. You’re a big boy. You can help your mother a great deal, if you’ll just answer a few questions. You want to help her, don’t you?”

“No!” Robert cried. “Go away!”

“Just tell me what you saw in your room the other night. Was there a snake there?”

“*No!* Mommy! Mommy! Make him—go away!”

“What’s the use?” asked Taylor. “The kid’s an awful liar. He’s been brought up on fairy tales.”

“Shut up!” said Tilly, perhaps for the first time in her life.

“He saw lemmings, that weren’t there. And he saw me, when I wasn’t there. He could easily see a snake in his room that wasn’t there.”

“Mr. Osborne saw—that,” said Tilly.

“Oh, Sam Osborne would see anything you told him to see,” said Taylor.

“Shut up!” said Tilly, again.

“Keep out of this, Taylor,” said Levy. “When I want to hear from you, I’ll tell you.”

Taylor shrugged his shoulders and leaned his head back against the wall. But there was no need for him to say any more. The harm was done. Tilly could see how fantastic her story must seem to Levy, and now Sam Osborne's confirmation would be suspect.

“I won't keep you any longer now, Mrs. MacDonald,” said Levy, and she rose and picked up the wildly sobbing child.

Now I'm completely discredited, she told herself. I don't know what will happen now.

CHAPTER TEN

They went out, hand in hand, into the corridor brightly lit by unshaded electric bulbs. Robert held her hand tight; his tears had stopped, but from time to time he gave a sob that was like a gasp.

He's had too much to stand, Tilly thought. Ever since that day—it seems so long ago—the day the boy came while he was making his vallons. The day Sibyl died . . . He says Taylor is the boy, but it can't be that way, if Taylor was in the camp, with Mr. Abbott. Then who was it?

A maniac. Some unknown, horrible, dangerous creature who had killed Sibyl, had killed the bird and the chipmunk, who had put the snake in Robert's bed. Someone unknown . . .

They went into the room where the policeman sat at the desk, and another policeman sat on the bench against the wall. Here, too, it was brightly, even glaringly lit, and as they went out of the building, the darkness surprised Tilly; the green lights on either side of the entrance shone out on an empty street, lined with trees, the branches tossing wildly in the wind.

“Mommy, where are we going?” Robert asked.

“We're going home, darling.”

“Back to Cousin Sibyl’s house?”

“Yes. We’ll walk a little way and see if we can find a taxi.”

“No! I don’t *want* to go back there!”

“It’s only for a little while, dear.”

“No! No, Mommy, I *won’t* go back in that room!”

“I’ll stay with you, Robert. I won’t leave you alone.”

“No!” he cried, clutching her skirt, trying to hold her back.

“No, Mommy! Go in another house!”

It was beginning to rain, a faint drizzle that pattered on the leaves, and, standing there with her child, Tilly felt that they were utterly forlorn and lonely, facing a dark and rainy world. *I don’t want to go back to Sibyl’s house, any more than Robert does, she thought. But we have to.*

A taxi stopped before the police station, and a man got out, slamming the door behind him. Even in the dark, Tilly recognized that angular figure, that easy stride. But Robert was indifferent.

“Mommy!” he said, still dragging at her skirt. “Mommy! What did that policeman have in there, all wrapped up in a newspaper?”

“A little bird and a chipmunk, dear. The same ones you saw, beside the tree . . .”

“No. You’re a liar!”

“That’s not a nice thing to say, Robert. You wouldn’t like me to say it to you.”

“They smelled,” he said, and began to cry again. “And they looked . . . Mommy! Why did they look that funny way?”

Osborne had come up the steps, and stood beside her. But Robert must be answered.

“Because they were dead, darling.”

“Why does it make ’em look so funny—to be dead?”

It was Tilly’s conviction that questions like these from a child must be answered as clearly and honestly as possible. She came of an outspoken, even blunt family; she tried never to be evasive with her child. But this was hard; hard to talk of death to this little creature at the beginning of life.

“You see,” she said, “they were getting ready to go down into the earth. And down there, they’d help the trees and the grass and the flowers to grow.”

He was silent for a moment.

“Did Cousin Sibyl look funny like that?” he asked.

“No. She looked very nice, Robert. Very handsome and—happy.”

“Did she like to be all dead?”

“Yes,” said Tilly. She felt tired to the point of exhaustion, yet it seemed to her necessary to go on, to explain, if she could, the meaning of this new and overwhelming reality her child had been forced to meet. “You see,” she said, “the things we love in Cousin Sibyl—in everybody—don’t get dead. The kind, good things. They go on.”

“I don’t love Cousin Sibyl,” said Robert. “I think she’s an old bad bastard.”

“Robert!”

“She’s an old bad *bastard*,” said Robert.

“That’s a very naughty thing to say,” Tilly told him, and that was just what he wanted. He repeated his phrase; he wanted to be naughty, to shock her, to defy her and all the new, strange, frightening world that was closing in on him.

“It’s silly,” said Osborne.

At the sound of his voice, the child gave a start; his hand grasped Tilly’s convulsively.

“Sam . . . ?” he said. “How did you get here?”

“I’m always here, when needed,” Osborne answered, in a tone Tilly found irritatingly smug and boastful. “You’re hungry, aren’t you, Robert?”

“No!” said Robert.

“We’re all hungry,” said Osborne. “We’ll get in that taxi, and we’ll go to the Inn, and eat a good dinner.”

“Thanks,” said Tilly, “but I think we’d better go home.”

“And where’s ‘home’?” Osborne asked.

“Oh, don’t *bother* me,” she cried.

“I’m not going to,” he said. “Come on!”

He picked up the child, and Tilly followed him down the steps; the driver opened the door and she got into the cab.

“Cigarette?” Osborne asked.

“Thanks. I don’t smoke.”

“Well, if you’ll permit me . . . ,” he said, and lit a cigarette for himself; in the little flare of the match his bony, dark face had a smile like a cat’s. Or a devil’s, Tilly thought.

“Carola’s been talking,” he went on. “She’s been telling all and sundry—including Levy—that Sibyl treated you shamefully, and you had to stand it, because you were penniless.”

“I’m *not*.”

“I’m telling you what Carola’s saying. She says nobody could blame you for wanting Sibyl dead. She says you knew you were going to inherit a handsome sum of money from her—”

“I don’t know anything of the sort!”

“Well, I hope to God you don’t,” said Osborne. “Motive. Opportunity. Obstructing the police in the performance of their duty. Why the hell did you leave those things in your room?”

“I forgot them, that’s why. I took them in there, because I wanted to show them to Lieutenant Levy. I thought it might be an important—clue, if they’d been poisoned, too.”

“They are, all right.” The cigarette glowed red as he drew on it. “The lawyer’s coming tomorrow morning to read the will, and then we’ll see.”

“See what?” Tilly demanded, coldly.

“Motive.”

“It’s preposterous!” Tilly cried. “Nobody could think I’d do a thing like that.”

“But why not you?”

“I’m not—well, I’m not—like that.”

“Maternal love . . . ,” said Osborne, thoughtfully. “One of the fiercest passions. You wanted money for your child, and she wouldn’t help you out with his education. She treated you very badly, and you hated her—”

“That’s a lie!”

“That’s a big liar,” said Robert, with satisfaction.

“How can you say things like that?” Tilly cried. “How can you think things like that about me?”

“I’m not giving you my personal opinion,” said Osborne. “What I think doesn’t matter. I’m simply showing you what could look like a very plausible theory.”

“And Howard? Am I supposed to have poisoned him, too?”

“Oh, that is a side issue.”

“I can see that. Nobody seems to care about that. And why?”

“Howard looks like an after-thought. And he’s still alive.”

“And where was I supposed to get these deadly poisons?”

Osborne threw his cigarette out of the cab window, and turning her head, Tilly saw the ghostly outline of the spiked fence, like silver in the rainy night. They were driving by Sibyl’s place now.

“They’re holding Jensen,” he said.

“You mean—he’s been arrested?”

“For further questioning. Y’ see, both Pauline and Jenny are ready to swear that they’ve seen these yellow capsules in Sibyl’s bathroom cabinet right along, for weeks and weeks. Well, Doctor Crowdie says he hasn’t given her a prescription for nembutol since May, and it’s not renewable. The local

druggist is a cautious old guy. The police are satisfied that he didn't sell her any on the side. So Levy did some ferreting. Servants, guests, nobody knew anything about those capsules. Then it came to light that Jensen had opened a savings bank account in New York early in June—”

“How did it ‘come to light’?”

“The cook—what’s her name—”

“Gloria.”

“Gloria,” he repeated. “Gloria says she found a bankbook on the kitchen floor. Jensen had left his jacket hanging there, and she thought the book must have fallen out of his pocket. Anyhow, she looked in, just to be sure, and it was for an account in the name of Richard Peters. A deposit every week, always in cash; a balance of three hundred and twenty dollars since the early part of June. She says she put the book into a pocket of Jensen’s coat, and there was never a word out of him about it.”

“She was probably snooping in his pockets.”

“Very likely. Anyhow, she said she never asked him any questions about it, because she was afraid to.”

“Why?”

“Well, in the first place, he was one of them foreigners, and you could never tell what they’d be up to, with the plots and plans they’ve got, to be blowing up the country, God help us.

And then he'd a way of looking at you, you'd think he was laughing to himself at you."

"How do *you* know all these things?"

"I've been a-ferreting myself. I'm the one who got that story out of Gloria."

The taxi stopped before the Inn; Osborne paid the driver, and got out, and Tilly followed him, holding Robert's hand. Mrs. Raeburn, the landlady, opened the door for them.

"I'm real pleased to see you," she said. "It's late, but I kept everything nice and hot. And I've got something special for the little boy."

"What?" Robert asked.

"You eat your meat and vegetables, and you'll see," said Mrs. Raeburn.

She led them to the dining room where there was a small table laid for three.

"Sit right down and make yourselves at home," she said.

"And if you hear any noises, don't be bothered. There's some of those summer visitors in the bar. . . . I declare to goodness, sometimes I think to myself I'd rather do without this money than put up with 'em, and the noise and trouble they make.

But my nephew, he tends the bar and he looks after them. He won't stand any nonsense from them. You've had enough, he'll say, if it's a millionaire he's speaking to. You'll get no more drinks here."

She went off to the kitchen then, and Robert got up on the chair where a telephone book had been laid for him to sit on.

“You must have told Mrs. Raeburn we were coming,” Tilly said.

“I did,” said Osborne.

A sudden irritation rose in Tilly; she wanted to fly at him, to accuse him of being unbearably sure of himself, pleased with himself. But she repressed this, and was silent until her dinner was set before her, a plate of roast duckling and green peas and sweet potatoes; she began to eat with an unexpected appetite, and the irritation vanished.

“What did Jensen say about the bank account?” she asked.

“Oh, he admitted that he’d opened it, and had made the deposits. Said he had done it for someone else. They’re still trying to make him tell who the ‘someone else’ is, but I don’t think they’ll succeed. There’s no charge against him, no tie-up with the murder, or the pills. He’s very amiable and reasonable, but he refuses to give any information about ‘Richard Peters,’ or how he got all that cash. Of course, it smells like blackmail but—”

Mrs. Raeburn came in from the kitchen, with lemon pie and coffee for Tilly and Osborne, and for Robert a glass of milk and three little gingerbread men, with eyes made of raisins.

“Are they to eat?” he asked.

“Yes, indeedy!” said Mrs. Raeburn. “I made them just special for you. Here! Take a bite!”

“And drink your milk with it, dear,” said Tilly.

Osborne lit a cigarette, ignoring the pie and the coffee.

“I’m telling you all I know about the case,” he said.

“Well, thank you . . . ,” Tilly said, hesitant, a little doubtful.

“And there’s a purpose in it,” said Osborne.

“What purpose?”

“If you know anything, if you have any information, even any suspicion, tell Levy. And for God’s sake, don’t wait.”

“I have told him everything. I told him I brought Sibyl a capsule.”

“You told him too late. Pauline told him that before they came out here, while they were in New York, Sibyl always lay down on the bed for that pre-dinner nap, and told her to bring a capsule. All right. That was Sibyl’s habit, Pauline wasn’t with Sibyl that afternoon, and you were. What’s more, it’s pretty well established that Sibyl was dead when you left her room.”

“I didn’t know! How could I know?”

“You didn’t look at her? Didn’t see anything unusual about her?”

Tilly was silent for a long moment.

“I didn’t know—Sibyl was dead,” she said.

She took a sip of coffee, and then she raised her eyes to Osborne’s face.

“I did think she looked—queer,” she said. “But I didn’t know—I *couldn’t* know it was—anything like that.”

Or did I really know—and not *want* to know? Did I—just leave her there, and hurry off to Robert?

“Could she have been saved, if—the doctor had come sooner?” she asked.

“No. With a dose like that, it’s a matter of seconds. Don’t get your New England conscience working on that. Nothing could have saved her. The thing—”

Robert jumped down from his chair with a thud, and went to Tilly’s side.

“I want to go to bed,” he said. “I want to go upstairs. *Now!*”

“Why, I declare!” said Mrs. Raeburn, from the doorway.

“You haven’t eaten up even one of your little men! Finish him up, and drink your milk, that’s a good boy.”

The gingerbread head with its big black raisin eyes lay on his plate; Mrs. Raeburn picked it up and held it out to him.

“Eat it up, now,” she said, coaxingly.

“No!” cried Robert, and his voice rose, almost to a scream.

“*No!* Take it away!”

Osborne took the cookie from Mrs. Raeburn’s hand; he pulled out the raisin eyes.

“It’s nothing but a piece of cookie,” he said, casually. “Mind if I try a bite?”

Robert did not answer, but Osborne took a bite, and laid the fragment on the child’s plate. And it was not a little dark-eyed head any more. Robert moved nearer to look at it.

“Let’s go,” said Osborne to Tilly. “Taxi there, Mrs. Raeburn?”

“It just came,” she said, a little stiffly. “I’ve made these cookies for plenty of other children, and I never yet saw one of ’em take on like that.”

“He’s over-tired,” Tilly explained. “Otherwise, he’d have been delighted with them. It was very kind of you to make them, Mrs. Raeburn.”

“Well . . . ,” said Mrs. Raeburn, mollified. “I did hear that they’d taken the poor little object down to the police station, whatever for I can’t imagine. But I heard Mr. Cantrell telling that Mrs. Dexter about it, in the bar. It’s a shame, Mr. Cantrell said. Oh, I don’t know, says Mrs. Dexter. Children see a lot more than people imagine.”

“So they do,” Osborne agreed. “Come on, Robert.”

“Come where?”

“In the taxi,” Osborne answered, and picked him up, over his shoulder.

“I’ll take him now,” said Tilly, when they were in the cab.

“Better let him alone. He’s half-asleep already.”

It was a short drive, too short; the taxi went on through the steady rain, at a moderate speed, but inexorably. Back to that house.

“Then you think that I might—get into trouble?” Tilly asked.

“You’re in trouble right now,” said Osborne. “I don’t mean that you’re likely to go to the electric chair, or even to jail. But you’ve given the impression that you know more than you’ve told. That you’re holding out on Levy. And if you’re down in Sibyl’s will for something handsome . . .”

“Then what?”

“Then there will be a lot of questions. A lot of worry and bother. And every answer you give will be suspect, because you started off with a lie.”

“You’re odious when you talk like that!” said Tilly.

“So be it,” said Osborne, with a sigh.

The taxi turned into the drive, and the house loomed before them, dark and strange.

“But why aren’t there any lights?” cried Tilly. “It’s not late. It can’t be much after nine.”

“Howard’s idea,” Osborne answered. “He ordered all the shades pulled down yesterday, after we left for Boston. I don’t know how long etiquette requires them to stay down, but *he’ll* know. Anyhow, Pauline and Gloria and Jenny all approve of it, highly.”

The taxi stopped, and as Osborne leaned forward to pay the fare, a new thought came to Tilly.

“You’ve been very nice,” she said. “I’m afraid it’s been a great expense to you, these taxis and the dinner. . . . I—thanks.”

“*De nada*,” said Osborne.

He got out, still carrying Robert, sound asleep now; he rang the bell and when Jenny opened the door, he went past her and started up the stairs.

“Tilly . . . ,” said Howard’s voice, very low. He came out of the drawing-room and came to her side. “Chet Price is here. The lawyer. We’ll have to have the reading rather earlier than I wanted tomorrow morning, but Chet has to get back to town. Nine-thirty. Please don’t be late.”

“I’m never late,” she said, in a tone so curt that Howard frowned in surprise.

She went up the stairs, hot with resentment; the door of her room was open, and Robert lay on his bed, sound asleep,

while Osborne was taking off his shoes.

“I’ll finish, thanks,” said Tilly, in the same curt tone. “Good-night.”

She locked the door directly he had gone, and set to work on Robert. He was limp as a rag-doll, but heavy and hot; it was a struggle to get his jersey off over his head, to get his arms into his pajama sleeves. She tucked the sheet tightly over him, and went into the bathroom for a shower.

She got into her own bed, doubling the pillow under her head; she left the lamp burning. I’m not going to sleep yet, she thought. I’ve got to think things out. If there’s anything I didn’t tell Lieutenant Levy . . . ? Anything I noticed . . . ?

But the *idea* of Howard saying “Please don’t be late”! I’m *never* late. For years and years, on my school reports—it was Tardy: no times. I’m never late. It was very provoking of Howard. . . . Entirely uncalled for. . . .

* * * * *

Robert was shaking her shoulder.

“Mommy! Wake up, Mommy! Someone’s knocking on the door!”

She opened her eyes and sat up straight.

“Madame! Is me, Pauline. It is after nine, madame, and I bring you some coffee.”

She got up to unlock the door, stumbling a little from drowsiness.

“*After nine . . . ?*” she asked.

“A little moment only, madame. Ten minutes, perhaps fifteen. I bring you some good hot coffee.”

“Oh, Pauline, thank you! But I haven’t time. Pauline, will you please dress Robert, and give him something to eat?”

She began to dress herself in a frantic haste. A black skirt, and a white blouse. . . . I’ll be late. . . . Oh, never mind my hair! I’ll be late. . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

She was late. The people assembled in the library were obviously waiting for her: Howard, Taylor, and Carola, two unknown women in black. Behind the desk where Levy had sat there was now a thin-necked, narrow-shouldered man with pince-nez on his long nose, and beneath them a tiny mouth pursed up in a querulous pout.

“Is everyone present now?” he asked. “Miss Duval?”

“She’ll be here in a moment,” said Howard, taking Tilly’s arm and leading her to a chair.

“Mr. Osborne?”

“*Osborne?*” Howard repeated, startled.

“Samuel Osborne,” repeated the man behind the desk, irritably. “I was under the impression, Howard, that I gave you a list last night.”

“You did, Chet,” said Howard. “But I’m afraid I didn’t read it very carefully. I thought I knew pretty well who was wanted. I’ll get Osborne at once.”

As Howard went out of the room, Pauline came hurrying in; she stopped by Tilly and bent over to whisper.

“The little one now eats his breakfast with Gloria, madame.”

Howard came back, with Osborne; they all sat down, they all looked at Mr. Price behind the desk.

Mr. Price picked up a long document and looked at it with a frown. Then he raised his brows, and that started the pince-nez sliding down his long nose, he pushed them back, and cleared his throat with a sound like a growl.

“Yes,” he said, and growled again. “I, Sibyl Fleming, being in my right mind . . . do declare this to be my last will and testament. . . . My beloved son, Taylor—, the sum of one hundred thousand dollars, to be held in trust for him until he shall have reached the age of twenty-one years”

But what a lot! Tilly. I didn’t imagine she had so much.

““My cousin Josephine Evans, of Boston, the sum of five thousand dollars, also my Georgian tea-set and tray . . . My cousins Marian and Genevieve Stockley, of Boston, jointly the sum of five thousand dollars . . . To Robert MacDonald, son of my cousin Ian MacDonald and Mathilda MacDonald, of New York City, the sum of five thousand dollars, to be held in trust until he shall have reached the age of twenty-one years””

Sixteen years! Tilly thought. He needs it *now*. . . .

““To my cousin-in-law Mathilda MacDonald, of New York City, the sum of five hundred dollars, also my garnet earrings and necklace—””

Tilly's eyes filled with tears. Sibyl thought I'd like them, because they've been in Ian's family so long, she thought.

“To my friend Samuel Osborne, my library . . . To Pauline Duval, of New York City, in recognition of her loyal service, the entire contents of my wardrobe, including my mink coat and my platinum fox wrap . . . To my beloved friend Carola Dexter, my opal ring—”

“No!” cried Carola.

“Hush!” said Howard, sternly.

Mr. Price growled again, and went on reading.

“To my beloved husband, Howard Fleming, the entire residue of my estate including my house in Swallow Cliff and all the contents thereof, also my holdings, stocks, and debentures—”

On and on he went; Tilly sat watching him, but not listening any more, until he had finished.

“Sam,” said Howard, in a low, grave voice, “will you drive Mr. Price to the station? He's in something of a hurry.”

“Sure,” said Osborne. “And the two ladies—?”

“Well—er . . .” Howard said. “That is—unless they'd care to stay to lunch . . . ?”

There was a courteous murmur from one of the ladies in black.

“Oh, thank you, Howard, but I really think we’d better be getting home now. . . .”

“I see!” said Howard. “Then . . . if you’re ready . . .”

Mr. Price rose and moved toward the door, but Carola sprang to her feet and caught him by the sleeve.

“I want that taken *out* of the will!” she said. “I won’t *have* that opal ring! Please cross it out of the will before you go.”

Mr. Price looked down at her with a sort of shiver of disgust.

“That’s quite impossible, madam,” he said. “The will must be offered for probate—”

“But now—this moment—I own that ring, don’t I? Well, I *won’t* own it! It means the most horrible bad luck, and Sibyl *knew* it. She tried—”

“Carola!” said Howard. “Get hold of yourself!”

“No! Sibyl tried to give it to me, ages ago. But I wouldn’t take it. She inherited it from somebody, and she was terrified of it. She never wore it. She *knew*—”

“Madame . . . !” said Mr. Price, trying to draw away from her. But she still clutched his sleeve.

“It means a horrible death!” she went on. “Sibyl *told* me so. And now—it’s mine. I won’t—”

Howard took her wrist and detached her clutching fingers.

“Sit down!” he said, sternly, and pushed her down into an armchair. “Now, then, Osborne . . . ?”

With polite nudges he formed the two ladies and the lawyer into a small procession, which followed Osborne into the hall, and he brought up the rear. Pauline sat stiffly on the edge of the sofa; Carola had turned, her face buried in her folded arms against the high back of the chair; she was sobbing, forlornly. But Tilly watched her with no feeling of pity. Like a child, she thought. Or like a doll, with all that long blond hair. Utterly irresponsible and self-centered. And dangerous.

Pauline rose, with a loud sigh, and went over to Carola.

“Madame would like a cup of coffee?” she asked.

“No!”

“A cup of tea? That is good for the nerves.”

“*No!* Let me alone!”

Pauline shrugged her shoulders, and thrust out her underlip in a scornful smile, and turned to Tilly.

“Madame, if you will go into the dining room . . . ? Your breakfast is ready.”

“Where’s Robert, Pauline?”

“Robert? He is in the kitchen, Madame. Gloria is most good, today. She lets him fill the salt-shakers, and other things to

amuse him.”

When Tilly went into the dining room, no one was there. I’m glad, she thought. If I can just have a cup of coffee before I have to talk to anyone, or listen to anyone . . . But that’s contemptible, to depend upon coffee. Or *any* stimulant. Maybe I ought to take a glass of milk instead.

But when Jenny set a steaming cup of coffee before her, she began at once to sip it. Now that Lieutenant Levy knows I’m not inheriting a lot of money from Sibyl, she thought, perhaps he’ll—

Howard entered the room, and sat down at the head of the table.

“Thankful for a quiet moment,” he said, somberly. “This strain . . . I want to discuss things with you, Tilly. Tell you my little idea.”

“Yes, Howard,” she said, politely.

“Of course,” he went on, “it’s impossible for you to stay here any longer. We have to think of appearances, Tilly,” he said.

“Yes . . . of course,” Tilly said, only half listening.

“This is my idea, Tilly. You know the gardener’s cottage, at the end of the drive? It hasn’t been in use for some two or three years. We haven’t had a resident gardener. Only a man who comes in every day, and occasionally a helper.”

“I see,” said Tilly.

You have to be patient with Howard, she told herself. He can't help being so roundabout and tedious.

“My first thought was the Inn here,” he went on. “But Lieutenant Levy prefers you to stay here until he’s finished his—his investigation. And, at the rate he’s proceeding, it seems likely to take God knows how long. I can’t see that he’s accomplished anything whatever. Except to cause a completely unnecessary—” He paused for a word.

“Complication,” he said. “Embarrassment. These newspaper men . . . I’ve managed to keep them off the premises, but they’ve taken snaps. . . . It’s—”

He paused.

“I don’t like that fellow,” he said. “That Levy. Sibyl’s—Sibyl’s—” He could not get the word out. “What happened was an accident, pure and simple.”

Tilly glanced away from him. Sibyl took cyanide—by accident? And where did she get it? And what about *you*? *You* were poisoned, too. Unconscious. Was that an “accident,” too?

For the first time, she began to think and to wonder about Howard’s mishap. It had been, she thought, most strangely ignored. Yet the two poisonings *must* belong together, she thought. There couldn’t be *two* murderers here. They ought to look for someone with a motive for killing both Sibyl and Howard. And that couldn’t be me. Then who?

“This was my idea,” said Howard. “It’s obviously—I mean, you can’t—you wouldn’t wish to stay here. Gossip—and so on . . . The gardener’s cottage is in excellent condition. My idea is that you should move in there—live there, with Pauline to look after you. I’ve sent her down there now, with a man from the village to help her—shift furniture—put up curtains—so on and so forth. She’ll cook for you—do the marketing. I—naturally, I’ll defray all expenses.”

“Thank you, Howard,” said Tilly, absently.

What does “defray” really mean? she thought. “Fray” means to tear and frazzle things. Then how do you de-fray things?

“I think you’ll be comfortable there, Tilly. If there’s anything you want—?”

“Thank you, Howard,” she said, with more warmth. “You’re very kind.”

He pushed back his chair and rose.

“Not at all,” he said. “I’m only too glad to help, Tilly. And —” He paused again. “I feel it’s what Sibyl would want,” he said. “I’ll come back presently, and we’ll inspect the cottage.”

Tilly went on with her breakfast, glad to be alone. I want to think, she told herself. Only I seem very stupid today. . . . Why doesn’t anyone seem to take any interest in Howard’s being poisoned?

“Mrs. MacDonald?” said a voice, another portentous voice. It was young Abbott, the schoolmaster, standing in the doorway. “May I speak to you for a few moments, in confidence?”

“Why, of course!” said Tilly, suppressing a sigh.

He came into the long room, and stood close beside her chair.

“I’m in a dilemma,” he said. “It’s entirely my own fault. I don’t know now what steps I should take, and—You’re a New Englander, like myself, Mrs. MacDonald. You’re the only person here I can speak to. I—need advice.”

Well, don’t ask me, Tilly thought. I’m a fool, Sam Osborne will tell you so.

“I suppose you’ve heard about the Lambson School?” Abbott asked.

“Well, nothing except that Sibyl said it was very good.” And fabulously expensive, Sibyl had said.

“It’s unique,” said Abbott. “People come from all over to study Doctor Lambson’s method for dealing with problem children. He accepts them from the age of two up to twenty. Of course, he has different houses, different routines for the various age-groups, but the method is the same. A continuous psychoanalysis—without the patient’s knowledge—until total recall is achieved. The results are extraordinary. For instance, we had one boy who had been an arsonist for seven years. He had started at least—”

Jenny came in, with a plate of bacon and eggs for Tilly.

“You *had* your breakfast, Mr. Abbott,” she said, in the special tone of annoyed defiance she used for Tilly and all others who were not genuine guests.

“Yes. Yes,” he assured her, too eagerly, and Jenny retired.

“Of course,” Abbott went on, still standing close to Tilly, and speaking in a loud tone, “this method necessitates a very large staff. Doctor Lambson interviews each boy once a week, and he requires a detailed report from each boy’s supervisor. As a rule, each supervisor has three boys in his charge. I—I blame myself.”

“Sit down, Mr. Abbott,” said Tilly, sorry for his obvious misery.

“No, thanks,” he said. “No. I blame myself. I failed with Taylor, from the beginning. I realized that it would be a difficult case. You know, of course, that he had been dismissed from several schools and camps in the past—”

“No, I didn’t. What for?”

“He’s almost completely non-co-operative,” said Abbott. “I was never able to make a report of any value to Doctor Lambson. I could never get the boy to talk of his childhood, his relations with his parents, and so on. Doctor Lambson himself found a most serious block in the boy’s mind, erected, of course, to conceal from the conscious some profound psychic trauma.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand much about all that,” said Tilly. “Does it mean that Taylor was unmanageable?”

Abbott’s hand grasped the back of the chair before him; his earnest young face looked desperate.

“It means that *I* failed!” he said. “At the camp, I was in sole charge of Taylor. I thought I’d made some progress. I thought I’d got him interested in lepidoptery and—”

Jenny came in again.

“More coffee, ma’am?” she asked.

“No, thank you,” said Tilly, and Jenny left them.

“I’ll—come to the point,” said Abbott. “The boy got away. He took the car which was there for my use, when necessary, and he left the camp early in the morning.”

“What morning?”

“The morning of the—tragedy,” Abbott answered. “He left this note in the garage. I kept it. I—have it here.”

He brought a folded sheet of writing-paper from his pocket, and opened it to show one line in a small but clear hand.

Back to dinner, so take it easy. Taylor, the problem child.

“He came back about eight,” Abbott went on. “I’d made up my mind that if he hadn’t returned, I’d telephone Doctor Lambson. I—I admit I should have done so before. As soon

as I missed him. But I—No. I shan't make any specious excuses. I—” He swallowed. “I was afraid of losing my job,” he said. “I didn't report his absence.”

“Could he have come here?” Tilly asked.

“Easily.”

They were both silent for a time.

“I—haven't reported the matter to the Police Lieutenant,” Abbott said. “I told the boy I might feel obliged to do so—and he was—as usual—defiant and—jeering. I don't know . . . I think I can honestly assure you I'm not thinking of my job, in this connection. It's a—a question of where my duty lies.”

The knuckles of his broad, short hand grasping the chair had whitened; he was looking at Tilly with a scowl.

“I don't *know* . . . ,” he said, raising his voice. “There's my duty—as a citizen. . . . But, after all—fifteen . . . I mean—I don't *know*. I don't know if he should be held responsible. At fifteen.”

“Mr. Abbott . . . ! But if he did come here, I think Lieutenant Levy ought to know. He might have seen something—he might have information that would be helpful.”

“He had access to a small store of cyanide,” said Abbott.

Tilly pushed back her chair and rose, and Jenny entered the room.

“Have you finished, ma’am?” she asked.

“No!” said Tilly, sharply. “I’ll ring when I’m ready.”

“It’s so late—”

“I’ll ring,” said Tilly, and Jenny once more left them.

“I don’t know where else we could go to talk,” Tilly explained to Abbott. “I don’t know who’s in the house now, or where anyone is. How could Taylor get—that?”

“I had some, at the camp. Crystals from which I made a solution for my collection of lepidoptera. I—I kept it under lock and key. But—locks can be tampered with.”

“Did you look to see if it was gone?”

“I opened the locked compartment to get out my money, when we were leaving to come here,” Abbott answered. “I glanced, you might say automatically, at the bottle of crystals. It was in its usual place.”

“But—empty?”

“No,” he answered. “But—I shouldn’t be able to state—with any accuracy—whether or not some of the contents had been removed. I mean—it’s difficult to remember just how full a bottle was. . . . I mean—I *should* have known. But I don’t. I knew, too, that the boy was—was extremely hostile toward

his mother at the time. She had written again, in answer to some letter of his, to say his allowance was stopped until he wrote an apology. Doctor Lambson wrote to Mrs. Fleming, advising her against this course of action, at the present time, but he got no reply. I—perhaps I did wrong, but on two or three occasions, I lent the boy small sums, for some legitimate expense. Underwater goggles, for instance, and—”

“But you don’t *know* that he ever opened your locked—whatever it was?”

“Compartment,” said Abbott. “No. I have no evidence, Mrs. MacDonald. But . . . The day before the tragedy, the boy asked me for ten dollars, giving a reason which I didn’t find acceptable. I refused. And—there was a ten-dollar bill missing from my wallet in that compartment, Mrs. MacDonald.”

Tilly realized that she was standing just as Abbott stood, gripping the back of her chair.

“I don’t *know* . . .,” he said. “Whatever has happened, I hold myself responsible. Wholly responsible. Fifteen . . . In my charge . . .” He raised his heavy glance to look straight at Tilly. “I don’t *know*,” he said. “I don’t know whether or not I should report this to the police. You—have a child of your own. I—I should like your advice, Mrs. MacDonald.”

“No!” Tilly cried, backing away from him.

“I ask you for your advice, Mrs. MacDonald,” he said, loudly.

“No . . . Wait . . . ,” Tilly said.

“There’s nothing to wait for, Mrs. MacDonald,” said Abbott.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Oh, wait! she cried, but only within herself. I'd like to—think. I'd like to ask Sam Osborne. . . .

“There’s a man in jail already,” Abbott went on. “Jensen, the chauffeur. Suspected of complicity in the crime. Perhaps if I gave the police my story, it would clear him. But—I don’t know. I’ve tried to think the thing out. To decide where my chief responsibility lies. The boy was in my charge. . . .”

“Do you think he did—do you think he *could* do—such a thing?”

“I don’t *know!*” cried Abbott, almost in a shout.

“But you’ve seen him—you’ve been with him for days—”

“I’m not a trained psychiatrist, Mrs. MacDonald. I don’t pretend to understand the mental processes of that boy. He’s by far the most difficult charge I’ve had. But Doctor Lambson has accomplished most remarkable results in other cases. . . . If the boy could remain in his care for another year—or possibly two . . . There might be a complete change of personality. A complete readjustment. Even a partial recall of some earlier psychic trauma—”

“Yes,” said Tilly, curtly. “I’m afraid I can’t give you any advice, Mr. Abbott. You’ll have to do whatever you think best.”

She wanted to get away from him and from his talk. This isn’t my responsibility, she told herself. I’m not going to advise him, or anybody else.

“If you don’t mind,” she said. “I think I’ll get Robert—”

She turned toward the door. But she could not go; she could not leave this room; she could not leave Abbott. The Moment of Truth, she was saying to herself. Face it. Every time it comes, face it.

“I think you should tell Lieutenant Levy,” she said.

“But the thing is—a police interrogation might do the boy untold harm—set him back—”

“There’s no use worrying about what *might* happen,” said Tilly. “That’s just thinking that the end justifies the means. And it doesn’t. Nobody can see what the end of anything is going to be. All you can do is tell the truth.”

“But, Mrs. MacDonald . . . My responsibility toward the boy ___”

“You’re not responsible for him,” said Tilly. “And if you think he’s capable of such an unspeakably horrible—crime, you ought to help to see him shut up where he can’t do any more harm.”

“But prolonged psychiatric treatment—”

“I don’t believe in psychiatry,” said Tilly.

“What!” cried Abbott. “*What!*”

“I’ve read in the newspapers, dozen of times, about people discharged as normal from mental institutions who came out and committed murders, or set fire to buildings, or did whatever horrible things they’d done before. I don’t care *why* people commit atrocious crimes, any more than I’d care why a rattlesnake bit me. Most people don’t commit crimes. And they’re the ones I care about.”

“Mrs. MacDonald! The boy is only fifteen—”

“You asked for my advice,” said Tilly, “and you got it. Tell Lieutenant Levy the whole thing.” Now she could go. She opened the swing-door to the pantry and went through it to the kitchen.

“But isn’t Robert here?” she asked Gloria.

“No, ma’am. Pauline, she took him out, down to the gate house, she said.”

The old, unreasoning panic rose in Tilly again. Pauline’s so foreign, she thought. She might give Robert something to eat that would make him sick. Or even a glass of wine. I’ll have to hurry. . . .

But that scene with Abbott had changed something within her. No, she told herself. I’m not going to be like this. I’m

not going to hurry. Not going to be so frightened about Robert all the time. It's bad for him, and bad for me. I'm not going to be that sort of mother. Suspecting everyone . . .

She went out of the back door, and strolled, deliberately slow, along the side of the house. Of course, I can't be easy, she thought, until I know who put those things into Robert's room, who killed those animals.

Until I know who killed Sibyl. Why don't I think more about that? Once we know that, everything will be different. Taylor? No! I can't believe it! I don't really know him, and I never liked him, but I can't think he's—a monster. His own mother . . . Unless it was an accident. Unless he didn't know that cyanide was so deadly. Sam Osborne said that the snake in Robert's bed was harmless. Perhaps it was all Taylor's idea of a joke, a cruel, insane joke.

She started across the lawn, still sauntering.

“Tilly!” called Howard's voice. “Where are you off to?”

Turning, she saw him on the terrace, with Cantrell and Osborne.

“I'm just going down to the cottage to get Robert,” she answered.

“Please *don't*,” said Howard. “I don't want you to go there until it's all in order. Then we'll make a little tour of inspection, after lunch.”

She felt sure, from his tone, that he was planning a surprise to please her, and it seemed to her unkind and ungrateful to thwart him.

“I won’t go inside, Howard,” she said. “I’ll just get Robert ___”

“That’s not necessary,” said Howard. “There’s an extension telephone to the cottage. You can call, and tell Pauline to send him along.”

“All right,” said Tilly, but very reluctantly.

“I’ll get the cottage for you,” he said, and held open the screen door for her. He went to the seldom-used telephone that stood on a table behind the stairway; he pressed some little buttons.

“There you are!” he said, and pulled back the chair for her. “That’s the extension to the cottage.”

“Hello?” Tilly said, holding the receiver to her ear. “Hello? *Hello?*”

She waited; she spoke again; she waited.

“Howard!” she said. “There’s no answer.”

But Howard did not answer, either, and turning her head, she saw that he had gone. I’m going to get Robert! she cried to herself, and hurried out to the terrace. The three men were all turned away from her, watching the drive, and Pauline and Robert were running toward them, hand in hand.

“Monsieur!” she cried. “What tragedy . . . ! Monsieur!”

She was out of breath, tears running down her face, but Robert showed no sign of distress; he pulled his hand away from hers, and mounted the steps to the terrace, in a sturdy, manful way. Pauline seemed unable to make this effort, she stood in the drive, looking up at them, clasping her hands before her.

“Monsieur! Such tragedy! Monsieur, such crime! Such *wickedness!* Monsieur!”

“What’s happened, Pauline?” asked Howard.

“A crime! A wickedness, without compare! He is *dead!*
Killed! Murdered!”

Howard went down to her, took her arm, and led her up the steps.

“Sit down!” he said. “Come now, Pauline! Try to calm yourself. Try to tell me—”

Sitting forward, on the edge of a wicker chair, she seized Howard’s coat sleeve, looking up at him, her face distorted.

“Monsieur! He must be punished! He must suffer! He’s a monster!”

Osborne had gone into the house through one of the French windows; he came back now with a small glass in his hand.

“Brandy,” he said. “Best thing, Pauline.”

“Ah . . . ! *Ça-y-est, Monsieur!*” she said, with a sob.

“*Monsieur, je vous remercie, mais beaucoup.*”

She took a sip, another one, and Tilly watched her, with cold dread in her heart. Murder? Murder again? In this sweet summer morning? It’s like a fog, she thought. Like a miasma, creeping along the ground toward us.

Pauline took another sip, and turned toward Howard.

“*Monsieur,*” she said. “*Pardonnez-moi, je vous prie. . . . Mais—je suis absolument—*”

“In English, please,” said Howard.

“I tell you *all*, Monsieur,” she said, still weeping, but more calmly. “Very well! I go to the cottage, I take with me little Robert, and in my arms I carry—” A sob interrupted her. “I carry—my little Coco. This morning he is quiet, very quiet; he looks up at me with one eye closed.”

She made a hideous face, one eye closed, her tongue out.

“He is telling me this way—*maman*, I wish only to sleep. I say *no, bébé!* I put him down on the grass. I say, now run a little. Do some little exercise. For the liver. Then I enter the house with little Robert. There is there already a young man from the village. Italian. *Il s’appelle Pietro. On ne peut pas senter trop de confiance—*”

“English, please,” said Howard. “Drink your brandy, Pauline.”

“Thank you, monsieur.” She took another sip. “Very well, I do not trust the Italian always. One remembers, in the war —”

“Yes, yes!” said Howard.

“But this one, this Pietro, he is not lazy. He is working hard, and I too begin to work. The little Robert, he runs from one to the other. Please bring me that curtain rod! Ah! Thank you! He is very happy. He is helping. Is it not so, Robert?”

Robert was not attending to her, he was sitting on the broad stone coping, busy with some string and a top he had taken from his pocket.

“Very well,” Pauline went on. “We are working, then. The door opens. No ring. No knock. There he stands!”

She was obliged to rise to demonstrate this arrival.

“There he stands!”

“*Who?*” Howard asked.

“It is that Taylor!” she answered. “There he stands!” She sat down again. “I say to him, Have the goodness to get out, at once. He answers, in French, *Me voici. Je suis venu—*”

“English!” said Howard, frowning.

“Very well, monsieur. He speaks French very well, that one. He has the clever mind of the criminal. I say to him—Go! In this house you do not plant a foot. He laughs.” She gave a

short, sinister laugh. “Hah! I have things here, he says. I shall take them away. I say, You shall take nothing from this house until Mr. Fleming shall be here. He laughs. Is it so? he asks. I take what I like. Then he goes to the stair. This I must not permit. I am forced to cry to Pietro, Stop him! He is a thief!”

“Pauline!” said Howard, shocked.

“Monsieur, it is the truth. I never tell this before, but now . . . Monsieur, it was in New York, in the apartment. You are out, Madame is asleep. Me, I am going to the kitchen. I pass down the corridor. I look into the salon, and there I see him. He is holding Madame’s purse, open, in his hands. He is taking out money. *Alors*, I cry. What are you taking? He turns. He sees me. *Ta gualé!* he says.”

“What’s that?” Howard asked, frowning again.

“It is a rudeness, Monsieur. Be quiet, it means. Shut up! Put back your *maman’s* money, I say. He puts it into his pocket. I shall tell madame! I say. *Bien!* he says. I shall tell her *you* took it. I shall tell her I have many times seen you take her money, sometimes a little pin, a bracelet. I say, Very well, my brave young man, we shall see!”

“You told her . . . ?”

“Monsieur, I cannot. Madame is already so sad, so troubled about that boy. I tell myself, if she will miss the money, if she will think that the cook, that myself, that some person is a thief, then I must tell. But madame—” She paused.

“Madame is not careful of money. She gets into a taxi, for

example. She opens her purse. Ah! But I have nothing here! I thought I had some sum of money, but I am mistaken.”

“Yes,” said Howard. “Go on, please.”

“Pietro assist me, and we oblige him to leave the cottage. We sometimes have to employ ourselves, and—” She sobbed again, and finished the brandy. “I do not forgive myself! I forget the little Coco. Then, suddenly, I remember. What he is doing? I ask myself. For he wished always to be at my side. I open the door. I call him. Nothing. I go out. I call. There—by a bush—I find him. Dead. Murdered!”

“I see!” said Howard, with a sigh of relief. “You mean—that is the murder . . . ?”

“My little Coco! I have no husband, no little children, my parents are dead! I am exile, in a foreign land, and I have only my little Coco!”

“I’m very sorry,” said Howard.

“I run to the policeman—”

“What policeman?”

“Monsieur, there is always a policeman here now, in your gardens, perhaps more than one. How do I know? I tell this policeman. I bring him to see my little Coco—”

“He’s dead, Mommy,” said Robert, glancing up. “But I didn’t care.”

“Hush!” cried Pauline. “You must not say that!”

“I don’t care,” Robert repeated. “I looked at him, and I touched him, too, and I didn’t care.”

“Hush!” cried Pauline. “You are cruel!”

“Never mind that now,” said Howard, with severity. “We’ll look into this, Pauline. Perhaps your dog was—er—ill. Natural causes—”

“He is murdered!” cried Pauline. “And it is that Taylor who does it! Monsieur! Save for this, I could never, never speak. But now . . . ! He has this poison that kills. Like the poison that has killed madame.”

“You have no right to say that,” said Cantrell.

“Monsieur! We have all the right to speak the truth. I have telephoned to that Lieutenant—”

“What!” said Howard. “Before you spoke to me?”

“Monsieur, I am so agitated. . . . I tell him my little Coco is killed—as poor madame is killed. And who knows? By the same hand.”

“Now, see here!” said Cantrell. “In the first place, the boy wasn’t here on the day—on that day. He was in camp. In the second place . . . In any case, it’s . . . It’s . . . You shouldn’t make these—unfounded accusations. It’s . . .” He paused. “It’s *wrong*,” he ended.

“Very well, Monsieur,” said Pauline. “The Lieutenant is coming. Perhaps he is already arrived in the cottage. He will see for himself—”

“I’ll go down there,” said Howard.

“Quite right, Fleming,” said Cantrell. “Quite right. I’ll go along with you.”

As soon as the two men had gone down the steps, Tilly rose, and took Robert’s hand.

“Come on!” she said. “We’ll go upstairs.”

And Sam Osborne can cope with Pauline, she thought. I can’t stand any more. Carola . . . and Pauline . . . Crying—being hysterical . . . Even Mr. Abbott was so—emotional. If we could only, only get away!

But, going upstairs was not getting away. They had to pass the closed door of Sibyl’s room, and it was like walking back into the thick of the stifling fog. She could see that room now, more vividly than when she had been in it. And their own room was no refuge; it had become horrible to her.

“What’ll I *do*, Mommy?” Robert demanded.

“Play with your toys, dear.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Well, you’ll have to,” said Tilly.

“No!” said Robert. “Tell me a story!”

“No!” said his mother. “You’re not a baby. You’re old enough to amuse yourself for a little while, and let me have a little peace.”

“No!” He waited. “No!” he said, again, and when that got no response, he began kicking the leg of the bedside table so hard that the lamp on it teetered dangerously.

“Robert, stop that!” said Tilly, and when he did not stop, she caught him by the shoulder and shook him. He hit out at her wildly, and she grasped both his hands and held them.

“You’re a bad little thing!” she said.

“*You’re bad!*” he said, struggling to free his hands. “I want to go away. Let me go!”

She released him then. Things mustn’t be like this, she told herself. Not between Robert and me. I’ve got to have patience. Only—if we could get away. I don’t want to stay in that cottage with Pauline. She was cruel about Taylor. Now when they find out that he wasn’t in the camp that day. Oh, it couldn’t be Taylor! Oh, don’t let it be Taylor . . . !

“Robert, stop that!”

“I want to go out.”

“In a little while. Play with your nice fire engine.”

Kindly don't let the child drag that fire engine over the floor when I have people here, Sibyl had said. And how few people had come, how limited her life had been.

“Robert, stop that! You hurt my foot.”

Don't let it be Taylor. Then who? She closed her eyes for a moment, and it was as if she saw before her a huge sheet of yellow paper, with that list of names typed in a column.

Alec Jensen

Jenny

Gloria

Pauline

Mr. Cantrell

Sam Osborne

Carola

Mathilda Smithson MacDonald

And Howard, she thought. But Howard was poisoned, too. Put him down on the list. And which one do *you* think would commit a murder? Go ahead and think. You'll never get away, you'll never be free, until this is settled. Who do *you* think did it? Who gained by Sibyl's death? Howard. And Taylor. And me, in a way. And Pauline, too, in a way.

But murders aren't always done for gain. They're done from hatred, from fear. Who hated her—that much? Who was afraid of her? Who—?

There was a knock at the door, and Robert jumped up and opened it.

“Lunch is served,” said Jenny.

The back of her cap was pinned to her hair, but the front of it reared up, like the crest of an angry bird.

“Mr. Osborne said, serve lunch,” she went on. “I’m sure I didn’t know *he* was the one to give orders in this house. But he comes marching into the kitchen, and he says serve lunch now.”

“Isn’t Mr. Fleming here?”

“No. And he didn’t leave any orders what time for lunch, or how many. Only, Mr. Osborne, *he* says—”

“Well, it’s time for lunch, isn’t it?”

“*Time* for lunch!” cried Jenny. “*I* never heard of any times for anything in this house. Breakfast, and they’d all want trays—ten o’clock, eleven o’clock. Dinner at eight, she’d say, and then sit out there drinking their cocktails till near nine, and if you had a date, or wanted to go to the movies—”

“You might remember what’s happened,” said Tilly sternly. “You might stop thinking about your own grievances and remember—”

“Well, I do!” said Jenny, and her eyes filled with tears. “I’m just as sorry as anyone. But, as far as *I* can see, there isn’t

anyone that's sorry about Alec shut up in jail and maybe be electrocuted."

"Not if he's innocent."

"That won't help him any," said Jenny, sniffing. "Not with all these rich people against him."

"Nonsense!" said Tilly.

"Oh, no, it isn't!" said Jenny. "There's one law for the rich, and one for the poor, and well I know it."

"Come, Robert! We'll get washed for lunch," said Tilly, and Jenny closed the door with a slam.

She's very spiteful and bad-tempered, Tilly thought. But a murderess? I don't think she'd have the brains to plan a thing like that. And I don't think she's the type. Then who? That's for the police to find out. Not me. It's not my responsibility.

Am I my brother's keeper? Yes. Always. No one can escape from that. What other people do will affect my life. And Robert's. No one can be just a spectator. We're *in* this.

She combed Robert's hair, powdered her face, and opened the door. She held out her hand to Robert, but he didn't want it; he ran ahead of her, stamping down the broad stairs. Who's here, in the house? Who are we going to see?

Robert was running along the hall to the dining room, and she hurried after him, with a feeling that in that room there

would be someone, or something, startling, confusing, perhaps dreadful.

But there were only Abbott and Sam Osborne standing by the table. Abbott drew back her chair, and she sat down. Robert hitched himself up on the chair next to her; the two men sat down, and Jenny came in with cups of jellied madrilène.

“I don’t like that,” said Robert.

“You mustn’t say that. It’s rude,” said Tilly.

“Why?”

She did not answer, and a complete silence followed. Women are supposed to make conversation, Tilly thought. Mother used to tell me that. She always did. She’d say something cheerful and nice, even if it didn’t mean much. I do believe the swallows are getting ready to fly. Well, that means the summer’s nearly over. Things like that. She used to sing a song—so sweetly . . . “The swallows are getting ready to fly, Wheeling out on a windy sky . . .” I wish . . .

“We’re all very quiet, aren’t we?” she said, with a sudden and, she felt, a preposterous gaiety.

“The cat’s got my tongue,” said Osborne.

Robert looked up, with interest.

“How . . . ?” he began, when Jenny entered.

“The Lieutenant is here,” she answered, “and he says he wants to see Mr. Osborne and Mr. Abbott, but he’ll wait till you’ve et.”

“Ask him to come in,” said Osborne. He turned to Tilly. “Don’t mind, do you?”

“No . . .”

Levy came in, looking taller and thinner than ever, in a dark-gray uniform with a wide leather belt. And a gun in that holster, Tilly thought.

“Sit down and have some lunch, will you?” said Osborne.

“No, thanks. I’m here on business, Mr. Osborne. I’ll wait until you’ve finished your meal—”

“No reason for waiting, Lieutenant. Sit down and have a cup of coffee, and go right ahead with the questions.”

“You might prefer to be questioned separately,” said Levy.

He looked stern, even ominous today. And Osborne, Tilly thought, was altogether too off-hand.

“Not me!” he said. “I prefer an informal atmosphere. Puts me at ease, and I talk more.”

“Mr. Abbott?”

“I—it’s—immaterial to me,” Abbott answered.

“You understand,” said Levy, “that you’re not obliged to answer any questions. Anything you say will be taken down in writing. . . . Beebe!”

A young policeman in uniform came in from the hall, and saluted.

“Sit over by the window,” said Levy.

“I wish to God *you’d* sit down, Lieutenant,” said Osborne. “If you don’t want coffee, what about a cocktail? Glass of sherry?”

“No,” said Levy. “Beebe, take this down. Mr. Osborne, from information received I have reason to believe that you were in possession of a certain amount of cyanide of potassium. Do you admit this to be the truth?”

“Yes. That’s the truth.”

“When did you acquire this cyanide?”

“The day before Mrs. Fleming’s death.”

“How did you acquire it?”

“I bought it, from a wholesale chemist in New York.”

“Did you go to the chemist yourself, to buy this cyanide?”

Osborne brought out a cigarette, and lit it.

“No,” he answered. “I gave Jensen the written order. I’m permitted to buy the stuff, for my work.”

“What is the nature of your work?”

“Photography is part of it. Travel articles, and so on.”

“Where did you keep this cyanide?”

“In the cottage. I had a dark room fitted up there.”

“Who else had access to this cyanide?”

“Nobody.”

“Do you want to reconsider that answer?”

“No use in that. I had the stuff in a bottle, in a tin box. The tin box was locked, and the bottle hadn’t been opened, when I took it out.”

“When did you take it out?”

“Early in the morning after Mrs. Fleming’s death.”

“Why did you remove it?”

“I wanted to get rid of it.”

“Why did you wish to get rid of it?”

“Pretty obvious, isn’t it?”

“I’d like an explanation,” said Levy.

“Very well. If you’d asked me whether I had any cyanide, I’d have told you the truth. But nobody asked me anything. And I didn’t feel like sticking my neck out. So I got the stuff, and flushed it down the toilet, and broke the bottle. I wasn’t destroying any clues. I wasn’t hampering the police. I give you my word—for whatever it’s worth to you—that my bottle of cyanide had never been opened.”

“Mr. Osborne,” said Levy. “I have a statement from the boy, Taylor Price, that he obtained a certain amount of cyanide crystals from the cottage.”

“Well, he didn’t,” said Osborne. “What I had was a solution. There weren’t any crystals there.”

“The boy is very definite on that point.”

“So am I,” said Osborne. “I haven’t used any cyanide crystals for months.”

“You admit that you did have cyanide crystals in your possession?”

“Yes, I did. And I used all I had.”

“Can you suggest where the boy might have obtained such crystals, if he did not get them from the cottage?”

“No, I can’t.”

You’re making a bad impression! Tilly cried, in her heart. Don’t be so defiant. Don’t try to be so nonchalant.

“The boy admits to killing the bird and the chipmunk found in Mrs. MacDonald’s room. He first shot them with a small automatic which was found on his person. They were not dead, and he then forced these cyanide crystals down their throats. He admits to killing Pauline Duval’s dog by this method.”

“Well?” said Osborne.

Levy looked steadily at him for a moment; then he turned his head.

“Mr. Abbott.”

Abbott pushed back his chair, and stood up, very straight.

“Mr. Abbott, you stated that the boy Taylor Price was with you in camp on the day of Mrs. Fleming’s death. Are you prepared to re-affirm this statement?”

“No,” said Abbott. His lips were trembling; he raised his chin. “No!” he said. “I—lied.”

“The boy was here—on these premises—on the day of Mrs. Fleming’s death?”

“I don’t know. He took my car. He was gone all day. I don’t know where he was. He—I—I also feel obliged to add that—that I myself had a bottle of—cyanide solution. Used—in lepidoptery. I—could not state definitely—whether or not the bottle had been tampered with. I—whatever may have happened—I hold myself entirely responsible.”

Levy pulled out a chair and sat down on it sideways.

“Beebe,” he said, “bring the boy in.”

Tilly rose, and took Robert’s arm.

“Come, Robert,” she said.

“I don’t *want* to!” he cried. “I want to eat my lunch!”

“You’re coming,” said Tilly.

She pulled him down from his chair, she dragged him across the dining room, through the swing-door, through the pantry, and into the kitchen.

“Keep him here, Gloria!” she said. “Give him his lunch— anything. But keep him here, will you, until I come for him.”

“Indeed, and I have not the time—” Gloria began, indignantly.

“You keep him!” said Tilly. “Don’t argue with me. Keep him here, and don’t let him out of your sight.”

Gloria and Jenny were both looking at her in astonishment.

“Don’t gape at me!” she said. “Do as you’re told. Look after Robert. He’s had enough. He’s not going to have any more.”

She went back into the dining room, and sat down at the table. Taylor was there now, and Howard, too.

“It’s not necessary for you to remain here, Mrs. MacDonald,” said Levy.

“I want to stay, thanks,” said Tilly.

“Just like Robert,” Osborne observed.

Tilly glanced angrily at him, but he was not looking at her. Then she forgot her anger as Levy rose, stood at the end of the table; towering tall, he seemed, stern, menacing, with the gun on his hip. Now it’s going to start, she thought. Now he knows.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You all understand,” he said, “that you have a constitutional right to refuse to answer any questions, if you believe that such answers would tend to degrade or incriminate you. This right, however, does not extend to refusal to answer on any other grounds. Such as a desire to protect any other person or persons.”

“You talk like a lawyer,” said Taylor, thoughtfully.

“As a matter of fact, I am a lawyer,” Levy answered.

“Admitted to the bar. But I chose police, in preference. The function of the police, you understand, is not to judge, or to punish. Our function is to protect the public from criminals, and, when possible, to prevent crime.”

“You have to do some judging, don’t you, before you can arrest anyone?” asked Taylor.

“It’s not judging,” Levy answered. He spoke to the boy seriously, without condescension. “When we arrest a man, we don’t pronounce him guilty. We simply state that we have certain evidences that constitute a case against him. Legally, the man is innocent until he is proved guilty by trial.”

“What about someone you *see* committing a crime?”

“Even in such a case, the man taken into custody is entitled to a trial.”

“Sure,” said Taylor. “Trial with a night stick—or a bullet, if he runs.”

“If it seems necessary to the police, for the protection of the public.”

“If you see a man running away from the scene of a crime, you can shoot to kill,” said Taylor.

“We’re obliged to act on the supposition that any person seeking to evade the police, or refusing to stop when ordered to do so, is guilty,” said Levy. He paused for a moment.

“This applies also to any person or persons who withhold information from the police, or who give false or misleading answers to questions asked them.”

“Well, I haven’t done that,” said Taylor. “I’m a model suspect. I’ve answered every question you asked, in a fine, honest, manly way. Mr. Samuel Osborne and Mr. Wilfred Abbott both told you lies, but I didn’t.”

“Come now!” Howard protested, indignantly. “Lieutenant, is it necessary for us to listen to this boy’s malicious—malicious—?”

“I’d like the boy to repeat his statements here,” said Levy.

“Fine!” said Taylor, and he too rose. “I like attention. Doctor Lambson wrote that to my mother. ‘The boy seeks to gain

attention, not through accomplishment, or normal competition, but through unacceptable behavior.””

He was, Tilly thought, a handsome boy, in a way, tall for his age, immaculately well-dressed, in gray flannels and a black shantung shirt, insolent and easy in his bearing. He was clever, and he knew it; he had money behind him, and he was well aware of that, too. Yet, she thought, there was something forlorn about him, something pitiable in his scornful smile, in his slight shoulders, his thin wrists, his long, narrow hands.

“If your mother told you that—” Howard began.

“She didn’t,” said Taylor. “I found the letter in her desk, and I read it. I don’t think she ever read half the stuff old Lambson wrote to her.”

“Taylor! That’s—outrageous!” cried Howard.

“We’ll let that go, for the present, Mr. Fleming,” said Levy. “Now, Taylor, if you’ll give us a brief summary—”

“Brief . . .” said Taylor. “All right. On the morning of August the twentieth, I rose early. I entered the room in the log cabin occupied by Mr. Wilfred Abbott. He was snoring, loud enough to drown out any little noise I made. I went past his bed, and I took the key out of his pants pocket, where I’d seen him put it, and I unlocked the wall cupboard where he keeps his wallet. I took out ten dollars—”

“That was stealing!” said Abbott.

“Not really,” said Taylor. “I knew that if you raised a stink about it, I could get the money from my mother to pay you back. Borrowing, you could call it. Then I locked the cupboard, and put back the key, and I went out to the garage, and borrowed his car.”

“The cyanide—?” said Abbott.

“There wasn’t any there.”

“That is untrue, Taylor. There was a bottle of cyanide in solution—”

“There was a little blue bottle, full of water,” said Taylor. “I’d used up the real stuff, a week before, for my experiments.”

“Experiments? What do you mean?”

“I used it on toads, frogs, fish, a lot of things I could catch. Then I dissected them. I think I’ll study to be a surgeon. I’m a sadist, Doctor Lambson says, and surgery—”

“Suppose we keep to the point . . .,” said Levy. “You took Mr. Abbott’s car, and then?”

“I drove home—if you like to call it that. I was so goddam sick of that damn camp—and Abbott—and Lambson—and the whole damn set-up.”

“No profanity!” said Howard.

“None?” said Taylor. “Anyhow, I left a note for Wilfred—pardon me! For Mr. Abbott, to say I’d be back for dinner. I did that just to keep him quiet, so that he wouldn’t tell Lambson, and start Lambson telephoning to my mother. Old Lambson’s in a hell of a spot about me. Being a psychiatrist, it’s his religion to believe that parents—especially mothers—are responsible for all your faults. But he has to pipe down about that, so that he can get his money out of the parents.”

“And your reason for taking Mr. Abbott’s car?” said Levy.

“I hoped I’d never go back to the camp,” Taylor said. “I thought I’d have a talk with my mother. I’d tried it before, but I thought I’d make one more attempt. I wanted her to send me to an ordinary, first-class prep school—and without her having one of her heart-to-heart talks with the headmaster, all about how worried and miserable and disappointed she was about me. But when I got here, I—changed my mind. I knew it wouldn’t be any good. I knew she’d only go into her act. ‘The child I brought into this world—’”

“And after you got here?” said Levy, inexorable, but with no sign of impatience.

“After I got here, I changed my mind. I didn’t want to see her. I thought I’d do some more experiments, so I went to the cottage, and got some cyanide I knew was there—”

“There weren’t any cyanide crystals there,” said Osborne.

“Well, I got some there,” said Taylor. “In an envelope, addressed to you, in the drawer of the desk. And I found an automatic there, too.”

“It belonged to—my wife,” said Howard. “She’d bought it, before we were married. She had a license for it, obtained in Brookline, after she’d reported an attempt to rob her house there. I—she was—in some ways—timid. But—I managed to get the thing away from her, without her knowledge. I—personally I don’t think these things should be left lying around. I—personally, I think they’re more of a—a danger than a protection. I shouldn’t have left it there in the desk, but the cottage was empty, the windows and the doors were kept locked, and the keys in my possession. They still are. I had no idea that Taylor, or anyone else, could get in there.”

“Elementary, my dear Watson,” said Taylor. “I’d been getting in there whenever I wanted for the last three years. I got the back-door key off your key ring—”

“How?”

“Oh, one time when you were . . . Well, let’s skip it. It was after one of your cocktail parties.”

“And after you’d taken the gun and the cyanide?” said Levy.

“I went out of the cottage. I hoped I’d be able to bring down some of the vertebrates to dissect, but I’d never found a gun before, and my shots didn’t kill either of the two I aimed at. So I finished them off with cyanide. Being humane, that was.

I went to get some lunch in a diner, and when I came back for my subjects, that damn brat was there.”

“Taylor!” cried Howard.

“Sorry,” said Taylor. “But I can’t stand that brat. His mother’s always doting on him and—

“Taylor!”

“Anyhow, I gave him a scare then, and a better one later on. I used the gardener’s ladder, and I put a couple of bats in his room, and a garter-snake in his bed. I thought maybe Mommy would have a little trouble, laughing that off.”

“You stated that on the twentieth of August you did not at any time enter this house. Do you wish to amend that statement?” Levy asked.

“I do not. It happens to be true. And it’s also true that I didn’t know my mother was dead when I climbed up the ladder. It’s also true that I didn’t kill her, or have anything to do with her death. I wouldn’t think of such a thing.” His superior smile turned into a grimace; a muscle in his cheek twitched. “I was brought up to honor my parents,” he said. “By the time I was—that brat’s age, I was being shuttled from one to the other. My father told me my mother was a witch, and she told me he was a stinker. And I honored them both such a lot that I believed them both.”

“Taylor!” said Howard, again.

“That’s my statement,” said Taylor. “It’s true, all of it. If you don’t want to believe it, all right. Go ahead, and do anything you damn please.”

“You’re certain that the envelope containing cyanide was addressed to Mr. Osborne?”

“Couldn’t be more certain.”

“What did you do with the envelope?”

“Tore it up. Threw the pieces away.”

“Very well,” said Levy. “I won’t keep you any longer, Taylor.”

“May I take him back to the camp now, sir?” asked Abbott.

Levy looked at him. He said, “You can leave the room now, Taylor. Mr. Abbott, too.”

“Thank you,” said Abbott. “Come along, Taylor.”

“Wait!” said Tilly. “If you’ll go into the kitchen, Mr. Abbott, Gloria will give you some lunch.”

“Thanks,” he said. “But I—I don’t feel particularly hungry, just now.”

“I was thinking of Taylor,” said Tilly, curtly.

“Oh, yes . . . Yes, of course. Then—this way, Taylor, m’ boy.”

“Go to hell,” said Taylor, and walked off, into the hall. Abbott hastened after him.

“Mrs. MacDonald, you needn’t wait—”

“Let her stay, if she wants,” said Osborne. “I don’t mind. I take it you’re going to ask about that envelope addressed to me, with cyanide crystals in it. All right. I didn’t know it was there. I don’t know how it got there.”

“Are you prepared to sign a statement to that effect?”

“Yes.”

“Have you any suggestions to make as to how this envelope came to be where it was?”

“Well, I have one suggestion,” said Osborne. “Or even two. The first is that Taylor didn’t find the cyanide in the cottage. The second is that the envelope—if there was any envelope—was not addressed to me.”

“You’re prepared to deny the boy’s allegation?”

“No. I’m not in a position to deny it. Maybe he found just what he said he found. But if he did, I don’t know anything about it.”

“You admit that you did, at various times, purchase cyanide of potassium?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you use this cyanide in the cottage, Mr. Osborne? Yes? For what purpose?”

“In connection with my photographic work.”

“Is photography your profession, Mr. Osborne? Your means of livelihood?”

“Only partly. I write articles, and so on.”

“Are you, at this time, regularly employed in any capacity?”

“I’m a free lance.”

“How long have you been an inmate of this house, Mr. Osborne?”

“Well . . . On and off, for about three months.”

“You have previously stated that you have no fixed residence. Where had you planned to go when you left here, Mr. Osborne?”

“Brazil.”

“For what purpose, Mr. Osborne?”

“Write articles. Make photographs.”

“Have you ever, at any time, had regular employment, Mr. Osborne?”

“I’ve had jobs, on and off.”

“What was the nature of these jobs?”

“I was a swimming instructor once, at a summer resort. I was a photographer for an advertising agency for a while. I was a steward on a private yacht for over a year. I was a guide in Hong Kong, in Tokyo, in Singapore. I was in the Army nearly four years. In Europe.”

“What is your present source of livelihood. Mr. Osborne?”

“I’m doing some writing.”

Osborne was answering promptly and readily, and, Tilly thought, truthfully. But it seemed to her that his curt answers were building up a disastrous impression of a drifter, a good-for-nothing, and, more than that, an impression that he was withholding something. Not lying, not evading, but volunteering nothing.

“Mr. Osborne,” said Levy, “we can continue this interview in privacy—”

“Not on my account, thanks.”

“Very well. From information received, Mr. Osborne, I understand that you have been mailing checks for deposit in a New York bank, with considerable regularity.”

“Yes.”

“What was the source of this income, Mr. Osborne?”

“Advances. On some work I was doing.”

“Mr. Osborne, I understand that these checks were made out to your order, and signed by the late Mrs. Fleming. Do you confirm this?”

“Yes.”

“What was the nature of the work for which the late Mrs. Fleming advanced you money at stated intervals?”

“Writing.”

“Do you mean that this money was in the nature of a loan?”

“No.”

“Mr. Osborne. Did you, at any time, purchase, or cause to be purchased, any barbiturate preparations for the late Mrs. Fleming?”

“I did not.”

“Mr. Osborne. With the assistance of the New York City Police Department, we have learned where Jensen bought the supplies of cyanide on your order. We have also learned that at these times, and at other times, Jensen bought—illegally—considerable supplies of a certain barbiturate preparation in capsule form, from an elderly uncle of his, employed in this wholesale chemical company. Jensen refuses to give any information as to his subsequent disposal of these capsules. Have you any comment to make, Mr. Osborne? Any suggestions as to the disposal of these capsules?”

“No, I don’t know anything about them. Never knew Jensen got them.”

Levy took a small notebook out of his pocket, and began turning the pages. He’s not really reading anything in it, Tilly thought. It’s just to make a pause. To give Sam Osborne time to think. It’s pretty plain what the Lieutenant’s leading up to. That Sibyl gave money to Sam Osborne either to get drugs for her, or—what? Because they were lovers? Or—blackmail? He’s made himself look like that sort of man, shiftless, a sort of adventurer, who hasn’t even any address.

But he’s *not* like that. It’s not just silly and feminine to think that. I know about people. I’ve never been swindled by anyone, or very much disappointed in anyone.

“Mr. Osborne,” said Levy, “you state that you made use of the cottage for your photographic work. How did you gain entry to the cottage?”

“I lent him my key,” said Howard.

“Well, no,” said Osborne. “I had a key of my own.”

He reached in his trousers pocket and brought out a key ring.

“Here it is,” he said. “Want me to take it off the ring?”

“Yes, thanks,” said Levy, and Osborne detached a key and handed it to him. “Mr. Fleming!”

Howard gave a violent start. “Yes . . . ? Yes . . . ?”

“Mr. Fleming, have you any comment to make on Mr. Osborne’s statement?”

“No . . . ,” Howard said. “Except that he—that Osborne—ab-b-bove suspicion. Writing a book with me. Travel book. The money was for research. For his time. All very customary . . . Nothing furtive—all aboveboard . . . M-m-man of—of—h-honor . . . I—I—I—”

“Thank you,” said Levy. He closed the little notebook, and put it into his breast pocket, with the key. “One more question, Mr. Fleming, and then I’ll be going. I have in my possession a sworn statement made by Mrs. Carola Dexter, in which she affirms that, in the presence of a witness, you declared that you wanted to marry again—if you could get rid of your wife. Do you confirm this, Mr. Fleming?”

“D-d-damn . . . !” Howard cried. He tried to rise, but he sank down into the chair again. “*Lie!*” he shouted, and fell forward, slamming his forehead on the table.

“He’s hurt himself!” cried Tilly, springing to her feet.

Neither Levy nor Osborne even glanced at her, or at Howard.

“Is it all right to ask who the witness was?” said Osborne.

“Quite all right. Mrs. Dexter gave me the name of Richard Cantrell as witness.”

“What does Cantrell say?”

“Mr. Cantrell,” said Levy, “doesn’t remember anything—about anything.” He moved toward the door. “Nobody in this case remembers anything. Nobody knows anything. It’s a big help.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Howard slid sideways from his chair, and fell to the floor with a soft thud. Tilly ran to him, and knelt by his side, saw his face white as chalk, his eyes closed.

“He’s hurt himself,” said Tilly. “Will you call up the doctor?”

“He’s only passed out,” said Osborne, looking down at Howard. “He’ll be all right.”

“You don’t know. He struck his head hard on the table. He may have hurt himself seriously. If you won’t call the doctor, I will.”

“Take it a little easy,” said Osborne. “Give him ten minutes, even five, if you’d rather. The only doctor I know of here is Crowdie,” he said. “And I don’t think we’d better send for him.”

“Why not?”

“Howard wouldn’t like it.”

“*Why not?* D’you have to be so cryptic and all-knowing, like a great detective?”

“That’s not how I feel, right now,” said Osborne. “I feel like the biggest damn fool there ever was.”

“All right. Why wouldn’t Howard want Doctor Crowdie? He’s been their doctor for years.”

“I might as well tell you,” said Osborne. “It’s no secret. The police know it. And you’d probably hear about it, anyhow, before long.”

“Tell me.”

“I was in Howard’s room when Crowdie and the police doctor were working on him. I heard what Crowdie said, and so did Howard. Crowdie told Levy he believed Howard had taken the chloral hydrate himself. He said he’d been called in twice before, to treat Howard for the same condition. He said that last summer, when Howard had stopped drinking, he’d prescribed chloral hydrate, to help him sleep. Said he warned Howard that the stuff was dynamite, if he took it along with alcohol. But Howard started drinking again, and one night, when he couldn’t sleep, he took a dose of the stuff, and knocked himself out. He swore he didn’t have any chloral hydrate, and you can’t get it without a prescription. But he did get more—or he had some left, because he knocked himself out again, when they first came out here. And this time they found an almost empty bottle of it under Howard’s bed. No label on it. Howard said he’d taken off the label; said it was the original bottle Crowdie had prescribed. He said he hadn’t taken it—knowingly. He said that when he saw Sibyl, he thought she was ill, and he drank the whiskey that was already poured out, in a glass on the table beside her. Said he was shocked by the way Sibyl looked, and wanted to brace himself up.”

“Well, why couldn’t it have been that way?”

“Because you said there wasn’t a glass of whiskey on the table when you left the room. And there’s one thing very certain. Sibyl didn’t get up and pour herself a drink after you’d gone.”

Tilly was silent for a moment.

“Then someone else did it . . . ?” she said, half-questioningly.

“Sure. Someone else who knew Howard would be the one to find Sibyl dead. Knew he’d drink the glass of whiskey; and doped it with enough chloral hydrate to knock him out. But not a lethal dose.”

Tilly stood looking down at Howard on the floor, his feet on the big cushion, his face so white.

“It could have been that way,” she said.

“Sure,” said Osborne, and he, too, was looking down at Howard.

“Can’t you stop being mysterious?” Tilly demanded. “Can’t you say what you think?”

“No. I can’t. What I think isn’t evidence, and anyhow maybe I don’t know what I think. Only . . . Howard’s a good egg, after his fashion. But he’s got what you might call a low breaking-point. And he’s had to stand all the things a stuffed shirt can’t stand. Disorder, confusion, crazy extravagances, crazy quarrels with neighbors, servants, tradespeople. One

time when they were having a dinner-party, all the oyster forks had disappeared, at the last moment. He was absolutely sunk.”

“I can’t think that’s very tragic,” said Tilly.

“It was—for him. In the first place, it was a humiliation he never got over, to see their guests eating oysters with big forks. In the second place, the missing oyster forks couldn’t be found, and Sibyl accused a maid they had of stealing them, and the maid got a lawyer and they had to pay her to keep the case out of court. Months later the forks turned up. In a suit case of Sibyl’s. She— He’s coming to, poor devil.”

Howard’s eyes fluttered, opened, closed again; he gave a long sigh, like a groan.

“Take it easy, old man!” said Osborne, and going to the sideboard he poured a drink from a decanter. Kneeling beside Howard, he raised his shoulders. “Just drink this down,” he said.

“It’s—brandy, Sam!” Howard protested.

“Good for you,” said Osborne, and Howard drained the little glass.

“Better?” Osborne asked. “Now I’ll help you upstairs, and you can rest for a while.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I—in a few moments—I promised Tilly—that little tour of inspection—and the cottage.”

“You’d better lie down, Howard,” she said. “There’s no hurry. I’ll wait.”

“Well, no,” said Howard. “You might want some changes made, Tilly, and this man I’ve got there is leaving at four. I—think I can make it now.”

“Howard, please don’t! Please rest first.”

With Osborne’s help, Howard got up. But he still held to Osborne’s arm; he was still white, his blue eyes looked dim.

“In a few moments—,” he said. “The man’s leaving at four. You may want changes made, Tilly.”

“I’ll go along with her,” said Osborne. “I’ll help you upstairs now, Howard, and you can rest.”

“I—think I’d rather rest down here,” Howard said. “In the—the library, I think.”

Osborne helped him out of the room, and Tilly stood, motionless, until Osborne returned.

“Do you mean you think—it was *Howard*?” she demanded.

“No,” he answered. “I don’t think anything. Come on! Get Robert, and we’ll go along.”

“I don’t really care how things are arranged in the cottage,” said Tilly. “Pauline’s there. She’ll—”

“Please don’t argue,” said Osborne. “Just get Robert and come along.”

“But I don’t want to.”

“Look here!” he said. “Please don’t argue. I’m sick.”

“Do you mean ill?” Tilly asked, with a sudden anxiety.

“No. Sick. Come on, please!”

She found Robert lying on his stomach on the kitchen table, drawing on a paper bag with a pencil. He was very troublesome about coming with her.

“I don’t *want* to!” he said.

Like me? Tilly thought. Am I childish, and unreasonable, and troublesome?

“Go along with you now!” said Gloria, outraged. “Your poor mother so kind and good to you, and you carrying on like a wild boy.”

That seemed to impress him, and he got down from the table.

“I’m not a wild boy,” he said, ingratiatingly.

“You are not,” said Gloria. “And here is a little cake you can take along with you.”

Osborne was waiting on the terrace, smoking a cigarette; they all set off down the drive without a word.

“Where are we going, Mommy?” Robert asked, after a moment.

“To the cottage, darling. Where you went this morning with Pauline.”

“Why?”

“We’re going to live there. Won’t that be nice?”

“Just you and me, Mommy?”

“Yes. And Pauline.”

The cottage was before them now, and he stood still.

“I’d like Sam to live there, too,” he said.

“Sam would like it, also,” said Osborne. “But he can’t. It’s not protocol.”

“I don’t *want* to live there!” said Robert. “That bad boy will come and kill me dead.”

“That’s silly,” said his mother. “It’s going to be very nice and cozy there.”

“I don’t *like* it!”

Neither do I, thought Tilly. It was a pretty little house, half-timbered, with a pointed roof, a pointed arch over the front door, a little porch with a settle on either side. But the tall

trees grew so close to it; it looked dwarfed, unreal, like a witch's cottage in a fairy forest.

“Tilly,” said Osborne, “you’ll be all right there. Levy’ll keep an eye on you, and so will I.”

He took her hand, and she was comforted and pleased by his warm, steady clasp.

“I wish Pauline wasn’t quite so temperamental,” she said.

“Probably does her good,” said Osborne. “I’ve often thought that if I would yell, and kick, even faint, I’d be a happier man. And I might gain some weight.”

“You are rather thin,” said Tilly.

“Very thin. Lonely. Homeless.”

“Haven’t you any—family?”

“Only a couple of parents, and two brothers, and a sister. All married. Including my parents.”

They went on, hand in hand, and Robert came behind them, scuffing up the gravel.

“You talked to me,” said Tilly. “You were quite eloquent about my telling everything to the police . . .”

“Meaning I didn’t do it myself? I’ve answered every question they’ve asked, truthfully.”

“That’s quibbling,” said Tilly.

“I know it,” he said. “But just the same, the advice I gave you was absolutely sound. Hew to the line—let the chips fall where they will.”

“My grandfather used to say that,” said Tilly. “When I was a little girl, I had a sort of picture in my mind of a man up in a tree, sawing off a branch, and the chips were falling down and getting into the eyes of the people underneath.”

“You can get more chips in more people’s eyes, if you just go hacking around any old how.”

“I don’t know—,” Tilly began, but she stopped, and drew her hand away from Osborne’s, at the sound from inside the cottage. Carola’s voice, very high, very clear.

“You’re a cruel, wicked liar, Dick Cantrell!”

“Nothing of the sort,” Cantrell responded. His voice, too, was loud, but resonant and steady. “When the question was put to me, I answered truthfully. I certainly do *not* remember Howard’s saying what you quoted him as saying.”

“Then you were drunk.”

“I’m never drunk,” said Cantrell, sternly. “And you know it.”

“You were right there when Howard said he wanted to get rid of Sibyl.”

“He said nothing of the sort. Sibyl had threatened to leave him—by no means for the first time—and he said that if she did leave him—permanently—if she wanted a divorce, he would marry again.”

“Marry *me*.”

“Carola, your name was not mentioned.”

“It *was*, you old liar.”

“Carola, it was extremely foolish and improvident of you to tell that story to the police. Don’t you realize that you were providing them with a motive?”

“What do y’ mean—motive?” Carola demanded, scornfully.

“I mean,” said Cantrell, “a motive for killing Sibyl.”

“They wouldn’t think that about *me*,” said Carola. “Nobody would—but *you*.”

“I don’t think we ought to listen—,” Tilly began.

“Keep still!” said Osborne.

“I know you helped me out,” Carola was saying. “But I *offered* to pay you back. I *tried* to pay you back, and you wouldn’t *take* the money.”

“I told you I wouldn’t accept it, Carola. I told you—I tried to warn you against your method of getting money.”

“What did you expect me to do? Starve to death? Go around in rags?”

“You’re not penniless, Carola. Wait! I admit your income—your alimony—is inadequate to your scale of living. But you could either go to work—”

“Doing what? Go on the streets?”

“You could either go to work,” said Cantrell, “or you could live in a very much less expensive way.”

“Certainly! I could live in a furnished room in a slum. Never see anybody. Never go anywhere. Never have any decent clothes.”

“That would be infinitely preferable to what you have been doing, Carola. I’ve already pointed out to you that you would be sent to prison if your illegal traffic in drugs—”

“They—they’re *not* drugs. They’re just sleeping pills. I take them myself. I’d go mad if I didn’t.”

“They are drugs. And traffic in them is not only illegal but dangerous. There have been many, very many cases of suicide by barbiturates.”

“If people want to commit suicide, that’s their responsibility. Not my headache.”

“Try to think how you’d feel if you knew you had provided—for money—the means for committing suicide.”

“I wouldn’t feel anything at all,” said Carola. “I don’t think suicide is one bit wrong. I think people have a right to kill themselves if they want to. Anyhow, nobody’s going to find out about my selling those capsules—unless *you* tell them. Jensen won’t tell. He made a good profit himself—out of me. I don’t know whether he really bought them, or just stole them, but anyhow he made me pay plenty. And he wants to keep on, when he gets out of jail.”

“I hear this,” said another voice, Pauline’s voice, and she too spoke loudly and with that note of hysteria Tilly had learned to dread. Sibyl, Carola, Jenny, Taylor, Abbott, even Howard . . . The voices of people who had lost control, who were possessed. “Do not be afraid, madame, but that *I* shall tell the police. It is for *you* that that fine young man is in the cell of a prison. It is *you* who have led him into wickedness. You who —”

“Oh, shut up!” said Carola.

“I? I shut up?”

“Never mind, now, Pauline,” said Cantrell. “Don’t say anything more. And don’t speak to the police, or anyone else about this until I’ve talked it over with you. If Mrs. MacDonald agrees, I’ll come back later for that fine French dinner you promised me. Now I’m going to drive Mrs. Dexter home.”

“No, you’re not!” said Carola. “I came here to have a few words with that kept woman of Howard’s, and I’m going to wait until she comes.”

“You’re not,” said Cantrell. “You’re coming with me now— if I have to carry you out to my car.”

“I won’t!” There was a moment’s silence. “Stop!” Carola shrieked.

“Is he going to kill her dead?” Robert asked.

“No,” said Tilly. “No, darling. Sam, go and see—”

The front door of the cottage opened and Cantrell came out, with Carola over his shoulder, struggling frantically.

“Sam!” cried Tilly. “Stop him!”

“Not me,” said Osborne, and as Tilly moved forward, he caught her by the arm. “Keep out of this, Tilly.”

“No! But his face . . . ! He looks so—furious! Sam, suppose he hurts her! Suppose he—”

“I don’t care if he strangles her,” said Osborne.

Cantrell had gone through the gateway into the road with his burden; they were out of sight, and Carola shrieked again.

“Help! *Help!*”

Then there was silence, and then the sound of an engine starting.

“Is she all dead now?” Robert asked, with interest.

“No, darling,” Tilly answered, mechanically. She looked up at Osborne.

“She called for help—”

“That’s the best thing she does,” said Osborne. “She’s been to Howard, God knows how many times, yelling for help. Money to pay ‘the doctor.’ To pay her servants, her taxes. Her fines for speeding. She tried to nick me once for twenty-five dollars, but she didn’t get it. To Cantrell and to Howard, and probably a lot of other people, she’s always and forever a Morrowly of Pelham, so she *has* to have servants, and cars, and what they call ‘decent’ clothes. But I don’t seem to be impressed. Did you happen to hear what she called you?”

“I don’t care. It was horrible to see him drag her away like that. To hear her screaming for help.”

“You heard what Cantrell was saying to her. You know now that she’s been supplying—God knows who—with these capsules.”

“I want a pony,” said Robert.

“Not just now, dear.”

“Yes! Now! Cousin Howard *said* he’d buy me a pony. I want it now!”

“Well, you can’t have it now. Come! We’re going into the house now. Do you want to come in, Mr. Osborne?”

“The name is Sam. Do you want me to come in?”

She hesitated for a moment. “Well . . . yes,” she said.

She rang the bell, and Pauline, in a green overall, a blue ribbon tied over her hair and under her chin, opened the door at once.

“Mais, s’il vous plait, regardez donc, madame!” she cried.
*“Ce jeune Pietro, il a tant travaillé, c’est presque impossible!
Et tant de goût! Regardez, je vous prie, ce qu’on a fait ici. . .
.”*

She went on, in a rapid French which Tilly did not understand, and with an enthusiasm Tilly did not share. The windows of the little sitting-room were heavily curtained in dark green rep, there was a green carpet on the floor; there was, in Tilly’s opinion, far too much furniture here, and too heavy for the room.

“She wants you to go upstairs with her and see what Pietro’s doing,” said Osborne.

Reluctantly Tilly went up the steep, narrow stairway, and found Pietro fastening a valance of wood covered with chintz on the mantelpiece of a small bedroom.

“Your room, madame!” said Pauline. “All is comfortable for you, no?”

“Oh, very!” said Tilly. “You’ve done wonders,” she said, politely, to the young Italian.

Then Pauline led her to see Robert’s room, smaller than her own, furnished with a white iron bed, a big old-fashioned

chest of drawers, two rush-bottomed chairs, a marble-topped pedestal table, a dark red carpet, dark red curtains, dark red bedspread. The trees shut out the light; a branch was brushing back and forth across the screen.

“Red is cheerful,” Pauline said.

“Yes, it is,” Tilly agreed. “I’ll have to go downstairs now, Pauline. Mr. Osborne’s waiting.”

“He will wait, madame,” said Pauline, with a meaningful smile. “You must, please, see the bathroom. See if all pleases you.”

“Very nice,” Tilly said, looking at the dim and narrow little bathroom with a chipped old tub standing on curly legs.

“Very nice, Pauline. Now I’ll really have to go down—”

“But a moment, madame! I show you *my* room. And, madame, two things, if you please.”

She had opened the door of another room, small, narrow, dim and crowded, like the others. “Madame permits that I keep here my little dog?” she asked.

Tilly looked at her in amazement that was almost terror.

“I have, as you see, a little basket for him,” said Pauline. “I keep him here, that he will not disturb you.”

“But, Pauline, I thought—”

Tears came into Pauline's eyes. "Madame, please . . . I do not speak of my little one who has gone. I cannot. But Mr. Cantrell—but what kindness! This morning he takes me in his auto to this place—what is it?—many little dogs. Ah, yes! This kennels. He tells me, regard these little dogs. Choose which you will. I see one—so small—a little nose of black velvet . . . *Bien, alors!* says Mr. Cantrell. I buy this little one. He is yours. But let him remain here with his mother one more week. Then, if madame permits . . . ?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And, madame, do you permit that Mr. Cantrell shall dine here tonight? I should not have asked him this, before your permission, but, madame, when he buys for me this little dog, I am so pleased, so thankful, that I do not think."

"Why, yes, that'll be all right, Pauline," said Tilly. "Now I'll have to go downstairs."

"You understand, madame, I have all materials in the house. Mr. Fleming has said to me, order what you will. Me, I like *much* better to go myself to the market. There I see. There I choose. Today this is good, the other is not good. I look. I say yes, or I say no. But there is no auto so this morning I telephone. Everything is now arrived. Milk, grain, oranges, for Robert—"

"That's fine!" said Tilly.

I can't listen to her for one single instant longer, she thought. Is she going to keep on like this, talking and talking and

talking, all the time we're here? "That's fine, Pauline," she said again, and turned away to the staircase. All the time we're here? And how long will that be? Weeks? It's very kind and thoughtful of Howard, but I don't *like* this cottage. I—really hate it.

The somber, crowded little sitting-room was empty; the sound of Robert's voice led her to the kitchen, where she found the child with Pietro, and, to her surprise, Howard. He was still pale; his eyes still had a look of dimness, but he was neat, business-like, talking to Pietro.

"You say you've fixed the sink yourself? Then I'll call up the plumber, and tell him not to come. Now, if you have time to take a look at the cellar . . . I think there's a lot of rubbish down there, old furniture, and so on."

"Yes, sir," said Pietro. "I'll run down there now. And what about these pictures, sir?"

He was holding out a sheaf of large, glossy photographs.

"Rubbish!" said Howard, loudly. "Burn them up."

"Some of them are real pretty," said Pietro. "I'd like to take 'em home, if you don't mind."

"I'll—glance over them," said Howard, and took them from Pietro's hand.

Robert was trying to wind an old window-shade back on its roller; nobody had noticed Tilly, and she now retreated, letting the swing-door close silently. I don't want to talk, she

thought. And I don't want to hear anyone else talking. I suppose Sam got tired of waiting. But he'll come back.

I'm tired, she thought. I'd like to lie down in my room for a few moments. But not with Pauline up there. In one corner of the sitting-room there was an ungainly old spring-rocker upholstered in brown; she sat down in it, and it was very comfortable; it was very pleasant to rock gently, with almost no effort, so good to be quiet, to be alone. . . .

The swing-door opened, and in came Howard.

"Oh, Tilly?" he said. "Is everything satisfactory?"

"Everything is fine, thank you, Howard."

"Good! I'll have to go back to the house now, Tilly. See this investment counselor fellow. But if it suits you, what about my coming back here to dinner? The house—it's natural, I suppose—it gets on my nerves."

"I'd love it, Howard," Tilly answered. "But, you see, Pauline asked Mr. Cantrell to dinner here."

"What!" cried Howard. "Pauline . . . ? Tilly, surely you don't allow your servant to issue invitations?"

I wish I was Robert, Tilly thought. Then I just wouldn't answer at all. And if Howard said it was very rude and naughty not to answer, I shouldn't care.

"It's something rather special," she said, and because she could not be Robert, she went on, to tell about Cantrell and

the little dog.

“Very kind of him,” said Howard. “Most generous. Well, then, suppose I come, too? Unless—” He gave a smile that was surprisingly roguish; dimples came in his pale cheeks. “Unless it’s a case of two’s company, eh?”

“Oh, no! I’d love you to come.”

“Cantrell’s an eligible bachelor, you know.”

She made herself smile.

“I *want* you to come, Howard.”

“Thank you! I accept with pleasure,” he said.

Tilly went to the door with him, and when he had gone, she returned to the spring-rocker. I want to be alone, just for a little while, she thought. I want to be quiet. The rocker squeaked softly, the trees rustled outside, Robert was talking to Pietro in the kitchen; Pauline was trotting about upstairs. But it was quiet in this corner. Forget Carola’s frantic screaming; forget Howard stuttering . . . Howard fainting; forget Taylor.

Taylor was the worst, she thought. He’s only fifteen—and he’s so bitter, so warped, so dreadfully lonely. Only fifteen . . . What will happen to him now? Will Howard look after him? What will become of him? What—?

Robert came into the room, and the spring-rocker enchanted him; he sat on one arm of it.

“Go faster!” he commanded.

“I don’t want to, Robert. I want to rest.”

“Why?”

“Because I do.”

“You’re unreasonable,” said Robert.

Tilly suppressed a smile at the unexpected word.

“Maybe I am,” she said. “But I do want to rest for a little while, Robert. Why don’t you go up and help Pauline?”

He thought that over, and then, to her relief, he turned away toward the stairs. I can’t talk, she thought. I don’t want to listen to anyone talking, not even Robert. I wish Howard and Mr. Cantrell weren’t coming to dinner. I wish I could go upstairs and lie down—but with Pauline there . . . It’s coming to an end, Sam said. Lieutenant Levy knows who killed Sibyl. He’ll arrest someone—and someone will scream. . . . Like Carola. It was so horrible to see her struggling like that, to hear her screaming like that . . . To hear Robert crying so, when he saw the poor little dead things . . . To hear Pauline, when she was telling about Taylor . . .

Horrible voices, screaming, accusing, hating, terrified . . . But if it’s coming to an end, Robert and I can get away. Only where? I’ve let the apartment till the first of October, and if we board somewhere, it will cost so much. I’ve got to get Robert a new winter coat. He couldn’t begin to get into his old one. And I want to start him in a good school next year. I

don't know when I'll get that five hundred dollars from Sibyl

And I don't care. I won't care. I won't even think about it. It's sordid and hateful to think about it, when Sibyl's dead. Murdered. That's what I ought to think about. About justice. About—

The front door of the cottage opened with a slam, and Tilly sprang to her feet. The wind . . . ? she thought. But there was no wind; only a light breeze. Before she had crossed the room, Carola had entered. Her white blouse was torn and dirty, her face was smudged, her blond hair tangled.

“Now!” she said. “*Now* you're going to get what's coming to you, you damn smug little witch! You're going to be arrested, any minute. You'll be in jail tonight. And you'll end up in the electric chair!”

“What are you talking about?”

“You'll find out soon enough, you hussy! Dick Cantrell dragged me into his car. He dragged me along the ground by my feet—”

“He didn't.”

“Shut up! He did! He locked me in my room, and he took the key away. He said he was sending a doctor to see me. He said I was going to be put away. Locked up, in some loony-bin, for ever and ever. Not me! I have a telephone in my room and I called up that policeman—what's his name? Levy. I told him how I'd *seen* you kill Sibyl.”

“Leave my house,” said Tilly. “At once. You’ve been drinking.”

“*Your* house? You’ll be in jail tonight, my fine kept woman. I told Levy what I’d seen. I saw you get the package of cyanide from Howard’s desk, and I saw you go upstairs to Sibyl’s bathroom. I saw you open that capsule and dump out the powder, and fill it up with the cyanide crystals, and put it back in the bottle. I told him I’d swear to it in court. I told him you’d killed Sibyl so that you could marry Howard. But you won’t! You’re going to die in the electric chair. You’re going to be arrested any minute.”

“Carola!” said Tilly, in horror. “Try to think what you’re saying. Try—”

“Shut up! I got out of my room through the window. I hurt myself. I fell. But I got here . . . I got here! I want to *see* you taken off to jail. I want to *see* you strapped down in the electric chair—”

“Madame?” called Pauline, from the stairway. “You wish me to help you? To telephone to the police? To Mr. Fleming?”

“No, thank you. Just keep Robert upstairs,” Tilly answered.

Carola’s out of her mind with drink, she thought. She’s dangerous. She’d say anything, do anything. But I can cope with her.

For the first time in her life, she looked at a fellow-creature as an assailant; she appraised Carola, steadily, without fear. I’m taller than she is. I’m younger and stronger, and I’m in

my right senses. If she won't leave, I'll put her out. If I have to, I'll throw her out.

"There!" cried Carola. "I hear a car! Now you'll see! Now you're going to be arrested!"

Levy appeared in the doorway, with the young policeman behind him.

"Here she is!" cried Carola. "The murderess! Arrest her!"

"Just a moment," said Levy, mildly. "We've got to do things in order, Mrs. Dexter."

"I told you I'd swear in court about what I saw. I *told* you—"

"Suppose we sit down for a moment, Mrs. Dexter. Mrs. MacDonald, too."

"Do you mean to say you *believe* what she's said?" Tilly demanded. "Any of it? There's not one word—"

"Just a moment," he said again, with the same mildness. "Now, if you'll both sit down, please . . ."

"Why don't you arrest her?" cried Carola. "I've told you what I saw. Take her to jail!"

"Sit down!" said Levy, and, though he did not raise his voice, it was a command. Tilly did sit, on a straight-backed chair against the wall, and, in a moment, Carola flounced down on the sofa. Levy, in his well-cut dark uniform, stood facing them.

“I went to your house, as you requested, Mrs. Dexter,” he said. “But you weren’t there. The door of your room was locked.”

“I got out of the window. I wanted to *see* her arrested.”

“I knocked several times on your door, Mrs. Dexter, and when I got no answer, I unlocked the door. I found a considerable supply of cocaine there, and a syringe. Where did you procure the cocaine, Mrs. Dexter?”

“From a doctor.”

“What is the doctor’s name, Mrs. Dexter?”

“I don’t know. I’ve forgotten. Just a doctor—somewhere in New York.”

“Did you obtain regular supplies of cocaine from this doctor, Mrs. Dexter?”

“No! Drop it. It doesn’t matter.”

“Did Mr. Cantrell offer, some months ago, to pay your expenses, if you entered a private institution for the treatment of drug addiction?”

“No! He’s a liar. I never took it. I got it for somebody else.”

“You understand, Mrs. Dexter, that it is a criminal offense to procure cocaine to sell—”

“I didn’t sell it. I—gave it away. Drop it!”

“Mrs. Dexter, I have received information that for the past six months you have been purchasing large supplies of barbiturate capsules, which you resold at a profit to—”

“Who told you that? It’s a lie!”

“Mrs. Dexter, I have the names of two persons in this community who state that they have bought such capsules from you.”

“Drop it!”

“Mrs. Dexter, I suggest that you undertook this illegal traffic in barbiturates in order to secure money for cocaine.”

“*Drop it!*” she cried, almost in a scream. “I’m not going to talk about it. I won’t answer any questions about it.”

“This is a very serious charge, Mrs. Dexter.”

“Drop it, I tell you! Don’t bother me so.”

“You wish to state that you saw Mrs. MacDonald take a package of cyanide crystals from Mr. Fleming’s desk?”

“What?” she said. “Oh, that? Yes, I did.”

“Where were you when you saw this, Mrs. Dexter?”

“Me? I was in the hall.”

“Will you describe the package?”

“It was a little envelope. Of cyanide crystals.”

“How did you know what was in the envelope, Mrs. Dexter?”

“Because—I did know.”

“You stated that subsequently you saw Mrs. MacDonald filling a capsule with cyanide in the late Mrs. Fleming’s bathroom. Where were you when you saw this?”

“Oh . . . In the hall.”

“At what time did you see this?”

“In—the morning.”

“How long after you allege to have seen Mrs. MacDonald take the envelope from the library?”

“I don’t . . . Just a few moments.”

“Did you follow Mrs. MacDonald upstairs?”

“Yes. I did! I was afraid she was going to kill Sibyl. I knew she wanted to, and I knew why. I knew—”

“Very well. What did you do, Mrs. Dexter, after you had seen Mrs. MacDonald fill this capsule with what you believed to be a fatal poison?”

Sweat was glistening on Carola’s face; her lips were parted; her eyes were fixed on Levy’s face, with a dreadful intensity.

“You’re just trying to . . . You’re trying to . . . Drop it! Let me alone!”

“What did you do, Mrs. Dexter, after you had seen Mrs. MacDonald preparing the capsule?” Levy asked, still mild, still patient.

And, Tilly thought, cruel as a cat with a mouse. He had already entangled Carola in her own lies, and Carola was half-aware of this. She was confused, frightened, helpless.

“Did you inform the late Mrs. Fleming of what you had seen?”

“I—wrote her a note.”

“I see,” said Levy. “How did you deliver this note, Mrs. Dexter?”

“I pushed it under her door.”

“Did you knock at the door, Mrs. Dexter?”

“No. I thought she’d probably be asleep.”

“You state that you believed the late Mrs. Fleming to have been in imminent danger. After pushing this note under her door, what further steps did you take to warn her, Mrs. Dexter?”

“I—” Carola began, and stopped, and a change came over her. She looked, Tilly thought, like a sleepwalker suddenly

awake on the verge of an abyss, aware of the pit before her, rocked by a gale of wind.

“I didn’t write any note,” she said.

“How did you warn the late Mrs. Fleming?”

“I didn’t warn her,” Carola said. “You see, I wasn’t sure.” She spoke now with a sort of dull cautiousness. “You see, I didn’t think Tilly would dare to do that. I thought she’d taken the cyanide to commit suicide with.”

“You state that you saw Mrs. MacDonald fill a capsule.”

“I didn’t see that. Only after Sibyl was dead I knew it must have been that way. I only saw her take the cyanide out of Howard’s desk.”

“What reason did you have, Mrs. Dexter, for assuming that this package or envelope contained cyanide?”

“I stopped in to see Howard that morning—whenever it was—and he was talking to Sam Osborne about it. Howard said that he didn’t want to keep such dangerous stuff around and he wanted Sam to take it away, to keep it somewhere. Sam said he would. But just then Howard was called to the telephone, and while his back was turned, Sam slipped the envelope into the desk drawer, and went out of the room.”

“Did you later tell Mr. Fleming about this?”

“No, I didn’t. I knew it would worry him, and he’s such a frantic worrier. But I spoke to Sam about it, a little later, and he said he’d already taken the stuff away.”

She rose, stood with her hands in the pockets of her torn skirt.

“I want to go home now,” she said.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Mrs. Dexter,” said Levy. “The District Attorney wants to see you, in his office.”

“Not now,” she said. “I want to go home. I’ve got to go home.”

“Mrs. Dexter, there is a serious charge pending against you. Illegal possession of narcotics.”

“Oh, let me alone! Let me alone,” she cried. “Later on, you can hound me and torment me, but now I’ve got to go *home*.”

“Sergeant Crawford will drive you to the District Attorney’s office now, Mrs. Dexter.”

“I won’t go! Not now! I want to go *home*.”

“Mrs. Dexter, if you raise any further objections, I shall be obliged to place you under arrest.”

“Me?” said Carola. “When you have that murderess here? When—”

“Sergeant!” said Levy, and the young policeman stepped into the room. Then Tilly saw that Pauline and Robert were standing in the little hall hand in hand. Pauline ought to know better! she thought, with indignation. She ought to keep the child away.

“Mrs. Dexter,” said Levy.

“No!” said Carola, and then almost at once: “Yes,” she said. “I’ll go. But I’ve got to stop off at my own house first.”

“Sergeant Crawford has his instructions, Mrs. Dexter.”

“I tell you I’ve got to stop home! I have to—change my clothes. I have to—I’ve got to!”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible, Mrs. Dexter.”

“Damn you!” she cried. “I *will* go home!”

She was pitiable and appalling in her desperation. It’s that drug she wants, Tilly thought in a sort of wonder. It’s horrible, but I’m sorry for her.

“The District Attorney is waiting for you, Mrs. Dexter,” said Levy.

She rushed out of the room, her long fair hair floating behind her. In the hall she stopped, staring down at Robert.

“Here!” she said, taking a little package out of her pocket and thrusting it at the child. “Here! Here’s a present for you. See how you like it.”

“Robert!” cried Tilly, springing to her feet. “Give that to me! At once!”

But he had snatched his hand away from Pauline, and had started up the stairs, with a squeal of excitement. It’s that cyanide! Tilly thought.

She nearly caught him at the head of the stairs, but he darted into the bathroom and turned the key; she heard him give a breathless little laugh.

“Open the door, darling,” she said pleasantly and calmly.

There was no answer, but she believed she heard a rustle of paper, as if he were unwrapping a package.

Take deep breaths, she told herself. Deep, slow breaths. Don’t rattle the knob, don’t pound on the door. Don’t be so angry at him, so fiercely angry you would like to smash in the door, and grab that package, and hit him, push him, knock him down.

“Open the door, darling,” she said again.

There was no answer, no sound but her own loud breathing.

“Open the door, *bébé*,” said Pauline’s voice behind her. “We go to see if my little dog arrives, no?”

The key turned in the lock, and Tilly pulled the door open. There was a scrap of white tissue paper on the floor, and a bit of string. She unclasped his hands, roughly, but they were empty.

“What was in that package?” she demanded.

“The lady gave it to me!” he protested.

She did push him, back against the wall. She felt in the pocket of his shorts, and brought out what she felt there. It was a ring, an old-fashioned one, a plain gold band in which was set a long oval softly-gleaming opal, circled by tiny diamonds.

“Is that what she gave you?” Tilly asked, and he nodded his head. “You bad, horrible, naughty child!” she cried.

“You bad, horrible little thing! Don’t you ever dare to run away again, when I call you.”

“Well . . . You can keep it, Mommy,” said Robert softly.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“The ring of poor Madame Fleming . . .” said Pauline.

“Yes,” Tilly agreed.

“And how did that one come to secure it, I ask you, madame.”

“I don’t know,” Tilly answered.

And I don’t care, either, she thought. I’m—I guess I’m tired. Because I don’t care—about any of it now.

“You will now telephone, madame?”

“Telephone? To whom?”

“But, madame, to the police! They have gone, the young one, also the Lieutenant. But now you telephone, but, of course, madame. You report about the ring, which that one without any doubt stole from poor Madame Fleming.”

“Yes, I’ll tell them.”

“But, madame, without delay, I implore you! That one has made frightful accusations against you. Report this ring, and it will be sure that she is a thief, a liar. Who then will believe what she screams? Me, I know very well why she does this.”

“Robert, run along to your own room and play,” said Tilly.

But he was not going to run; not he. He went off along the hall, with his hands in his pockets, his small dark head bent, tottering as he placed one foot in a straight line before the other.

“I don’t know why she hates me so,” Tilly said.

“But, madame, I think it is not hatred. I think it is fear.”

“You mean she’s afraid she might be suspected?”

“No, madame. That I do not think. What motive can she have for this murder? She gains nothing. She loses a good customer for her wicked drugs. No. Me, I understand human nature perfectly. She tells this story that you took the poison from the desk, because she wishes to protect Mr. Fleming.”

“You mean she thinks *he* did it?”

“She does not think, that one. She is only in panic. Ah! she says to herself. I have lost my good customer, Madame Fleming. But from Mr. Fleming I can always procure a little money, perhaps even much money. So he must not be molested. She thinks if Mr. Osborne tells the police that Mr. Fleming left this poison in the bureau, that will be bad. For of all persons, he has the most to profit. He — The telephone rings, madame! Shall I answer?”

“No, thanks,” said Tilly, and turned and ran down the stairs. It’s the police, she thought. They’ll want to question me about what Carola said. Perhaps they’ll “hold” me. I’ve read

that in the newspapers. “Held for further questioning.” That must mean prison. I can’t . . . I won’t.

She went to the telephone in the little hall and took up the receiver.

“Yes?” she said, in a cold, clear voice.

“Mrs. MacDonald?—Abbott speaking.”

“What do you want?” she cried, shocked.

“The police have given me permission to take Taylor back to the camp. We’re leaving now. And I wanted to say good-bye, Mrs. MacDonald. And to tell you how much—how I appreciate having—it’s been a privilege to meet you.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Tilly.

“Your small son is indeed fortunate, Mrs. MacDonald. Your—er—the influence . . .”

“Oh, thank you!” said Tilly again. “Good-bye and good luck, Mr. Abbott!”

And she hung up the instrument. I didn’t mean to be rude to him, she thought, but I can’t *talk* any more. I don’t want to think. I’m tired. I never felt so tired—and so stupid. She crossed the room to the spring-rocker and sat down in it. It’s so comfortable, she thought. But I can’t rest. I know that. Something will happen. Someone will come, and I’ll have to listen. I’ll have to talk.

There were footsteps on the staircase. Pauline came down, with Robert behind her.

“Madame . . . ?” she said, in eager inquiry.

“I can’t tell you now,” said Tilly. “But you’ll hear later, Pauline.”

“I understand, madame, but perfectly! A secret of the police. You will report the ring?”

“Yes, I will,” said Tilly.

“Now, madame, if you permit . . . I go to make some little arrangement in the kitchen—a little ragout of veal—and then, if you permit, I should like to go in my room and rest a little.”

“Certainly!” said Tilly. “You must be very tired, Pauline.”

“I am tired, madame, and I am sad, for my little dog. But with me, I rest an hour. I spring up, refreshed as at sixteen.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Tilly.

Pauline went into the kitchen with Robert, and Tilly sat in a daze until they returned.

“Now, madame, if I can do something for you, before I rest?” Pauline asked, pushing her hair back from her forehead with a dramatic gesture of fatigue.

“No. No, thanks. Go upstairs and lie down, Pauline,” she said, “and Robert and I will bring you a pot of tea.”

“Oh! Madame is too good!” Pauline protested.

“No. Go ahead,” said Tilly.

“It is too much trouble, madame!”

“No, it isn’t,” said Tilly. Go on upstairs, and shut up.

Pauline started up the stairs, bending forward, and holding the rail, in what Tilly felt to be an exaggerated exhaustion. Well, let her, if she wants. She’s had a hard day. She really is tired. And she seems to think that tea is a sort of medicine.

She put on the kettle, and looked about the unfamiliar little kitchen for a tea pot, a tray, cup, saucer, spoon. Robert climbed on a chair, to examine the shelves in the cupboard.

“Look!” he said. “Look, Mommy! Here’s a cup!”

It was a huge old-fashioned white mug with gold lip and handle, and “Grandpa” written on it in gold.

“It’s too big, darling.”

“No, it *isn’t*! She’d *like* it.”

“I’ve got another cup here for Pauline. Get down, Robert, and don’t touch the china. You might break something.”

“*Look*, Mommy! Look at the little tiny, tiny cup and the little tiny little pitcher! Look!”

“Yes, darling,” Tilly said, turning her head. “It’s a doll’s tea set. Now get down, Robert.”

“There’s a little *tiny* sugar-bowl with sugar in it. Look!”

“Put the lid back on it, and get down from that chair.”

“I want to take this little tiny little sugar-bowl up to Pauline.”

“No. Leave it there.”

“I *want* to take it up to Pauline! It’s *pretty*. It’s got flowers on it.”

“All right!” said Tilly with a sigh. “Put it on the tray.”

“I want to carry it myself!”

“If you promise not to eat any of it, Robert.”

“I promise,” he said.

Tilly carried the tray and Robert went up the stairs before her, with the sugar-bowl.

“Now, I don’t remember which is Pauline’s room,” she said, confronted by four closed doors.

“*This* one!” said Robert.

Tilly knocked, and Pauline opened the door; she was wearing a very long gray taffeta slip, and over it a knitted bed jacket of pale pink, with a big rosy bow under her chin.

“Ah . . . But madame is too good . . . !” she cried.

“*I* brought the sugar-bowl,” said Robert.

“Then you too are good!” said Pauline.

Tilly put the tray on the table.

“Come, Robert!” she said.

“I think I’ll stay here with Pauline.”

“No. Pauline wants to rest.”

“For a little moment only, *bébé*,” said Pauline. “Then I come down, and I prepare your little tea, eh?”

“*I* don’t drink tea.”

“No, no. You shall have something very nice, eh?”

“All right,” said Robert.

Someone had brought his toys here; Tilly waited while he got what he wanted from his room; then they went downstairs together. Tilly sat down in the spring-rocker again, and Robert sat on the floor across the room, and began taking his stone blocks out of their box. He’s very clever with them, she thought. Maybe he’ll be an architect.

The rocker squeaked softly, the trees rustled, like water. It's very dark here, for only half-past three, she thought. Maybe it's going to rain. Or maybe it's a shadow. It's coming to an end. And then someone will scream. . . . We have to stay here. We can't get away. . . .

But I hate this little house. Like a witch's house, in a forest . . . Hansel and Gretel, in my old picture-book, walking hand in hand through a forest . . . And Hansel looked like Robert. No! That's horrible. The witch put him in the oven. . . . Did Pauline look like a witch, so pale and sharp-nosed, with stringy hair?

"Mommy!" called Robert, pulling her sleeve. "It's too dark. I can't see. Mommy, put the light on! Mommy, *hurry up!*"

She opened her eyes, and it was dark; Robert's face looked white.

"*Hurry up, Mommy!*" he cried, pulling at her sleeve.

She rose in haste, filled with the same urgency that possessed the child. But it was a strange room, and she did not know where a light was. She moved forward, with Robert still clutching her sleeve.

"Where's a lamp, Robert?"

"Here! Here! *Hurry up!*"

Her outstretched hand touched a table, groped forward, to the smooth cold base of a lamp; she pulled the dangling chain, a pale yellow light blossomed.

“But, Robert . . . ! Why didn’t you call me before, dear? It was too dark to play, wasn’t it?”

“I guess I went to sleep,” he said, doubtfully.

“Where? On the sofa?”

“No . . . I guess, on the floor.”

She looked at her wrist watch.

“Heavens! It’s twenty past six! We’ll go and ask Pauline for your supper.”

He ran ahead of her, and pushed open the swing door, and stopped. Coming behind him, Tilly saw that the kitchen was dark, and it was, she thought, filled with a stifling vapor, a sickening stench. Fire . . . ? she thought. She felt along the wall for a switch, but found none.

“Hold the door open, Robert,” she said, and by the pallid light from the sitting-room, she went into that dark and stifling room. There was a light hanging from the ceiling; she felt for the chain, and pulled it; it made a grating click and no light came. There’s got to be a light, she said to herself. I’ve got to see . . . She pulled the chain again, and this time it worked, a feeble little light under a fluted white shade.

Smoke was coming from a pot on the gas-stove; she turned off the burner, and raised the lid, and an ill-smelling puff came out; there was nothing in there but a black, sticky paste. Like witches make, she thought. Stop being so silly. It’s the ragout Pauline was making. She must have overslept

too. We all fell asleep, Pauline and Robert and I, and it got dark.

That's nothing. I'm sorry Pauline's ragout is spoiled. But it's nothing. It's not important, not serious. She set the pot in the sink; when she turned on the water, there was a fierce hissing, a cloud of steam. That's nothing.

"I'll get you some supper, Robert," she said.

"No, thank you. I'll go and get Pauline."

"No, Robert. Let her alone. She's tired."

"She said she was going to get me something nice."

"I'll get you something nice."

"No, thank you. I want to go up and get Pauline."

"Well, you can't."

"I want to go upstairs to the bathroom."

"No. There's a bathroom down here."

"Why can't I go upstairs?"

"Because I say no. Sit down here, and I'll see what I can find."

"I want to go *upstairs!* I want to see *Pauline!*"

“No!” she cried. “Sit down there and stop bothering me! You’re not going upstairs.”

“Well, *why?*”

She did not answer him; she could not explain, even to herself, the horrible fear and oppression that weighed upon her. We all went to sleep, and it got dark. And what happened, in the dark? Nearly half-past six, and Pauline’s dinner is ruined. Maybe I ought to go upstairs and—wake her up.

But not now. Not yet. I’ll give Robert his supper first. Then I’ll go up. But not now. Not yet.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It took time to find things, in this unfamiliar place. She laid a checked cloth on the kitchen table; she set out brown bread and butter and honey, and a big glass of milk for him.

“That’s nice, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you,” he answered.

He sat at the table and began to eat, in silence. But he’s not being sulky, she thought. Why doesn’t he say something?

“Some more bread and butter, Robert?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“And more milk?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Don’t you feel like talking, Robert?”

“No, thank you.”

Let him alone. He’s only a child. He can’t tell you if he feels . . . Feels what? Frightened? Sleepy?

“I’ll be back in a moment, Robert. You go on eating.”

She went through the dimly-lit sitting-room into the narrow hall, and tried the front door. It was unlatched. Anyone could have pushed it open; anyone could have come into the house. In the dark. But who? Why should I think that anyone came in?

Pauline was so tired that she’s overslept. In a few moments I’ll go up and wake her. She’ll be so upset about her dinner, poor soul.

“There are some nice red apples here, Robert. Would you like one?”

“No, thank you.”

“Then—you’ve finished now. We’ll go upstairs and you can have a nice, warm bath.”

“Is there anybody else upstairs?”

“Why, no darling. Only Pauline. Who else did you think was there?”

He was silent for a moment, sitting straight in his chair at the table.

“Is Pauline dead?” he asked.

“Robert! Why do you ask that?”

“I went upstairs and I knocked on her door and she didn’t answer, and I went in and she looked—all dead.”

“When did you go upstairs, Robert?”

“When I was building with my blocks, and you had your eyes closed, so I went upstairs. Will she get well again, Mommy?”

Now I have to go up, Tilly thought. But not Robert.

“You stay here, darling,” she said. “I’ll be down—”

“No, thank you. I’d rather go with you.”

“I’ll come down in just a moment, and then I’ll tell you a story.”

“No! I don’t *want* to stay down here alone.”

“Robert—,” she began, but she could think of no way to appeal to him, no way to reach him in his strange mood.

The door-bell rang. She put her hand to her neck, and stood motionless, frozen in fear.

“That’s the door-bell!” said Robert, with an impatient frown.

“Yes. Wait here, darling, just a moment.”

But he got down from his chair; he went close behind her. The branch of a tree was scraping back and forth across a

screen; it seemed to her that the fumes of the burnt and ruined dinner had made a fog in the little house.

“Why don’t you open the door?” Robert demanded, angrily. “Maybe it is the little new dog for Pauline. Open the door, mommy!”

She opened it, only a crack.

“Tilly?” said Howard’s voice.

“Oh, *Howard!*” she cried. “Oh, come in, Howard!”

He entered, closing the door after him; he crossed the dim little sitting-room, and turned on another lamp that stood on top of a tall and very narrow bookcase. But this light, too, was feeble, under a lemon-colored shade.

“Tilly!” he said. “I smell smoke!”

“It’s nothing. Something that was cooking got burnt.”

“Is everything all right here, Tilly?” he asked. “Everything cozy?”

“Howard, I’m worried about Pauline. I wish—”

“Pauline’s all dead,” said Robert, with a sort of smug satisfaction.

“What’s the child mean?” Howard demanded, sharply.

“I don’t know. But she hasn’t come downstairs yet. And the ragout she was cooking is burnt, ruined.”

“She probably fell asleep,” said Howard. “If the dinner’s spoiled, we’ll go to the Inn.”

“Howard, I thought if you’d just go up and knock at her door . . . ?”

“I? Well, see here, Tilly, if she’s asleep—tired out—why not let her alone? I’ll leave a note—”

“Howard, I want to know. If you’ll keep Robert down here, I’ll run up—”

“I’m going with you!” cried Robert. “I won’t stay here alone.”

“Cousin Howard will be with you, Robert. And I’ll be back in a minute.”

“No! I want to go with you!”

“Howard, can’t you—tell him a story, maybe?”

“I cannot,” said Howard. “I couldn’t undertake to look after such an unmanageable child. And it’s not necessary. No reason to disturb Pauline. Come! We’ll go along to the Inn —”

“Howard, I can’t leave the house until I *know*. Just keep Robert here—even if you have to hold him, even if he’s naughty—”

“I’ll do nothing of the sort! It’s all nonsense.”

“Then will you—just go up and knock at her door?”

“I will not, Tilly.”

She felt her heart pounding; she forced herself to breathe deeply and quietly; she forced herself to look at Howard.

“Why—won’t you go up, Howard?” she asked.

“Dear God in Heaven!” he cried. “Haven’t we had enough . . . ?”

“Then you do think something has happened to Pauline?” she asked.

“No! I do not! Simply, I—that smell of burning—is—is sickening. We’ll go to the Inn at once—”

“Not me,” said Tilly. “I won’t leave this house until I see about Pauline.”

“Tilly . . . I’ve had so much—too much. I—you shouldn’t ask me—”

“I won’t, any more.”

She looked at him, and it seemed to her that he was changing before her eyes, that he had changed. He seemed no longer the kindly and pompously courteous Howard; his face, which she had, until now, thought agreeable, but weak, looked strong now, the mouth set, the eyes steady. And it was, she

thought, the strength that fear gives. The frightened creature can break bonds, can plot and plan, can fight, or run.

He is the one who profits the most, Pauline had said. If he had desperately needed money, if he had been desperately longing to break his bonds and be free . . . ?

I don't know . . . she thought. But anyhow, he's got to be kept away from Robert.

She moved, to look at the sitting-room door. "If you'll come out into the hall—"

"Why?" he asked, but he followed her, and so did Robert.

She pushed the child back into the room, and turned the key and put it into her pocket. He began to scream, and pound on the door, and it was to her the very sound of a nightmare, her child terrified, abandoned.

"Tilly!" said Howard, catching her by the arm.

"Let me alone!" she cried, jerking away from him.

He caught her arm again, and she pushed him with all her strength, so that he staggered back. It doesn't matter, she thought. Nothing matters—but this.

This has happened before, she thought. In a nightmare. Because I *know*. She knew the steep and narrow little staircase; she knew the feeling of someone standing silent in the hall below, watching her; she knew the darkness and the silence there would be in the upper hall. She felt along the

wall, and found a switch, and another dim light came on, to show her four closed doors. I remember which is Pauline's room, she thought. I must knock, I must wait. I must knock again.

There would be no answer. There was no answer. Now you must open the door, and it will be dark in there. It was dark, and close, and there was a queer odor in the air. That's it, she thought. The poison.

A faint light came in from the hall, and she went in, and turned on the lamp by the bedside. Now look at her. Not with horror, not with any fear. This is your fellow-creature, and she is dead, and everyone dies.

She turned away and went down the stairs, and Howard was in the hall, leaning against the door, with his hand over his eyes.

"Call the police, Howard," she said. "Pauline's dead."

She unlocked the door, and Robert flew at her, hitting her furiously.

"I *hate* you!" he cried. "I *hate* you!"

She took his hands and held them together.

"I don't think you do," she said. "Not any more. I had to go away for a little while, darling, but now I'm back."

"I don't *want* you back! You locked me up! You went away!"

She freed his hands and moved away, back to the spring-rocker. Pauline was lying dead upstairs, but the cottage had lost its atmosphere of bewitched horror for Tilly. I'm ready, she said to herself.

Those were the words she found for what she felt now. Robert stood before her for a moment; his face was grimy and tear-stained; the knuckles of one hand were grazed; he was breathing hard, with a sort of snort, the ebb-tide of his weeping. Then he turned his back on her and crossed the room.

He was frightened, she thought, he was terrified. Maybe it's one of those things you read about, things a child never gets over. Maybe he'll have nightmares all his life, about being locked up somewhere, alone.

But it's done. It's happened. And other things will happen to him; he'll be hurt; he'll be frightened again. No matter what I do, I can't protect him—from living. I can just stand by him, and let him feel sure of that.

I can't refuse to listen to people, refuse to answer. I can't get away—with Robert—from horrible and dangerous things. From living. I went up those stairs; I knocked at that door. And I can go on now. I'm ready now.

“Robert,” she said, “suppose we go in the little bathroom down here and get your hands and face washed? Then you can lie down on the sofa in here and take a little rest?”

He did not answer; he still stood with his back turned toward her, but when she took his hand, he went with her. His grazed knuckles had bled a little; he winced, and frowned, at the smart of soap on them, but he did not try to pull away.

He'll get over it, she thought. I don't suppose there ever was a child on earth that didn't have things that frightened and hurt it. But we get over things. Even that telegram about Ian. I thought I couldn't bear it, couldn't go on. But we do go on, most of us.

When they went into the sitting-room, Howard was there.

"Levy's coming," he said. "I telephoned. I—My God! What must you think of me, Tilly?"

"I think you're kind and generous," she said. "Here, Robert! Put your head on this pillow and just rest for a while."

The child stretched out, flat on his back, and lay there with his eyes wide open. He's getting sleepy, though, Tilly thought.

"I know how I must look to you," Howard said.

"Contemptible, cowardly . . . It's all very well. It's true. I—when I found Sibyl like that . . . All I could think of was—that I'd be the first one suspected. I mean—the husband . . . I mean—the chief one to benefit . . . That's why I took that chloral hydrate. As if I'd been poisoned, too . . . I had the glass of whiskey in my hand, when I went upstairs, and I put the chloral hydrate in it. That's why I got Osborne not to mention our work—the book, you know—the

photographs . . . I—I thought that if the police knew we had cyanide . . . I—to be frank—I couldn't stand the thought of being dragged into court. . . . I can see now, that I simply made things worse. . . .”

“Yes,” Tilly said. “Do you know—do you think you know who did it, Howard?”

“No . . . ,” he answered. “This may sound like an odd thing to say—may sound heartless, perhaps. But, to tell you the truth, I didn't think much about that. About who was guilty.”

I didn't, either, Tilly thought. She said, “And now—Pauline.”

“She may not be dead, Tilly. I mean to say, a layman—”

“She's dead.”

“Very well!” he said, with another frown. “Natural causes—why not? Overworked herself today—strained her heart—something of that sort. A layman . . .”

He let the sentence trail off, and Tilly had nothing she wanted to say to him. Lieutenant Levy is coming, she thought, and he'll find out. That's his business, just as he said, to find the dangerous people and shut them up. To protect the people who aren't dangerous and savage and utterly irresponsible. Someone's killed Pauline, murdered her. I know it. I think I knew it before.

Then a new thought came to her that made her heart jump. She glanced at Howard, saw him standing, with his knuckles

pressed against his front teeth, his brows drawn together. Like a frightened animal gnawing at a trap?

He lied before, she thought. He took that—other drug; I’ve forgotten the name. He didn’t think about anything, care about anything but keeping himself out of trouble. Suppose he knew that Sibyl’s death was caused by some horrible mistake? Suppose he’d made the mistake himself, by some stupid accident?

Would he let someone else take the blame? I think he would. He’s cowardly. And perhaps cowards are dangerous—always dangerous. To everyone. If Pauline knew anything—if he even thought she knew something . . . ?

Thank God, I don’t know anything. Howard’s always been kind and generous to me and to Robert. It was kind of him to fix up this cottage for us. But if I did know anything, I’d tell it. No matter what it might lead to. The people who are willing to kill have to be—put away. For the sake of the others. You have to be on one side or the other.

The door-bell rang, and Robert sat up, pale and dazed with sleepiness.

“*I’ll go!*”

“No!” said Howard, sharply. “Lie down again—”

“Let him go,” said Tilly. “It’ll be Lieutenant Levy.”

But it was Cantrell who entered, with Sam Osborne behind him.

“Sam!” she cried, and tears sprang to her eyes, began to run down her face. “I’m—glad to see you,” she said.

He was wearing a gray flannel suit that looked too big for him, a green and blue bow tie that was crooked; he had a ruffled, disturbed look. But—I’m so glad to see him . . . , she thought, and could not stop her tears.

“Okay,” he said, laying his hand on her shoulder. “Take it easy.”

“No,” she said. “No . . . Pauline . . . I don’t want to talk with Robert here.”

“You don’t mean . . . ?”

“Yes, I do. It’s—that. Howard’s called the police. Robert, lie down again, won’t you?”

“No!” Robert answered, angrily, and fell back on the pillow. The door-bell rang again, but this time he did not stir. As Osborne and Cantrell went out into the hall, Tilly closed the door after them; she heard quiet voices outside, she heard footsteps mounting the stairs, footsteps overhead; a car stopped before the house, the door-bell rang again.

“Tilly!” said Howard.

“Robert’s asleep,” she whispered.

“Tilly—I can’t stand any more of this. I—I’m afraid I’ll have to get a doctor.”

“They’re sure to have a doctor with them, Howard. When he’s finished upstairs—”

“My God, no! No. I’ll call up Crowdie. I—all this—the—the whole—*atmosphere* . . . It’s—my God! All I ever asked for was—peace and quiet—an orderly life—decency—and dignity—”

Quite a lot to ask, isn’t it? Tilly thought. And who was expected to provide it?

“I’m sorry, Howard,” she said, and she was truly sorry for him. “Why don’t you sit down and smoke a cigarette?”

“Why, yes. Yes. Thanks,” he said. “Got to get hold of myself. I suppose they’ll be asking more questions. More questions . . . Raking up all sorts of—of unnecessary things . . . I—we all have things—we all make mistakes. . . . If the police would stick to the point . . . Not go raking up things—”

Let him go on; maybe it did him good. But she ceased to listen to him; she was back in the spring-rocker, and comfortable there, not drowsy, not tired, but ready. It might be a long time, and what was coming would be hard, it would surely be horrible. Very well. You can wait. You can listen, you can answer, you can endure.

Someone was coming down the stairs; someone was telephoning in the hall outside; she could hear the click of the dial, the murmur of a voice, footsteps remounting the stairs. There were footsteps overhead, heavy, and very stout, she

thought. Perhaps there was something up there in Pauline's room that would point immediately to the murderer. Perhaps they know already, she thought. Then they won't have to ask questions.

They were coming down, a trampling herd of deliberate steps that shook the wall. Levy opened the door.

"Please!" said Tilly. "Robert's asleep in here. Can't we talk somewhere else?"

"There's the dining room," said Howard. "But it's not quite in order yet."

"All right. Where is it?" asked Levy, with a curtness Tilly had not heard from him before.

"This way," Howard said, and as he went out into the hall, Tilly followed him and closed the door.

"Do you want me, Lieutenant?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered.

Howard had opened a door to an airless and hideous little dining room, the walls papered in dark-red, a dark carpet so padded that it felt like damp grass; there was a round pedestal table in the center and over it a hanging light with a dark-red shade. There were six chairs ranged against the wall; Levy drew one up to the table and sat down, but the others remained standing; the police doctor, the young sergeant, another man in uniform, Cantrell, Sam Osborne, Howard, and Tilly.

“I have some questions to ask you,” said Levy, not mild now, not patient. “You are not obliged to answer, but I caution you that evasive, untrue, or incomplete answers will be considered as obstructing the police in the performance of their duty. This woman Pauline Duval has been killed this evening by cyanide poisoning—”

“Suicide!” said Howard. “She was in a bad state—hysterical —”

Levy gave him a glance that silenced him.

“Mrs. MacDonald!” he said. “A chair, Crawford. Sit down, Mrs. MacDonald. Are you prepared to answer the questions put to you truthfully and without reservation?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“I understand you arrived in this house at approximately half-past two this afternoon. Is that correct?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t look at the time.”

“Very well. We can establish the time later. What persons have been in this house since your arrival here?”

I’ll just tell the truth, she thought. About everything.

“Mr. Cantrell and Mrs. Dexter were here before I came,” she said. “I saw them leaving. Mr. Osborne came in with me, and later Mr. Fleming came. Then Mrs. Dexter came back, and you found her here. And there was a young man working here; Pietro, they called him.”

“Mrs. MacDonald, did anyone else enter this house after your arrival?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“You see, after I’d taken a tea-tray up to Pauline, we fell asleep, my son and myself. It was dark when I waked up, and the front door wasn’t locked.”

“You state that you took a tea-tray up to Miss Duval?”

“Yes. She was very tired.”

“Crawford?” said Levy, holding out his hand, and the young sergeant stepped forward, holding something wrapped in a handkerchief. Levy set it on the table, and let the handkerchief fall open.

“Do you recognize this exhibit, Mrs. MacDonald?” he asked.

Don’t let me be pale! Don’t let my heart shake me so! Let me answer.

“Yes. It’s a sugar-bowl,” she said.

It was the little blue and gold doll’s sugar-bowl Robert had carried upstairs.

“Did you take this sugar-bowl to Miss Duval’s room?”

“Yes.”

“What was in this sugar-bowl when you took it up to Miss Duval?”

“I—didn’t look. I just thought it was sugar.”

“How did you know that the bowl wasn’t empty?”

“It—didn’t feel empty.”

“You didn’t remove the lid at any time, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“No. I was rather tired myself, and I didn’t know where to find things. I just—thought it was sugar.”

“Mrs. MacDonald. When you took up the tea-tray—with this sugar-bowl—who was in this house?”

“Just Pauline and Robert and myself.”

“Mrs. MacDonald. To your knowledge, did any person or persons enter this house after you had taken up the tea-tray?”

“Mr. Fleming came, but much later.”

“Did Mr. Fleming go upstairs?”

“No.”

“Mrs. MacDonald, do you suggest that, during the time you state you were asleep, someone entered this house and tampered with the contents of this sugar-bowl?”

“No, I don’t ‘suggest’ anything. I only said that someone *could* have come in without my hearing.”

“But to your knowledge no one had access to this sugar-bowl prior to our arrival?”

“No. Not to my—knowledge.”

“You are willing to state, then, that according to your knowledge, this sugar-bowl and its contents are as they were when you took them to Miss Duval?”

“I didn’t look in the sugar-bowl. I don’t know if somebody else got into the house—”

He lifted the little blue lid by its gold knob.

“Do you recognize the contents of this bowl, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“No. I didn’t look in it before.”

“This bowl contains cyanide crystals, Mrs. MacDonald.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Mrs. MacDonald, are you prepared to confirm your statement that you took this bowl, without examining its contents, without ascertaining whether or not it was empty, and placed it on a tray, which you then carried up a flight of stairs to Miss Duval’s room?”

“I didn’t look in it.”

I will not let Robert get into this. He looked in it, he said it was sugar, and I let it go. He carried it up. In front of me. Suppose he'd come behind me? He's only five. He might so easily have wanted to take some. . . .

“It seems evident, at present, that Miss Duval believed this to be sugar, and put a certain amount, not yet determined, into a cup of tea. Two or three sips—”

“It's my fault,” said Tilly. “I should have looked. It's my fault.”

“Can you suggest by what method the cyanide crystals were put into the sugar-bowl, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“No. No, I can't.”

“Exactly where did you find this bowl, Mrs. MacDonald?”

“On a shelf in the kitchen cupboard.”

“I shall ask you to show me—”

“Wait!” cried Howard, with a sort of gasp. “Wait . . . !”

“Wait for what, Mr. Fleming?”

“I put the—the crystals in the bowl. Weeks ago. I—I looked around. . . . I couldn't find a jar . . . So I used that. I—I put it on a shelf in the dark-room we'd fitted up here. I—at the time—there was no one living in the house. I—no one. I—no one used the house. I—I—I assume—full responsibility.”

“That’s where young Taylor got the stuff, then,” said Osborne. “There never was any envelope full of cyanide, addressed to me, in the desk here, or in any other desk.”

“I—I—assume responsibility for that, too,” said Howard. “For the boy. For what he did. I—”

“I’ve got some of this responsibility, myself,” said Osborne. “The day after Mrs. Fleming’s death, I came to search the place—”

“I asked you to,” said Howard. “I—I thought that if—if cyanide were f-found here, there would be—there would be—complications. I—”

“Fleming said there were some cyanide crystals in a blue jar, in the dark-room,” Osborne went on. “Naturally, we kept pretty careful track of the stuff, how much we bought, how much we used, and so on. So I looked, all right. Nothing in the dark-room. I looked in both the bathrooms, in the kitchen. Trouble is, I was looking for a blue jar, and I wouldn’t call that thing a jar. I probably saw it, because I looked in the kitchen cupboard, but I didn’t bother with it. I suppose Taylor put it there, when he’d taken what he wanted.”

“I—understood . . . ,” said Howard. “I understood you—”

“I know,” said Osborne. “I told you I’d searched the place thoroughly—which was true, in a way, and that I hadn’t found any blue jar or any cyanide.” He paused for a moment. “When I come to think of it,” he said, “I remember a little

doll's tea-set. I must have stood six inches from that bowl . . .”

“Very well,” said Levy, rising. “That’s all.”

“How do you mean that’s all?” asked Osborne, startled.

“I shan’t need to ask you any further questions—at the present moment,” said Levy. “Or Mrs. MacDonald. Or Mr. Fleming. I’ll lay the facts before the Horton County District Attorney, and he’ll decide whether or not to make a charge of criminal negligence against any or all of you.”

“Not Mrs. MacDonald,” said Osborne. “There’s absolutely no reason to suspect that she knew what was in that damn bowl.”

“There’s still less reason to believe that any woman would carry a bowl up a flight of stairs without troubling to see whether or not the bowl was empty, or what it contained. Unless she had accepted the statement of a second person that the bowl contained sugar.”

“What ‘second person’?” Osborne asked.

Levy glanced at him, and looked away.

“The District Attorney will undoubtedly want to question all three of you, later on,” he said. “None of you must leave this vicinity without his authorization.”

“I’d like to make a statement,” said Cantrell. “Not that I think it’s going to help much, but I want to get it off my

chest.”

For the first time, he seemed handsome to Tilly, straight and stalwart, his ruddy face composed, dignified, a little sad.

“I’m directly responsible for Sibyl’s murder,” said Cantrell. “I’m not going to deny it. Weeks ago, Carola brought this capsule out of her purse. She told me she’d filled it with cyanide that she’d got hold of when she was watching you and Osborne working on some photographs. She told me she’d fixed up the capsule, carried it with her all the time, so that she could commit suicide if—as she put it—things got worse. She meant, if the time came when she didn’t have enough money to buy her cocaine. I didn’t believe she had poison in the capsule. She was always talking about suicide, when she needed money. And—” He was silent for a moment. “I’ll be candid about it,” he said. “I did have doubts about it. But, to tell you the truth, even if I’d been much surer than I ever was, I don’t think I’d have taken any steps. I’d talked to four or five doctors about her—and they weren’t hopeful. Not one of them. She could have been sent away, for a cure. But there aren’t many cures. And—well, you remember what she was like, even three years ago, Howard.”

“Yes,” Howard said. “I remember. Popular, very pretty. Looked ten or fifteen years younger than now. Yes . . .”

“As soon as I heard the facts about poor Sibyl,” Cantrell said, “I felt pretty sure that this capsule was somehow involved in it, but—”

“But you deliberately withheld this vital information from the police,” said Levy.

“It was wrong,” said Cantrell. “I admit it. But I didn’t want to drag Carola into the thing. She—in her present condition—she couldn’t hold her own. She’s careless, y’ know—to the point of recklessness. Anyone might have stolen that capsule from her purse, or it’s equally probable that she might have left it lying around somewhere, anywhere. If anyone else had been accused, I’d have come forward, but in the circumstances . . .”

“You did not consider the possibility that Mrs. Dexter might be guilty?”

“Carola?” said Cantrell. “Lord, no! I’ve known her for years. And anyhow—” He paused, and the color rose in his face. “If I had considered that . . . Very well, damn it! I did. But there wasn’t any possible motive. I mean—she’d have everything to lose and nothing to gain. And even if she’s—well, not quite herself, these days, she wouldn’t murder an old friend, for no reason. I’ve known her for years,” he said, again.

That sounds ridiculous, childish, Tilly thought. But I guess we’re all like that.

“But you didn’t come forward,” said Levy. “These two deaths could both have been prevented. But they weren’t. If the police had been informed that Mrs. Dexter was in possession of a capsule which she had declared to contain cyanide, the capsule would have been examined, and she would have been put under restraint. Before a murder was

committed. If the police had been informed promptly that a blue ‘jar’ containing cyanide crystals was missing from this house, my men would have made a search. And you can take my word for it that they’d have found it. Before an innocent person was killed.”

They were all listening to him, in silence.

“Each one of you four had an idea of ‘protecting’ someone,” he went on. “You withheld information from the police. You protected no one.” He put his notebook into his breast pocket. “Think it over,” he said.

“Wait,” said Tilly. “I meant to tell you this before, but I—I forgot.”

She still had the opal ring in her pocket. She brought it out and gave it to Levy.

“Mrs. Dexter gave it to Robert,” she said, “just before you took her away this afternoon.”

Levy was holding up the ring so that the light shone on it, the tiny diamonds twinkled, brilliant, yet somehow insignificant beside the calm, smooth luster of the opal.

“I don’t suppose it’s of any importance,” Tilly said, apologetically. “Only—I wanted to tell you—everything.”

“A beautiful stone,” said Levy, contemplating it.

“It’s Sibyl’s ring . . .” said Howard, in a hushed voice.

“Belonged to her mother. But Sibyl didn’t like to wear it.

Bad luck, she used to say.”

“Yes,” said Levy. “There’s an interesting history attached to the opal, and the superstition that it brings bad luck.”

He smiled a little, and Tilly was amazed by the change in him, a change that affected all of them in the room. It was as if some intolerable tension were being gently relaxed.

“I’m very glad to get this, Mrs. MacDonald,” he said. “It’s what you might call the last link in the chain.”

From his breast pocket he took out a neat, dark-blue linen wallet, and from it he took a folded paper.

“I found this in Mrs. Dexter’s room,” he said. “I’ll read it to you.” He glanced around at them. “Dearest Carola: I am frightfully sorry not to send you the money as I promised, but I am absolutely out of cash, and I know you never want checks. So I’ve told Jensen to leave you this little package. You can sell it, or pawn it, or anything you want. Best of luck, darling, and see you soon. As ever, Sibyl.” He folded the note and replaced it in the wallet. “I didn’t, of course, know what had been in the ‘little package.’ But now I do.”

He picked up the ring from the table.

“A beautiful stone,” he said, again. “But, in this instance, the cause of a murder.”

“What d’you mean?” asked Cantrell, frowning.

“You’ll remember Mrs. Dexter’s outburst, when the late Mrs. Fleming’s will was read, citing her as the recipient of this ring. I suggest that the late Mrs. Fleming sent this ring to Mrs. Dexter, in lieu of the cash she had agreed to pay for her narcotics, and that when she received it, Mrs. Dexter believed it to be a deliberate attempt to bring ‘bad luck’ upon her. She needed money, but she was afraid to sell the ring, or to keep it. I suggest that her resentment—and her desperate need for money, for drugs—increased to a fury which led her to commit this murder.”

“Look here!” said Cantrell. “You’re not trying to say that *Carola* did it?”

“That’s my belief,” said Levy. “It’s been fairly obvious for some time. Mrs. Dexter supplied the late Mrs. Fleming with these narcotics. She had free access to any part of the house. She put the capsule into that bottle, and afterwards, she took the bottle away. It was simple. You were all downstairs.” He paused for a moment, then went on. “You understand, of course, that the police are not obliged to supply a motive, but, when a case comes to trial, motive is the chief factor with the average jury.”

“You can’t bring *Carola* to trial!” said Cantrell. “She’s—not responsible.”

“The question of an individual’s responsibility is a complicated legal matter, Mr. Cantrell.”

“You’re not going to arrest the poor girl!”

“She’s already under arrest,” said Levy. “In the State Hospital.”

There was a long silence.

“But this . . . ?” Howard said. “This—about Pauline?”

“So far,” said Levy, “I’m prepared to accept this as an accident. Caused by criminal negligence on the part of yourself, Mr. Fleming, of Mr. Osborne, and of Mrs. MacDonald.”

He rose.

“Both of these deaths could have been averted,” he said, “if all of you—including you, Mr. Cantrell, had had the honesty, the intelligence, and the courage to tell what you knew to the people you pay to protect you.”

There was a moment of silence. Then Osborne said, “Is it all right if I drive Mrs. MacDonald and her child to the Inn?”

“I’ve no objection to that,” said Levy. “Provided you all three hold yourselves in readiness for further questioning. Good-night.”

He went out of the room with Cantrell, and behind him went the police doctor, the young sergeant, the other man in uniform, all without a word or a glance. The three they had left were silent, Tilly sitting at the table, Osborne and Howard standing, and it was as if they were abandoned, disgraced, stricken.

“I vote we don’t start ‘thinking things over’ tonight,” said Osborne. “Ready, Tilly? I’ll carry your young hellion out to the car, and maybe he won’t wake up.”

“But—but . . . ,” said Howard. “If you’d both come back to—to my house . . . ? Gloria’ll find something to make us a little snack. I mean—”

“Tilly doesn’t want to go back there,” said Osborne.

“I don’t . . . Are you coming back later, Sam?” Howard asked.

“Come along with us to the Inn,” said Osborne. “And, for God’s sake, don’t hem and haw. I want to get Tilly out of here. I’ll go upstairs with you while you pack a bag, Tilly.”

Pauline’s door was closed.

“Is she . . . ?” Tilly asked.

“Don’t be morbid,” said Osborne.

He put his arm around her shoulder and drew her close to him; he bent, and kissed her on the temple.

“Hurry up now, and pack,” he said. “And don’t ask any questions, and don’t do any thinking until I tell you to.”

“I must say—!” Tilly began.

“No, you mustn’t,” said Osborne. “Hurry up, and pack.”

THE END

Transcriber's Notes

- Silently corrected a few typos.
- Retained publication information from a reprint edition: this eBook is public-domain in the country of publication.
- Omitted two novellas by other authors, still under copyright, from that edition.
- In the text versions only, text in italics is delimited by _underscores_.

[The end of *Widow's Mite* by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding]