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*Title:* The Clock Ticks On

*Date of first publication:* 1933

*Author:* Valentine Williams

*Date first posted:* July 5, 2022

*Date last updated:* July 5, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220710

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

# The Clock Ticks On

*by*

VALENTINE WILLIAMS

*Secret Service  
Series*



New York

P. F. COLLIER & SON CORPORATION  
PUBLISHERS

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*To*  
DOUGLAS

*This souvenir of Manhattan days and nights  
fraternally*

# THE CLOCK TICKS ON

## CHAPTER I

FIVE days out from Southampton, the Megantic, nose to New York, forged her way carefully through placid seas. There was fog about, and from time to time the great ship's siren sent its melancholy call booming through the June night. Dinner was an hour past: there was dancing in the big salon that evening and the men had the smoke-room to themselves. The air was clouded with the fumes of tobacco and vibrant with the desultory murmur of conversation.

A group of four men, clustered about a corner table, was silent. One of them, a puffy individual with a bald head, eyes screwed up against the cigar stub he held between his teeth, was reading a novel; a scientific magazine engrossed the attention of the second, who faced him across the table; the third was playing patience; while, as for the bespectacled youth who made up the fourth member of the circle, he smoked his pipe reflectively, gazing before him into space.

With a bang that set the cards dancing, the bald-headed man shut his book and slammed it down on the table. 'Tripe!' he vociferated disgustedly.

The card-player glanced up from his patience. 'Steady, Sir Alfred!' he murmured banteringly.

The other snorted. 'Sorry, Reardon. But, really, the muck they publish nowadays! Great Scott, I could write a better crime story myself!' He gazed about him for an audience and, perceiving that the youth with the pipe was regarding him with mild interest, immediately fixed upon him. 'A big employer of labour like me,' he pronounced pompously, 'has to be able to read men, see? I—er—flatter myself I can detect ability at a glance—er—deduction, yer know. I employ something over fourteen-hundred hands'—he seemed to swell a little—'and I study 'em individjerly, see what I mean? I get reg'lar reports on my work-people, and if I spot a man or woman with brains, I promote 'em. If you were to talk to any of my friends in Birmingham, where I come from, they'd allow that Alf Wellow's a pre-etty fair judge of people, I reckon. I've been at it that long I jes' can't help studying 'em. In the train, now, or in the Rolls driving to the works of a morning, I like to look at the folks and try and place 'em...' He wagged his shining pate in self-approbation. 'A rare good detective I'd have made...'

As this was obviously a monologue calling for no conversational activity on his part, the youth held his peace.

‘Take you, young Dene,’ Sir Alfred proceeded. ‘I’ve met you for the first time aboard this boat and I know nothing about you. Let’s see what I make of you...’ With a quick movement the young man removed his pipe and gazed rather hard at the speaker through his glasses.

‘You’re studious-looking,’ Sir Alfred went on, ‘and you wear what’s obv’ously a college tie. Yet I’d say you were too old to be still at college. A medical student, that’s what you are. Am I right?’

Dene laughed easily and replaced his pipe between his teeth. ‘I’m reading for the Bar, as a matter of fact,’ said he.

Sir Alfred beamed. ‘You see? I wasn’t so fer out...’ Then, noticing that the man opposite had put aside his magazine and was listening, ‘I was just having a little experiment with our young friend here,’ he explained.

‘So I see,’ remarked the other. ‘I’d no idea you went in for that sort of thing, Sir Alfred...’ His tone was faintly sarcastic.

‘Oh, just in an amachoor way, Blain, just in an amachoor way,’ Sir Alfred conceded, a fatuous smile on his fat and glowing countenance.

‘Quite,’ said Blain bluntly, gazing round the smoke-room. He was a long-nosed man with a strident voice. ‘Let’s test you out. D’you see that fellow over there? The old boy in the grey suit—there, he’s just drinking a glass of water...’

Sir Alfred settled his *pince-nez* on his nose to examine the person indicated. ‘Ah,’ he commented. ‘A kindly, refined face. American, obv’ously. Quietly dressed: apparently neither drinks nor smokes...’ He took off his glasses. ‘Well, Blain, I’ll tell you. I’d judge him to be a social worker of some kind, perhaps a lay preacher...’

Blain cackled discordantly. ‘“Social worker” is good. That’s Jack Finnegan, the con. man. He’s been working the boats for years. If you sit round here long enough, he’ll probably come over and offer to make your fortune!’

The patience player looked up from his game with a grin and even the stolid young man at Sir Alfred’s side relaxed into a smile. Sir Alfred cleared his throat. ‘That’s not a fair test...’

‘Right-o,’ Blain retorted. ‘Try me. I’ve told you nothing about myself. What do I do for a living?’

Sir Alfred was silent for a moment, drawing on his cigar and studying him. ‘Well,’ he said slowly, ‘you obv’ously belong to the professional

classes. Yet I wouldn't say that you were a doctor or a lawyer—you look to me more like a chap whose life is spent in the fresh air. And you read *The Scientific American*. I'd guess you were a civil or mining engineer...'

Blain shook his head. 'Wrong. Anyone else like to have a shot?'

There were no takers. 'I'm a vet.,' he announced, with an undisguised air of triumph. 'I spend my life travelling about the world gelding race-horses. Twice a year I go to the States. I'm on my way now to the Blue Grass country—Kentucky, you know.' He laughed unpleasantly. 'Spotting people's occupations isn't as easy as you think, Sir Alfred...'

With a peevish air the other sliced his cigar ash into the match-stand. 'Perhaps you can do better yourself,' he suggested, and glanced about him. 'Take Captain Reardon here. What does he do for a livelihood? Or has he told you?'

The card-player shifted a king and smiled. He was an attractive-looking man in the forties, exceedingly well-groomed, with a gardenia in the lapel of his evening coat.

'D'you mind, Reardon?' Sir Alfred asked.

'Go ahead,' said the other.

'All I know about Captain Reardon,' Blain observed, 'is that he left the Army after the war and is going to New York on business...'

'What business?' Sir Alfred demanded, with a malicious glance round the table.

'Do *you* know?' Blain enquired.

'Certainly...'

The vet. hesitated. 'Let's see. I shouldn't wonder if he didn't represent one of the big English luxury houses, motor-cars, or pipes, or perfumes...'

'Wrong!' Sir Alfred proclaimed.

'If it were polo ponies, I'd know him.' Blain remarked. 'He might be secretary of a club or something...'

'Wrong!' the reply came again.

Blain laughed and turned to the young man with the glasses. 'Go on! You have a shot,' he said.

Dene laughed and shook his head.

'Come on, young Dene!' cried Sir Alfred, clapping him on the knee. 'If you guess right, I'll stand a round of drinks. Reardon don't mind, do you, Reardon?'

'Go ahead,' said the card-player as before.



Dene shrugged his shoulders. ‘Captain Reardon’s obviously artistic,’ he pronounced. ‘I should say he’s an interior decorator or a designer, something like that...’

Reardon laughed and turned to his neighbour. ‘I’m afraid the drinks are on you, sir...’

‘D’you mean to say he’s guessed right?’ Blain demanded.

‘Near enough,’ remarked Sir Alfred. ‘He’s in the antique business.’ He crooked his finger at a waiter.

Blain turned to Dene. ‘Well, I’m blessed. How did you know?’

The young man shrugged. ‘He’s got artistic hands...’

Blain glanced across the table. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I suppose he has. But how did you spot ’em?’

Dene took off his glasses and began to polish them on his handkerchief. ‘I dunno. I always look at people’s hands. You can learn a lot from hands...’

‘But where did you get the interior-decorator notion?’ Blain enquired.

‘I happened to see him studying the frescoes in the big saloon,’ Dene explained.

‘He might have been an artist, mightn’t he?’

The young man shook his head. ‘Too well-dressed. Besides, he mentioned that he was going to the States on business. Artists don’t talk like that...’

Voices raised in heated argument were now audible from the table at the back of the group.

‘He had a fair trial, didn’t he?’ cried one, an unmistakably English voice.

‘I’m not saying he didn’t,’ was the retort in a nasal American accent. ‘I’m only pointing out that the evidence was purely circumstantial...’

‘Circumstantial or not, they’ll hang him,’ the first speaker declared with considerable emphasis. ‘If you think you can transplant your damned gangster methods to England...’

Dene had turned his head in the direction of the altercation and was listening with his habitual non-committal air. A little stir brought his attention back to his own table. The men had risen to their feet. A pretty blonde American girl stood there. She wore a little jacket of white fur over her blue evening frock and clasped a backgammon board under one arm.

‘Please don’t get up, everybody,’ she begged rather breathlessly, and addressed Reardon. ‘Oh, Larry,’ she said, ‘Fay Montagu and Enid and George and the whole gang are down in Jack’s stateroom. Jack’s getting up a backgammon tournament and you’ve got to come along...’

Reardon swept the cards together. He moved round the table. ‘Count me out on the drinks, do you mind, sir?’ he told Sir Alfred. ‘I’m with you, honey,’ he said to the girl. With a faint blush on her pretty face, she was gazing ecstatically at the tall Englishman. Reardon smiled at her: He showed very white teeth when he smiled, and his eyes, smouldering blue under long, close lashes, twinkled. ‘Come on, Helen. We’ll clean those guys out,’ he exclaimed. Long-legged, leisurely, and debonair he took her arm and they went away together.

A little Jewish man, round as a ball, was leaning forward to speak to Dene. It was Harry Solomons, the New York buyer, who sat next to him at meals. ‘It was just like I told you, boy,’ he pronounced solemnly. ‘We shall be late docking tomorrow, the Chief Officer says...’

‘An infernal noosance,’ grumbled Sir Alfred, who had overheard the remark. ‘I’m expected in Chicago Sunday morning. The convention opens Monday and I’ve got to see that the newspapers get advance copies of my speech... How late are we going to be, do you know?’ he asked the buyer.

‘It depends on the fog lifting,’ Solomons replied. The wail of the ship’s siren cut across his words.

Out of the shattering echoes of the foghorn’s warning, the disputing voices, heard before, emerged. A burly Briton with a flat provincial accent and a loud, hectoring manner was engaged in heated controversy with a plump, middle-aged American and his friend, likewise American, a short, aggressive individual. It was one of those bar-room discussions, interminable, digressive, in which no one is allowed to finish a sentence, everybody talks at once, and a faint aroma of whiskey hangs over all.

‘I’ll tell you why he won’t speak,’ vociferated the Englishman. ‘It’s because the police proved their case up to the hilt and he can’t say anything without giving himself away...’

‘Without giving the higher-ups away, you mean,’ the short man put in. ‘I’m not saying a word against your Scotland Yard boys, but they can’t be expected to know the ways of these gunmen. Take the Becker case, fr’instance...’

‘The way it looks to me and one or two Americans I’ve talked with,’ his plump friend interjected, ‘this bird Cloan or Atbury, or whatever he calls himself, is...’

‘You’re darned right, Gus, darned right,’ the other American struck in. ‘What I mean to say is...’

‘You can argue till you’re blue in the face,’ cried the Briton irascibly, ‘and you’ll never get away from the fact that Cloan killed the butler. You

know damned well that Scotland Yard did a thundering smart piece of work: the trouble is you won't admit it...'

'Wait a minute, wait a minute...' objected the short man.

'When they bumped off Rosenthal...' his friend began.

But the Englishman's stentorian voice overtoned them. 'What did the police have to go on? Nothing,' he proclaimed. 'No finger-prints and the safe unscratched. Yet in a week they'd nailed their man. Why, in America he'd never have been arrested, let alone brought to trial and convicted...'

'Just let me ask you one thing...' the plump American was interposing when his friend stopped him.

'Hold it, Gus, while he tells me this...' He bent forward impressively towards the Englishman. 'Did the police bring any evidence to show how he opened the safe? Will you answer me that?'

'You said yourself the case against Cloan was purely circumstantial,' the Englishman countered irritably. 'The Cartwrights thought the world of him. Both Mr. and Mrs. Cartwright had the combination of the safe. Cloan could easily have got hold of it somewhere. After all, that was what he was there for, with faked references and all...'

'And how did he get into the house?' the plump American broke in. 'He lived out, didn't he, over the garage?'

'He was in and out of the house all day,' the Englishman retorted. 'Used to valet Cartwright, didn't he? He could have had a key made, left a window open or something...'

The plump man applied himself to his glass.

'Well,' said his friend, 'I was reading in the ship's paper where some Congressman was conferring with the American Embassy about the case...'

'A fat lot of good that'll do Cloan,' was the blunt answer. 'The Home Secretary don't dare grant a reprieve. Public opinion wouldn't stand for it...'

A bell-boy tripped through the room. 'Paging Mr. Baldwin,' he chanted.

The plump American rose hastily. 'That's my call from New York,' he explained. 'You coming along to say "Hello" to Edie, Joe?' he said to his friend.

'Okay, Gus,' the latter replied. They hurried away.

At the corner table a steward was serving the drinks Sir Alfred had ordered. Little Solomons declined to join the three men: he did his drinking by proxy, he explained. There was the murmur of staccato salutations.

'Well,' remarked Sir Alfred, setting down his glass and wiping his moustache, 'our noisy friend is right. They'll hang this chap Cloan if only to

show people that you can't shoot a man in England and get away with it...'

Blain nodded. 'The old *Daily Mail* had a pretty stiff leader. They never got the stuff back, did they?'

Sir Alfred shook his head. 'No. Fifty thousand quid-worth of diamonds. Pretty nice haul!'

'What case are they talking about?' Solomons said to Dene.

The young man was silent, staring in front of him and smoking his pipe.

Blain answered for him. 'It's the Oldholme Priory jewel robbery,' he explained, and, perceiving that the other's face was a blank, added, 'You must have read about it in the newspapers?'

'I've been travelling in France for the past two months,' the buyer replied, 'and I don't read the French papers so good...'

Sir Alfred seized the opportunity to resume the direction of the conversation. 'Some Americans called Cartwright took this place, 'Oldholme Priory, for the summer,' he informed his questioner. 'They brought this man Atbury—his real name is Cloan, but he called himself Atbury—with them as chauffeur from New York. Mrs. Cartwright had a lot of valuable jewellery which they kept in a safe in the library. One morning—last April, I think it was—the butler was found shot dead beside the safe and the jewellery gone...'

'Seems to me I did hear something about it,' Solomons put in. 'The chauffeur was an ex-convict, wasn't that it?'

'Yes. His real name is Gerry Cloan. He'd served a term in Sing Sing. One of these rum-running cases—he'd shot a policeman or something...'

'Pardon, Sir Alfred,' Blain interposed. 'It was Ed Cloan, the brother, who killed the policeman. Ed Cloan was never brought to justice. Gerry Cloan was only driving the car...'

'Anyway, his references were forged...'

'Not forged. Stolen,' Blain corrected. 'The real Atbury is a chauffeur in Detroit. He was robbed of his papers in a speakeasy. Gerry Cloan admitted that the papers weren't his: said he'd bought them off a man when he found his prison record prevented him from getting work...'

'A pack of lies!' Sir Alfred affirmed. 'Why, he swore he was in bed and asleep at the time of the shooting until the police produced a witness who'd seen him hanging about the Priory Gates at two o'clock in the morning...'

'What settled Cloan's hash, however, was the gun,' Blain pronounced very positively; he seemed to delight in parading his knowledge of the case before Sir Alfred. He turned to Solomons: in the animation of their

discussion the two men appeared to have overlooked the buyer, who was vainly trying to edge his way back into the conversation. 'They found it in the reeds of a pond in the grounds,' Blain explained to the buyer.

'With a silencer attached,' Sir Alfred interjected promptly. 'That explained why no one heard the shot...'

Little Solomons nodded. 'They don't allow them to be sold at home any more...'

For the first time Dene, who had sat by smoking in stolid silence, spoke up. 'Is that a fact?'

'Sure...'

'Nevertheless...—Sir Alfred's tone was triumphant—'I believe I'm right in saying'—he glanced at Blain—'that both gun and silencer bore the American maker's name?'

'The gangs back home get hold of them, I guess,' Solomons commented. 'What does this egg say about it, anyway?'

'His system is to deny everything,' Blain replied. 'He declares he never saw the gun in his life and that he has never had a gun in his possession since he left America...'

'The old racket,' observed the buyer cheerfully. 'If they talk, they get bumped off by their pals, and if they don't talk, they go to the chair. It's one hell of a life, it seems to me...'

'A man at my club,' Blain remarked, 'knows Packett, who defended Cloan. Packett was in despair, he says: Cloan gave him no help whatever. There was this trip of Cloan's to London, for instance, a week before the murder. The prisoner refused absolutely to say a word about it—it did him a lot of harm with the jury. The police never explained it, did they?' he asked Sir Alfred.

Sir Alfred assumed a mysterious air. 'It was to arrange for the disposal of the diamonds, probably through an accomplice in touch with—er—a fence at Antwerp or Amsterdam. This is the police theory, at any rate. I was talking to our Chief Constable just before I sailed. He'd been up to town seeing the Yard about something or other and ran into Chief Inspector Manderton who's been in charge of the case. Between ourselves, Manderton, who's an old friend of his, told him that since times have been so hard on the other side a lot of American criminals have been operating over here...'

'One up to Old Man Depression,' little Solomons observed humorously.

A measured frown corrected this display of levity. 'It seems there have been several big jewel robberies on the Continent in which American

women were the victims,' Sir Alfred proceeded, in his pompous way. 'Safe robberies, like this one, see? There was one at Cannes and another, I believe, at Biarritz—Manderton thinks the women were followed from America, as in this case...'

'Organization, eh?' said Blain.

'Smart work all right,' Sir Alfred agreed. 'The French police were completely in the dark. The thieves got away and the jewellery was never recovered...'

'But you pulled in this guy over in England, didn't you?' the buyer asked.

Sir Alfred puffed out his chest. 'England ain't the Continent, friend. Scotland Yard put their hands pre-etty promptly on the right man...'

'But not on the stuff, eh?'

'They'll get back the stuff all right, don't you worry. In the mean time, they charged Cloan at the assizes and he was sentenced to death...'

'They'll hang him, that guy back there was saying?'

'You bet they'll hang him. And the sooner the better...'

'Right off the bat like that?'

'Why not? The fellow's guilty...'

Little Solomons shook his head. 'Kinda tough luck...'

'Are you suggesting that the blackguard should be reprieved?' Sir Alfred demanded, bristling.

'I'll say not,' the buyer assured him heartily. 'I was only thinking he'd have done better to have stayed home. With us he'd always have found a lawyer to keep stalling things along...'

'As a matter of fact,' Blain now put in, 'there's a good chance of the execution being deferred. Packett told this friend of mine he was in hopes of getting the Home Secretary to review the whole case again, just as Joynson Hicks did in that Brighton murder, remember? The Home Office were calling for all the papers, he said...'

'Lot of tomfool nonsense,' declared Sir Alfred. 'I'd string him up first and give 'em the papers afterwards...'

'I don't suppose it'll make any difference in the long run,' Blain proceeded. 'But Packett said it would delay the execution for a week. If I were Gerry Cloan, I'd rather have it over and done with...'

Little Solomons shuddered. 'Can't you gentlemen talk of something else?' he asked plaintively. 'You sure give me the willies...'

Dene, who had apparently been sunk in a brown study during this desultory discussion, stood up abruptly.

‘What? Have you had enough, too?’ Solomons demanded jokingly.

Dene laughed. ‘It’s a bit smoky in here,’ he said. ‘I’m going to get a mouthful of fresh air before I turn in...’

He nodded unconcernedly to the three men and, going to the door, passed out on deck.

## CHAPTER II

OUT on the deck it was dark save for the rare patches of light cast by the frigid, naked lamps in their wire cages. Dene found himself alone with the wind and the fretful, never-ceasing noises of a ship at sea. Awnings slapped against their frames: high above his head the breeze went piping through the gossamer of the wireless aerials; at his feet the water hissed and foamed as it slithered away from the vessel's sides. Everything dripped with the sea-mist. But the fog was lifting. Past the stark silhouettes of the smokestacks reared against the black curtain of the night, there was the glint of stars between the flying cloud-wrack.

The young man went to the rail and turned to let the wind blow upon his face and flatten his thin evening clothes against him. Sombrely he gazed into the darkness. Beneath his feet the deck quivered in time with the rhythmic tremolo of the propellers, as he stood there in silence, his mind filled with the grim tragedy they had been discussing, it seemed to him that the steady pulsation was beating out a name. With an unwilling gesture he shifted his position and, leaning on the clammy bulwark, cast his glance down to where a frothing, curling edge of inky water advancing and retiring was visible in the glow from the tiered decks.

Gerry Cloan... thump-thump: Gerry Cloan... thump-thump: like piano-keys striking their wires the propellers seemed to hammer out their endless refrain upon his taut nerves. A face that had haunted him all through the voyage rose to the surface of his mind. He closed his eyes to shut it out, and, when it appeared more clearly than before, opened his eyes again only to see it far below, forming and dissolving in the eternal to and fro of the waves. It was a young man's face, ghastly with the prison pallor, the eyes haggard with misery and despair. Out of the sea those eyes seemed to stare up at him imploringly as they had stared at him from the dock. The man at the rail shivered and, turning his back on the ocean, went below.

In the privacy of his modest stateroom on D, he stripped off his dinner-coat and, lighting a cigarette, sat down on the bed. With a distraught air he ran his fingers through his thatch of tawny hair. The coat he had removed lay beside him on the bunk. As though on a sudden impulse, the young man felt in the inside pocket and took out a flat leather wallet. From it he drew a folded letter.

At that moment the cabin door was softly tapped. Swiftly the young man replaced the letter and slipped the wallet in his pocket.



‘Who is it?’ he cried.

‘It’s me, sir,’ a cockney voice made answer.

Dene opened the door. His steward was there. ‘Beggin’ your pardon, Mr. Dene, sir’—his manner was more than usually impressive—‘but the Captain wishes to see you immediate...’

The young man lifted his eyebrows. ‘Me, Bligh? At this time of night? Are you sure there isn’t some mistake?’

‘Oh, no, sir. ’Is stooard jes’ come down with the message. If you was in bed you was to dress yourself, was the Captain’s order. If you’ll kindly foller me, sir...’

With a perplexed air Dene put on his coat, adjusted his tie in the mirror and smoothed his hair, and followed Bligh out.

The Captain’s sanctum, abaft the bridge, was commodious and many-windowed. With its cream walls, its water-colours and bookcases, and its big bowl of Hampshire roses on the writing-table, it suggested the morning-room of an English country-house. The curtains, close-drawn against the windows streaming with moisture, lent the cabin a cosy, intimate air. The throb of the screws, imparting a gentle vibrato to every object there, was the only sound.

In the smart blue-and-gold mess-jacket, with its double row of medal ribbons, the Captain was a gallant and dignified figure. He rose from behind the desk, a big man, grizzled and authoritative, as his steward, to whom Bligh had consigned his charge, ushered the caller in.

‘This Mr. Trevor Dene?’ The Captain bent a searching glance upon the visitor.

Beaming through his large glasses, the young man bore his scrutiny with the utmost equanimity. ‘That’s my name, sir,’ he replied with a guarded air.

The Captain made a perceptible pause while he waited for the door to close behind his steward. Then he added significantly, ‘Of Scotland Yard, I believe?’

On the instant his visitor seemed to stiffen. To all appearances he remained contemplating the Captain with an unchanged air of languid interest. But his face had grown stonily impassive. The features registered neither admission nor denial.

‘Nothing like discretion, Mr. Dene,’ said the Captain heartily. ‘But you needn’t be discreet with me. I have a wireless message for you:—from Chief

Inspector Manderton. Sit down!’ He indicated a chair, at the same time resuming his own seat at the desk. ‘Drink?’

‘No, thank you, sir. I’ve just had one.’

‘Smoke?’ He slid the box of cigarettes across and Dene helped himself.

‘It came after dinner,’ the Captain explained. ‘Sent to me in the Company’s private code. I always decipher these messages myself. So I had to wait until I came off the bridge. It was pretty thick earlier on, but it’s clearing now. Unfortunately, there’s a cipher group mutilated in the message and I had to ask for a repetition. It’ll be through any moment now. I wanted to catch you before you went to bed...’

Dene cleared his throat. ‘Perhaps I ought to tell you, sir, that it’s absolutely essential that no one either on board this ship or in America should discover that I’ve any connection with Scotland Yard...’

‘I think you can rely on my discretion, Mr. Dene,’ said the other rather stiffly. ‘Just out of curiosity,’ he went on, ‘I took a look at your declaration for the Immigration authorities. You describe yourself as a student, I see...’

‘Yes, sir.’ He paused. ‘I’m actually reading for the Bar,’ he added.

The Captain was eyeing him discreetly. ‘If you’ll forgive the remark, Mr. Dene,’ he said slowly, ‘you’re scarcely my idea of a detective...’

The young man grinned—his smile was a comprehensive affair that spread itself in crinkles to the farthest corner of a frank and very good-humoured face. ‘Not such a bad thing, is it? In a movie I saw once they spoke of one of the characters as “the well-known secret agent.” That wouldn’t help much in our business.’

The Captain’s basso laugh rolled through the quiet stateroom. ‘By James, you’re right. What I mean was that you’re unlike the ordinary run of Scotland Yard men, if you understand me...’

‘I’m afraid I left my deer-stalker and my powerful lens behind in London,’ Dene retorted drily.

The Captain chuckled. ‘Now you’re pulling my leg. You mustn’t think I don’t know what a Scotland Yard man looks like. I’ve had some of you fellows travelling on ships with me before. And you’re not the type. What I mean to say, you look different and you speak different. More like a...like a...’—he was about to say ‘gentleman.’ but substituted ‘public school man’—‘more like a public school man than a detective...’

‘That may be because I was at a public school,’ Dene suggested mildly.

‘Varsity, too, I shouldn’t wonder?’

‘Cambridge, as a matter of fact...’

‘And now you’re a what-do-you-call-it? A criminologist?’

‘God forbid!’ cried Mr. Dene earnestly. ‘I’m merely a plain-clothes man employed at Headquarters. “A split” or “a busy,” in the engaging vernacular of the criminal classes...’

‘But I thought everybody at Scotland Yard had to go through the ranks...’

‘So they have. I was a cop myself for eighteen months, not counting training and probation...’

The Captain examined him curiously. ‘You don’t say! Well, I’m from the ranks myself, and neither of us is any the worse for it, I expect. Metropolitan Police, was it?’

‘Yes. X Division. One of the largest in London. Runs all the way from Paddington to Edgware and South Mimms. I started at the Harrow Road police station. That put me over the jumps all right, I can tell you. Charming neighbourhood. Know it?’

‘I’m from Sunderland myself,’ observed the Captain.

The detective wagged his head. ‘Tough lot. Wife-beating and cop-bashing the favourite sports, especially on Saturday nights; oh, I got into some lovely scraps. I liked the life on the whole. A policeman sees a lot, you know. For instance, you wouldn’t believe how few people can look a bobby straight in the eye: we’ve all got more or less guilty consciences, I suppose. I made a fairly good cop, though I say it as shouldn’t. I managed to see one confidential report about me and it bucked me up no end. It said, “Not a very intelligent officer, but keeps himself smart and works hard...”’ Mr. Dene smiled seraphically through his gig-lamps at the Captain.

‘Well, I’ll be jiggered,’ the latter exploded. ‘I meet all sorts, ferrying across the drink, Mr. Dene, but I’ve never fetched up with a case like yours. And did you go straight into the police from Cambridge?’

‘Yes...’

‘Didn’t your people object?’

‘My Guv’nor was killed in the War. Mother was a bit hipped until one day I stopped the whole of the traffic in the Edgware Road to let her cross the street. I think she got a kick out of that...’

‘And you started at the bottom of the ladder and worked your way up?’

‘Rung by rung, as far as I’ve got, which isn’t very far. From burst water-pipes and rescuing kids with their heads stuck through railings to armed burglary, barratry on the high seas, and wilful murder. The self-made sleuth. Another powerful instalment next week...’

The Captain's guffaw made the walls ring. 'Fine. And now you're at Headquarters?'

The young man nodded brightly. 'Finger-Prints. As the lady said, "Nice work if you can get it!" The trouble is, there aren't nearly enough murders to keep me really interested. Not on our side of the herring pond, anyway...'

'And Inspector Manderton's your boss, is that it?'

Dene's face lit up. 'You know him?'

'Certainly. He crossed with me a few years ago—he was taking an absconding banker back to Cincinnati—and we've met two or three times in Town. Stout fellow, Manderton. How do you get on with him?'

'A. 1. He's not my boss officially. I'm a sort of protégé of his. That's to say, when he's on the job and wants a man from Finger-Prints he usually asks for me...'

'Thinks a lot of you, does he?'

'I wouldn't say that. You know what Uncle George is—that's his nickname at the Yard, you know—a bit self-opinionated and that sort of thing...'

The Captain cast up his eyes. 'You've said it. I never met a more cocksure chap in my life...'

Dene laughed. 'Manderton's all right when you understand him. He approves of me, I think, because I never argue with him. Hardly ever, that is,' he added, with a faint smile.

The Captain laughed. 'Well, I dare say you can hold your end up when it comes to an argument, eh, what? You've been to America before, I suppose?'

'No, sir. This is my first trip...'

'Making a long stay?'

'Only a week or two, I expect...'

'Well, well, perhaps I may have the pleasure of your company on the voyage back...' He broke off as a knock came at the door. 'Ah, this'll be from the wireless room... Come!' he called. His steward entered with a sealed envelope which he silently placed on the desk and withdrew. The Captain was unlocking a drawer. 'Now we'll see what we make of it,' he said to Dene as he took from the drawer a small black book. 'Excuse me a minute...' He broke the seal of the envelope and spread out the message it contained on the blotter.

For a short spell the Captain's hard breathing, as he referred from the code-book to the message, and the scratching of his pen as he filled in the

text above the cipher groupings, were the only sounds in the quiet room.

Presently he uttered a sigh of relief and laid down the pen. 'My writing's not so good,' he remarked. 'Perhaps I'd better read it to you...'

'If you wouldn't mind,' said Dene.

'Here goes, then... It's addressed to me personally, as I told you.' He cleared his throat and read out:

Very secret. Kindly give our Mr. Trevor Dene, D. 306, following message. Begins. Home Office action in reopening case strongly attacked House of Commons this afternoon. Stop. Understand Home Secretary will inform American Embassy tomorrow satisfied no justifiable grounds exist for interference course justice and unable recommend postponement. Stop. Date execution stands as originally fixed, Tuesday next June 14, 9 A.M. Message ends. Regards.

Manderton, Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard.

Dene put out his hand and took the message from the Captain. The gesture with which he adjusted his glasses to read it was purely automatic. He seemed utterly dismayed.

'That's the Oldholme Priory case, isn't it?' remarked the Captain briskly. 'Well, I thought he was for it...'

'Is it true that we shall be late arriving tomorrow?' Dene asked. His air was very perturbed.

The Captain nodded. 'We certainly shall...'

'When are we likely to dock?'

'Not before evening at earliest...'

'Evening?' The Scotland Yard man was aghast. 'As late as that?'

The Captain heaved his broad shoulders. 'Fog'll make a monkey out of the fastest ship afloat, Mr. Dene...'

'What time in the evening?'

'Round about nine. Later if we strike any more fog. But I fancy we're running into clearer weather...'

Dene's fingers drummed on the desk. All the resilience appeared to have gone from him. He looked thoroughly downcast. 'That makes us practically a day late...'

'If it's important for you to go ashore quickly,' the Captain suggested, 'I dare say I could arrange to send you on by the tug that meets us at Quarantine...'

Despondently Dene shook his head. ‘Thank you, sir. But I’m afraid I shall have to land with the other passengers in the ordinary way...’ With rather uncertain fingers he folded the message and thrust it into his pocket.

‘Well,’ said the Captain, ‘if you change your mind, let me know...’ He had stood up and they shook hands. The Captain’s glance was approving as the door closed upon his visitor. The young man had good manners; besides, there was an absence of affectation about him which, in a snobbish age, was refreshing.

No sooner was Dene out of the Captain’s presence, however, than that important personage passed altogether from the young man’s mind. He was beaten to the earth, panic-stricken, by these tidings that had come to him over the air out of the Atlantic brume. This was the night of June 9 and on June 14 Gerry Cloan was to die. Manderton had given him to understand that the execution was postponed for a week. From June 10, the day they were due in New York, to June 21 was eleven days. Now this respite had been reduced to what? They were still far out in the Atlantic at the mercy of fog and storm. In the most favourable circumstances he could not hope to set about his task until tomorrow, Friday, evening. And on Tuesday Cloan was to go to the gallows.

Saturday, Sunday, Monday—he had three clear days. Seventy-two hours. What chance had he of achieving in the time the purpose of his mission?

Seventy-two hours; and the Megantic was running at half-speed.

### CHAPTER III

DAY by day, he had set down in his diary the slow growth in his mind of his doubts and misgivings about Gerry Cloan. Back in his cabin with the door fastened, he drew from his pocket the little book stamped with his initials, T. D.—his mother's present. Throwing himself full length on his bunk, he turned to a date in April and began to read:

*April 9.* Had a word with Cloan at magistrates' court, first chance I have had. Gave him some gum. Brown-haired Irish type, quiet and probably slow-witted. Nice-mannered. Not highly educated. Said he was 'raised' on Ohio farm: fields ten times size of ours. Never been to England before: thinks it 'kinda cute.' Seems restless and unhappy. Doesn't suggest killer type, but that Lombroso stuff all bunk, anyway. Before I could switch talk round to murder, they fetched him away.

*April 12.* Resumed inquest. Coroner completely gaga. Manderton ran him from start. 'Wilful murder' against C. Uncle G. unbearably cockahoop at lunch. Thinks Priory job organized in New York, like robberies at Cannes and Biarritz last winter. Mem. look them up. Marvellous beer at 'Crown.'

*April 14.* Finger-prints wash-out. Back in town. Thinking over Priory job. Cloan must be pretty stout chap to have pulled it single-handed. Good organization, too, to get safe combination, break into house and out again and smuggle swag away.

*April 15.* Thinking about that safe. Cartwright doesn't see how Cloan could have got hold of combination which known only to self and Mrs. Cannot remember whether he or Mrs. ever worked combination in C.'s presence, but unlikely, though C. often came to them in library for orders. Manderton thinks object C.'s trip to town to get combination from accomplice as well as arrange about fence.

*April 18.* Safe-makers' report. Safe old-fashioned model. Might have been opened by touch.

*April 20.* C. at Yard. Watched him waiting corridor, but didn't speak. Certainly not my idea of armed burglar. Looks absolutely despairing like man stunned by misfortune. Manderton very stuffy as C. won't talk. M. says typical of American gunmen's code of

honour. Files on Cannes and Biarritz cases on M.'s desk. Borrowed them.

*April 22.* Mugged up Cannes and Biarritz cases. Princesse Montegattino's villa Cannes entered Sunday afternoon last Jan. while lady at races and staff off. Princesse recently returned from U.S. American maid detained, but released, as clear record. Police suggest gigolo, as Princesse given to whoopee. Safe opened clean. No arrest. Pearls not recovered. In Biarritz case (Feb.) Mrs. Gregson (American) also just back from U.S. bringing valuable jewellery she had inherited. Safe in dressing-room opened during night without scratch. Evidence (candle) thief worked several hours: house entered through basement window. Mrs. G. entertained largely and police suspect gentleman crook, though no evidence against known criminals at Biarritz. No arrests. Jewellery not recovered. Hablard, Paris Sûreté, whom I met on Legendre extradition, investigated for insurance. Wrote him.

*April 26.* Manderton says French police think same man behind Cannes, Biarritz job. Suspect a friend (probably lover) of Cannes lady, Hungarian calling himself Count Valda who went Egypt from Monte Carlo two days after robbery and disappeared. Sûreté theory is that Valda identical with one Ramiro Gutierrez, alleged Argentine, frequent visitor to Mrs. Gregson's at Biarritz, who eventually vanished, ostensibly to return Argentine. A woman who accused Gutierrez of blackmail put Sûreté on him, but never caught. Valda known to associate with American crook on Continent. No trace of him in England.

*April 30.* Letter from Hablard, very 'mon vieux-ish.' Calls Valda an 'ace' (*un as*). Highly expert safe-manipulator. Better than Danny McClintock whom we sent up for seven years last year. Indications V. author of interrupted attempt on safe at Duchesse de Carmay's (American born) at Aix last summer. Hablard says Biarritz safe unquestionably opened by touch, Cannes probably the same. Valda not Princesse de M.'s lover: H. says Riviera police always use this let-out when English or American women are robbed. Sûreté has no photo of Valda, not even positive of real nationality. Good linguist and expert at disguise.

*May 2.* Cloan at Yard. He puzzles me. I can't see him deliberately croaking anybody; looks too good-natured. This job certainly resembles Valda's handiwork. But we found no trace of any accomplice at Priory. Left Hablard's letter for Manderton.



*May 4.* Manderton knew all about Valda. Already had him in mind. I suggested he might have used Cloan as inside worker. But M. insists no evidence of more than one man on job.

*May 6.* Still wondering about Cloan. If he didn't have combination, he must have opened that safe by touch.

*May 8.* If Cloan opened that safe without the combination, I'm the Queen of Spain. Manderton had some papers for him to sign today, couldn't go himself so sent me. Five minutes with C. in visitors' room at prison. I looked at his hands. Danny McClintock whom I finger-printed last year had hands like a woman, small and slender. C.'s are big and strong and horny. He might blow a safe, but never work the tumblers. He looked utterly wretched. I tried to make him talk about the case, but he shut up like an oyster. When I persisted, he said savagely, 'Get out. I'm spilling nothing, see?' A warder told me he never speaks. Mem. Is he shielding someone?

*May 12.* What about the brother, Ed? A notorious gunman and probably quick on the trigger. Could he have been in on this? Sounded Manderton. M. says Ed recognized in Albany (New York State) few days before the murder and still at large. You can't beat Uncle G.—he thinks of everything.

*May 16.* This damned case on my mind. Why won't C. try and clear himself?

*May 17.* To Assizes with Manderton. Big crowd. Counsel for Crown very effective. Packett K.C. defending says C. refuses give evidence on own behalf. Packett cross-examined me regarding prints. Short and sweet, as there warn't none. C. didn't seem to know what it was all about. His eyes are tragic.

*May 18.* Cloan sentenced to death. Jury out 1 hour 45 mins. C. never bugged muscle. Very game. His eyes met mine as Judge put on cap, but he gave no sign of recognition. His face ghastly, not with fright, but despair. I shall dream of it.

*May 19.* I can't believe C. is psychologically type to have pulled daring job like this single-handed. The man who killed Cartwright's butler, instead of tying him up and gagging him, was a ferocious brute totally unlike this quiet, rather self-effacing young American. But how to make Manderton see it? I can't forget those eyes...

With a quick gesture Dene closed the book and, swinging his legs to the floor, began to undress. Everything in the cabin was oscillating: the Megantic was at full speed again. In shirt and trousers he knelt on the bed and gazed out of the porthole. The night was clear and dark, now, and the stars were shining. Head back, he drank in the pure air. The wind on his face, the movement all about him, gave him at once a sense of exhilaration and of solace. With every hour he slept the great ship would be bringing him nearer to the unknown city where Hermann Rontz awaited him, this enigmatic stranger who held the life of a human being in his hands.

Seventy-two hours!

## CHAPTER IV

THE MEGANTIC was at the dock. Canvas-covered gangways, gaily striped, red-carpeted, and brightly lit, stretched from ship to shore. Funnels of mystery thrust into the bottle-neck of the New World, they seemed to Dene as, his overcoat on his arm and his suitcase in his hand, he prepared to join the slow-moving throng of passengers and set foot on American soil. He had reached the gangway when a thought struck him. There might be a message for him at the purser's office—he'd better enquire. He turned back.

A large man in a Panama monopolized the attention of the only clerk on duty at the desk—the others were busy in the rear of the office. Dene set his suitcase down and waited. More from habit than anything else, he studied the individual ahead of him. 'Detective,' his trained eye deduced without hesitation. The stolid, somewhat suspicious air, the erect carriage, the dark suit—the symptoms were unmistakable. The clerk, busy and rather distraught, was listening with a somewhat impatient air to a long story the other was pouring into his ear.

'And amn't I after seein' him go on board meself?' the man was saying in a rich Irish-American brogue. 'A little runt uv a fella—Nick, they call him. I spotted him on th' dock awhile back with another uv thim gorillas, but lost 'em in the crowd—they must have slipped out on me. And who'd be lavin' a couple uv heels loike that come on th' boat at all? They gotta have tickuts, haven't they?'

'It's nothing to do with me, Jack,' the clerk remarked plaintively. 'You'd better see the purser. He's around somewhere. Yes, sir?' He addressed himself to Dene and the detective drifted away.

Dene gave his name and asked if there were any letters for him. Some chord within him had gently vibrated at the sight of the detective and he had a faint pang of homesickness. He turned to glance after the plain-clothes man and came face to face with The Girl.

He thought of her immediately like that, in capitals, so definitely did she emerge from the drabness of her background. The stuffy lobby was a bedlam. Passengers were clamouring for their stewards and stewards for their passengers; ship's officers, dock officials, and cable company messengers came and went; and in and out of the medley people drifted vaguely looking for their friends.

In this welter of nondescript humanity The Girl alone appeared cool and dainty and unflurried. She was with a pleasant, middle-aged American woman who had sat at Dene's table at meals, a Mrs. Fanning, and Dene guessed that the third member of the group, a florid, rather lumpy girl, was Mrs. Fanning's daughter, who, his fellow-passenger had confided to him, was to meet her. Mother and daughter were engrossed in one another. Their companion stood aloof, her eyes, inscrutable and rather haughty, idly ranging over the jostling crowd.

This was the typical American girl, Dene decided. Point by point he appraised her—she responded to every test. The somewhat disdainful air with which she surveyed her surroundings could not veil the winsome vitality of her whole personality, the limpid intelligence, the latent humour, the frankness, of her gaze. The little white hat she wore was *chic* and becoming; and the brim rolled up on one side to display a wave of nutbrown hair coquettishly set off the charming line of her face. Her bare arms, emerging from the sleeveless green and black-flowered crêpe, were tanned a golden brown: her ankles were slim and finely turned. She was slim, and healthy, and eager.

Her glance met Dene's and he sought to hold it. With complete indifference it passed him by. The young man sighed. He had no vanity, but a romantic heart fluttered beneath his grey flannel suit. Carrotty hair, freckles, and spectacles, he knew, held in the ordinary way no allurements for the other sex. Still, even as he pored over his lens and records in the strictly prosaic surroundings of the Finger-Prints Branch, day-dreams would come to him in which Chief Inspector Dene, the brilliant and unfailingly resourceful sleuth, would extricate from the gravest jeopardy some flower-like creature whose melting glance would unerringly pierce the famous criminologist's unflattering exterior to the solid worth within.

Reardon, immaculate in blue serge, was mounting the main staircase. Dene's glance was charged with wistful envy. There was a fellow, if you liked, who knew how to charm the women—one had seen him at work. He feigned aloofness, indifference, but he had a trick of flattering with his eyes every personable woman he met. The women on the boat had fairly swarmed about him. His pretty backgammon partner was with him now, dressed very becomingly for the shore and laughing up into his handsome, careless face. Dene sighed. He could imagine Reardon sweeping The Girl off her feet with a single glance.

He looked for her again. His powers of perception, sharpened by his police training, were swift to catch her change of mood. She was standing where he had seen her before, but now her hands were clasped tensely

before her and she was staring with a frozen air towards the stairs. The Scotland Yard man had seen that look on a woman's face before.

It was fear.

Perplexed, he glanced over his shoulder, following the direction of her eyes. Passengers were streaming up and down the stairs: he recognized shipboard acquaintances looking strangely unfamiliar in their shore-going clothes. There was the argumentative Briton railing at a coloured porter; behind him that Polish rabbi with the corkscrew curls; Sir Alfred Wellow came plodding up, chatting with rather obvious affability to a perspiring individual in a Palm Beach suit, probably a New York business friend who had come to meet him; Blain's long nose was visible at the turn of the stair; and here was Fay Montagu, the film star, stopping to use her magnificent eyes on Reardon in a tender farewell. In vain Dene's gaze travelled over the briskly moving, commonplace throng—he could discern nothing capable of explaining that terror-stricken stare. His eye sought the girl again. Mrs. Fanning and the daughter were still there, giving instructions to a baggage-man; but She had disappeared.

At the counter behind him he heard his name spoken. He swung about. It was the purser's clerk—he had forgotten all about him. 'Nothing for you, sir!' Dene nodded and picked up his suitcase. At the same moment he was aware of an individual lounging in front of the ship's notice-board and regarding him intently. He was a small and rather dapper fellow, swarthy of face, who wore a blue-and-white spotted tie. Dene's glance picked up the tie: he noticed such things. On catching the Englishman's eye, the man turned swiftly on his heel and, with a springy gait, walked off towards the gangplank.

Dene looked after him. He realized that the stranger must have overheard the clerk in the office address him (Dene) by name. Was it Hermann Rontz? If only he knew what the fellow looked like! But, stop, Rontz didn't know his name: the wireless Dene had sent him that morning from the ship had been left unsigned, according to the directions in the letter. 'A shyster lawyer,' Manderton had called him. But what did a shyster lawyer in New York look like? One knew the type at home, but everything was so different out here. Still, lawyers ran to type the world over, and the stranger had a vaguely flash air, a sort of bullying swagger, which did not tally with Dene's preconceived impression of the man who was expecting him. Still revolving the problem in his mind, he went ashore.

Almost the first person he saw on the dock was the stranger. Dene caught a glimpse of the spotted tie dodging about behind the piles of luggage in the vicinity of the letter D at the Customs to which the negro

porter steered him. The stranger was no longer alone: he had a companion, olive-skinned like himself, in a biscuit-coloured suit and natty brown hat. On Dene's approach the second man, on a sign for his companion, slipped away through the crowd.

Inspector Manderton's pupil felt a little thrill. That he was under observation was clear: Hermann Rontz's insistence on absolute secrecy was explained. Spotted Tie, whoever he was, was discreet. He kept his distance and gave no sign of even looking in Dene's direction. He just hung around.

There was a long wait before the grizzled redcap who had taken charge of the Englishman's suitcase, representing the sum total of his baggage, was able to obtain the services of a Customs examiner. The crowd was thinning by the time Dene was released. He paid off the porter and, carrying his case leisurely, made his way along the line of lettered signs until he came to R. There he halted and, at the same moment, was conscious of a spotted tie hovering behind a truck in the vicinity.

Once ashore, he had kept his weather eye open for anybody resembling his mental portrait of the man he had come to meet. His glance had singled out several middle-aged, rather seedy-looking individuals who might conceivably have filled the bill; but each proceeded to go about his affairs with a directness that precluded any idea of a rendezvous. One by one, Dene had seen his shipboard acquaintances depart. The Fannings' charming companion, he observed, was not with them at the Customs, and ultimately mother and daughter went off alone.

Where was Rontz? Only one or two people remained under R—an excitable Frenchman with a row of sample cases, two nuns, and the elegant Reardon who had been one of the last to leave the ship. With his wonted ease he was chatting with a knot of Customs officers who were chuckling at his sallies while a negro chauffeur in a smart livery and two ebony porters, their white teeth displayed in broad grins, were strapping up a large assortment of glossy and expensive-looking luggage.

Dene leaned against the Customs table and reflected. Even Spotted Tie seemed to have disappeared. He glanced at the clock—it was five minutes past ten. No use ringing up the lawyer at his office at that hour, but why not at his house? He pulled out the looseleaf address book which he invariably carried. He had foreseen the possibility of Rontz failing to appear on the dock as arranged—the fellow was obviously scared—and had looked up his private address and telephone number in the Manhattan Directory at the Yard. He paused. To ring him up might frighten him off; better go round to East Fifty-Fifth Street. He'd give him five minutes more and, if he had not

shown up by that time, drop his suitcase at the hotel and drive to East Fifty-Fifth. Seventy-two hours! He meant to waste no time...

His mind floated back to the morning, six days before, when, in Manderton's office at Scotland Yard, he had proposed himself for this mission to America. The date was June 3, and on the 14th Gerry Cloan was to die. Dene's offer had been made on the spur of the moment; that was the way important things always happened. He had taken a sheaf of prints in a banal arson case to the Inspector's room and on emerging had found himself committed to his first independent investigation with a man's life as the stake.

Manderton was talking on the telephone when Dene entered: the Assistant Commissioner, he concluded, from his superior's rather deferential tone. 'Very good, sir,' the Inspector was saying. 'I'll deal with the matter. But in the circumstances I'm inclined to do nothing.'

Frowning, he replaced the receiver. 'They're still at it,' he informed his subordinate. Dene knew to what he alluded—it was the Oldholme Priory case. Manderton had got his man and secured a conviction: he was enraged at what he regarded as illegitimate attempts to upset the sentence. He was particularly rancorous at the Home Secretary's action in calling for the papers in the case. 'Have a squint at that,' he said irascibly, and pitched Rontz's letter across...

That letter! It seemed to him he knew its contents by heart, so often had he pored over it during his six days at sea. Putting down his overcoat on the Customs table behind him, he drew his wallet from his pocket and, extracting the letter, let his eye run over it once more, from neatly embossed heading to scrawled signature at the foot...

Reardon was moving off. He did not see Dene, but strode away languidly in the wake of the chauffeur and the redcaps. The Scotland Yard man thought rather bitterly of the modest West Side hotel, where, on Inspector Manderton's recommendation, he proposed to register. Reardon, no doubt, was the guest of some millionaire or other—some fellows had all the luck. He turned to the letter again...

HERMANN RONTZ  
Attorney-at-Law

278 MAIDEN LANE  
NEW YORK CITY

*Strictly private*

Criminal Investigation Dept.  
Scotland Yard  
London, England.

*Attention Inspector Manderton*

The man Cloan, alias Atbury, can be cleared of the crime with which he is charged, provided you will carry out the following instructions.

You are to make no attempt, direct or indirect, to communicate with the New York police, but will despatch a representative to New York by the first available steamer.

If you accept, cable MANRON NEWYORK the word 'Agreed' and have your representative notify same address by wireless the name of the boat by which he is travelling, *but only on the day of arrival in New York*. Neither message to be signed.

The writer will be at the Customs on the dock under the letter R and will make himself known to your man on arrival.

This is a genuine offer. Any attempt to approach the New York police in the matter will automatically cancel.

HERMANN RONTZ

A genuine offer! And four mornings hence... Dene's heart was cold within him as he put the letter away.

More than once in the course of the extraordinary sequence of events that sprang from that letter he was to ask himself, as he asked himself now on the dock, whether he should not have spoken up again and told Manderton, even at the risk of his job, of the doubts which for weeks past had preyed upon his mind. But in the hierarchy of the Yard, he was the humblest of humble juniors, and, while Manderton was well-disposed towards him, there were moments when the Inspector's good humour was not to be presumed upon. And he had been in his most truculent, hectoring mood, that morning at the Yard. Besides, he had certainly given Dene to understand that Cloan's execution would be deferred a week...

Genuine offer? Manderton scoffed at the idea. He'd had Hermann Rontz looked up in New York, a shyster attorney, the sort of bird gunmen hired by



the year to keep them out of trouble and to pull them out of jail if, by some accident, they happened to get pinched. The old gag, playing for time. A nice state of things if a bunch of American crooks were to be allowed to ride roughshod over British justice!

‘But aren’t you going to do anything about it?’ Dene asked.

‘I shall probably cable him to go to the New York police, if he has anything to spill, or wire me here, just as he likes...’

‘But won’t that frighten him off?’

‘Bah, he’s got no evidence. They can’t upset that verdict, even if they do postpone the execution...’

‘They’re going to postpone the execution?’

‘For a week, the Assistant Commissioner thinks...’

‘Till the 21st, eh? Then there’s plenty of time to send a man to New York to investigate...’

‘If you think the Treasury lets us waste money on hare-brain trips to New York...’

Then Dene had made his offer. ‘I’m due for a month’s leave. Why shouldn’t I go?’

‘And pay your own fare?’

‘Why not? I was going abroad, anyway. Besides, I’d like to see America. Look here, sir, if it’s a plant, there’s no harm done. Besides, mightn’t it be awkward if Congressman Prett got wind of this letter? You’d want to know if there was anything to it, wouldn’t you?’

Manderton scowled. ‘Damned interfering busybody!’ But his eyes were thoughtful: the point had struck-home.

‘Furthermore, one might get a line on the missing diamonds...’

That had been a shrewd move, Dene mused: it was a sore point with Uncle George that none of the stolen property had been traced. Manderton had stood out for a while. The proceeding was highly irregular: the Assistant Commissioner would never stand for it; like Manderton, Sir Ernest was in favour of communicating in the routine manner with the New York police about it. It had been a strenuous tussle, but in the end the trip was approved. Dene was to understand that he was travelling unofficially and the Criminal Investigation Department was not to be identified with his mission, except in circumstances of extreme urgency. And he was not to look to the Department for expenses.

‘You go at your own risk,’ said the Inspector. ‘If the Home Secretary decides to postpone the execution until the 21st, that’s his affair. But if I’m

consulted, I shall oppose it. Cloan's as guilty as hell, and I'm not the one to stand for any interference with the course of justice.' Which uttered in his most formal tones, Uncle George became human again. He would give his protégé a letter to Commissioner Mulrooney for use in case of need and the word 'Agreed' would be cabled forthwith to MANRON NEWYORK. 'The rest is up to you, young Dene,' had been the Inspector's parting words. 'Take care of yourself and remember that New York isn't London. And watch out for bad liquor!'

Dene had caught the Megantic next day.

Well, here he was in New York and everything had gone wrong. The Home Secretary had failed him and on top of that Rontz had not shown up. The five minutes had elapsed—no use to wait about any longer...

A movement behind some luggage attracted his attention. Ah, Spotted Tie again! How now, old mole?—damn it, the fellow was quite close, leaning against a wardrobe trunk and watching him out of the corner of his eye. The thought struck Dene, If this isn't Rontz himself, why not an emissary? He stood up and sauntered towards the man.

This time the fellow stood his ground. Eyes, cold and black, like a snake's, looked into Dene's. 'Are you from Mr. Rontz?' Dene asked. Before replying, the other glanced swiftly to right and left. At the same instant, a large figure, cleaving a way through a knot of redcaps, swooped down upon him.

Dene recognized the detective he had seen at the purser's office. The swarthy face remained impassive: but the snake eyes were surly with misgiving.

In a tone of icy sarcasm the detective addressed his quarry. 'Can you swim?' he demanded loudly, stressing each word.

The other outlined a feeble smile. 'Notta so good, I think, mebbe!' he retorted sturdily.

'Then my advice to youse,' said the detective, 'is to stip over to Dalton's and take a few swimmin' lessons before you show your face on this dock again, for the next time I catch youse here or on one uv th' Company ships, I'll take yez by th' seat uv your pants and drop yez over th' soide. Is that straight?'

The reptile eyes were veiled. 'I 'avva da ticket of admeesion,' was the muttered rejoinder. 'I go looka for my cousin what arraive from Italy. I 'avva da right to go on de ship the same like anny other fella!'

‘Aw, can that!’ the detective ordered. ‘I know youse, Nick Mazzini, and you keep away from here, d’you get me? And now beat it to hell out uv this, ye dhirty little rat, before I take the toe uv me boot to yez...’

His mien and the gesture that accompanied it were so threatening that the other fell back, then, turning, made off hastily in the direction of the exit.

The detective’s inflamed gaze fell upon Dene. ‘And who are you, Oi’d loike to know?’ he demanded irascibly.

‘Me?’ The young man contemplated him mildly through his spectacles. ‘Oh, I’m just off the boat...’

‘English, ye are, isn’t it?’

‘That’s right...’

‘What did that guy want with you?’

‘Nothing. I expected someone to meet me and I thought he might be the man...’

The detective snorted. ‘Is zat so? This your first time in New York?’

‘Yes, it is.’

With a jerk of the chin the detective beckoned the young man nearer. ‘Listen, brother. There ain’t enough suckers in this town to go round, see? You be careful about talkin’ to strangers. Particularly gunmen. Or else youse is apt to wake up one of these foine mornings houldin’ a lily...’

Dene smiled seraphically. ‘I see. You mean that he’—his head moved in the direction of the exit—‘you mean that he’s a gunman?’

‘Sure.’ With grave, unsmiling face and jaws slowly masticating, the detective eyed him. His glance, charged with suspicion, dropped to the label tied to the suitcase in Dene’s hand. Nodding sourly, he turned away.

Five minutes later, Mr. Trevor Dene was bumping westward in a taxi.

## CHAPTER V

DENE stayed only long enough in the modest two-dollar bedroom he engaged at the hotel to wash his hands and change his collar. The June evening was stifling. Far below the open window Broadway was strident under its cascade of lights and the side-street where the hotel reared its twenty floors to the leaden night sky belched a constant stream of traffic, jarring and honking, stemming and advancing, into the main artery. From time to time, with a roar like an earthquake and in a flurry of streaming lights and thunderous bogies, a train rushed across the gaunt viaduct of the Elevated at the other end of the block.

So this was New York! Hat on head, Dene paused an instant at the window on his way to the door. There was something stark and rather awe-inspiring about this Manhattan of theirs. It was adamant, futuristic. A city of angles, and cubes, and rhomboids. The cold glare of electricity; the nakedness of steel; the black sheen of asphalt polished by a million drumming wheels. But vital. Glitter: speed: noise. Lovely, too, with its visions of floating sky-palaces stabbing at the sky with jewelled towers. A hard city, nevertheless. Bligh was his authority: the steward had liked to air his views upon America. 'What a man wants in New York, sir,' he had told him, 'is guts.' Well, New York held the secret he had come to unbare and he was going to tackle it. Guts, was it? He'd have guts, and plenty of them... He switched off the light and went quickly out.

On his arrival ten minutes before, the hotel lobby, smelling of dust and burnt-up oxygen, had been deserted save for the pallid, bespectacled clerk behind the desk. But now, through the open grill of the elevator, as they bobbed to a standstill, Dene saw that one of the armchairs was occupied. His glance, casual at first, became instantly attentive as he descried a spotted tie. The man from the dock sat there, his hat cocked over one eye. Save for the gleam of the cigarette between his lips he might have been asleep, so rigidly motionless was he in his chair.

At the sight of him, Dene swung sharply about, turning his back on the lobby. His hand stayed the small figure in uniform who was in the act of unlatching the gate. 'Take me up again, will you, son?' he ordered. 'I've forgotten something.' 'Okay,' piped the urchin, and once more they shot aloft.

A fine beginning, Dene told himself wrathfully. Of course, the fellow had trailed him from the dock as he should have anticipated: in the

excitement of his first contact with New York he had forgotten all about him. A gunman, eh? What did he want, sitting there like an image, and what was he waiting for? If he were an emissary from Rontz, surely he would have sent up his name?

Suddenly the closeness of the elevator, the stagnant hush of the honeycomb of rooms, floor upon floor of them gliding past, caught him by the throat. His mouth was dry. This was funk, he told himself, abashed, sheer funk, the fear of the unknown. He fought the sensation down. Now that he was warned, no one was going to put *him* ‘on the spot,’ or whatever they called it—not without a fight, anyway. Guts...!

They had arrived back at the eighth floor. The boy was sliding back the gate.

‘How would you like to earn a couple of dollars?’ Dene demanded.

The lad considered him carefully. ‘That’s jake by me,’ he squeaked guardedly.

Dene had remained in the elevator. ‘Is there a back entrance to the hotel?’ he asked.

‘Not unless you goes out by de foinaces, dey ain’t,’ the child vouchsafed. Then, perceiving two dollar bills in the Englishman’s hand, he added quickly, ‘Mebbe I could show you!’

Dene’s finger pointed downward. ‘Go ahead!’ They dropped down to the basement.

Through the searing heat of a boiler-room they emerged upon a short flight of steps that mounted to a dank and breathless court impregnated with the reek of a row of brimming ashcans. A rusty iron gate broke the line of a high wall on the far side.

The bell-hop pointed towards the gate. ‘T’rough de alley and you’re in de street,’ he explained in a hoarse undertone.

Dene passed the money over. ‘Keep your mouth shut about this, old chap,’ he said. ‘And tell old Skin-the-Goat at the desk that, if anybody asks for me, I’ve gone to bed and can’t be disturbed, savvy?’

The urchin was busy stowing the bills away in his trousers. Now in a gesture gravely formal as a Roman salute he touched his hand to his forehead. ‘Okay!’ With that he clattered down the steps and Dene made his way to the street.

A taxi whirled him across town to Rontz’s address: 120B East Fifty-Fifth Street proved to be a dingy brownstone mansion with a row of bells under the porch. ‘Rontz’ was the name written on one of the cards which

were appended to each bell. As the outer door was shut, Dene pressed the appropriate button and the door opened before him.

Upon the Stygian darkness of the hallway a glimmer of light descended from far above. Dene, groping his way up a seemingly interminable flight of stairs, was suddenly brought up short by an apparition that met him on a landing, a large woman in a kimono who, at the first glance, appeared to have no face. Then he perceived that she was a negress. Behind her the door of an apartment stood ajar.

‘Mr. Rontz?’ enquired the young man, still panting from his climb.

The woman shook her head. ‘Not home,’ she volunteered.

‘When do you expect him back?’

‘Cain’t say. Mis’ Rontz, he wen’ out roun’ seven o’clock. He wuz goin’ to the dock to meet the steamer...’

‘And he’s not back yet?’

‘No, suh!’

Dene turned his most winning smile on the ample brown face. ‘I suppose I couldn’t come in and wait for him? You see, Mr. Rontz was to have met me at the boat and we must have missed one another. I want to see him particularly tonight—it’s urgent.’

The negress rolled her eyeballs at him. ‘You wan’ see Mis’ Rontz on business?’

‘Yes. And I must see him tonight. Does he come in as a rule much later than this?’

Clicking with her tongue, the woman balanced her head from side to side. ‘Mis’ Rontz doan’ sleep heah reg’lar. Ah allows he won’ come home no more ternight—not this late he won’. You-all might cotch up with him at Angelo’s...’

‘Angelo’s? What’s that? A restaurant?’

She laughed musically, flinging back her head and displaying a phalanx of magnificent molars. ‘Boy, Ah’ll say it am. An’ Ah doan mean p’r’aps!’

The Scotland Yard man’s glance was bewildered. ‘Quite,’ he murmured vaguely. ‘Can you give me the address of this place?’

‘Ah sho’ kin. It’s right aroun’ the corner from heah, on East Fifty-Second. But you’s a stranger, Ah guess. Lissen, Ah’s gwine give you extensive directions. When you gits out of heah, you turns to yo’ left an’ it’s three down an’ one over. You’ll see the name over the do’. If Mis’ Rontz is any place, he’ll be there.’ She gurgled again. ‘Is it a restaurant? Boy, Ah’ll tell the world!’

Dene left her chuckling to herself. What 'three down and one over' signified, he had not the faintest conception. It seemed simpler to take a taxi. It was close on eleven o'clock already and his search had scarce begun.

Five floors of glowing windows flung wide to the breathless night behind window-boxes gay with flowers, a front door below, all wrought iron and glass—this was Angelo's, as the name in electric lights over the entrance proclaimed. Obviously, at one time, it had been a private house, and a high-priced house at that. With its elaborate front door and neat façade of stone it reminded the visitor from London of the aristocratic mansions to be encountered in the little streets abutting on Park Lane.

The front door was fastened, but Dene was aware that a man was scrutinizing him through the glass panel: clearly, a watchdog such as one found at the more surreptitious of London's night-clubs. Now the door was swung back a foot and the guard was peering suspiciously through the opening.

'You got a card, mister?' he demanded.

In his best police manner the Englishman had inserted his foot in the door. 'I'm a friend of Mr. Rontz,' he announced.

There was the sound of a whispered colloquy, then the doorman said: 'Hermie Rontz, is it?'

'Quite right,' Dene answered, and the door opened to admit him.

Across the dimly lighted lobby a second door was visible. A foreign-looking man in a dinner-coat with the unmistakable veneer of a head-waiter held the door for the visitor. Dene heard the rattle of keys in locks as he passed through. He entered a hall, ornate and blazing with light. Plush hangings, florid oil paintings in bright gilt frames and bronzes, eloquent of the sale-room, gave the place a faintly lubricious atmosphere. A girl, dressed like a maid in a French farce, gave him a check for his hat.

A broad flight of stairs curved upwards from the hall. The muted thrumming of Hawaiian music weaving through the loud murmur of voices was wafted down. Memories of police raids in Soho or the hinterland of Piccadilly stormed Dene's memory as he mounted the stairs. What was this 'restaurant,' the mention of which had so stirred the coloured woman's merriment? Were rouli-bouli and chemmy or less reputable pleasures the explanation of the precautions at the front door? Then the curve of the stairway brought him face to face with the truth.

What an ass he was! But he had pictured a New York speakeasy as a sombre sort of drinking-den located in some back room with a smoky ceiling and a sanded floor. Here was a supper-room full of people grouped at little tables with an orchestra of dusky musicians, and waiters darting to and fro, and along one wall, in front of an overmantel of looking-glass reflecting the brilliant lights, a bar behind which two mixers in white coats were shaking drinks as though their lives depended on it.

Well, well, well, one lived and learned. There was a crowd at the bar, a mixture of types. Perched on high stools two rather tony-looking matrons in *décolleté*, accompanied by a spruce elderly man in evening clothes, were bracketed between a noisy trio of youths in plus fours who were shooting poker dice and a very drunken individual who was telling a long and rambling story to a bored and indifferent friend. Finding a vacant stool beside a young girl who was drinking through a straw from a long glass, Dene ordered a whisky-and-soda. While the barman was getting it, the Englishman, adjusting his spectacles, made a leisurely survey of the room.

He speculated as to who, among all that motley gathering, might be Rontz. Why on earth hadn't he thought to ask the doorman whether Rontz had arrived and, if so, to point the lawyer out? However, no doubt the barman would know him.

As his drink was set before him, he put the question.

'Sure,' replied the barman with the impassive mien which the new arrival had already decided must be a characteristic of the New-Yorker; but Dene noticed that the man's eyes flashed an enquiring glance at his face.

'Is he here tonight?' the Englishman asked.

The mixer shook his head. 'I didn't see him yet!' He turned away to ring up Dene's dollar on the cash register.

A noisy altercation was in progress at the end of the bar. The intoxicated individual and his sober friend had moved along to where the girl on Dene's left sat perched in solitary state on her stool. With maudlin solemnity and considerable vehemence the drunk was addressing his companion.

'There's no jane in this town goin' to insult me an' get away with it,' he declaimed violently. 'You heard me, Ed—I was polite to her, wasn't I? "Babe," I says, "what about me an' you stepping across to Marty's for a little drink?" an' she calls me a bum. Is that any way for a lady to behave? As man to man, I ask you, Ed, is that manners? What the hell?'

'Aw, for cryin' out loud,' his friend ejaculated disgustedly. 'Can't you let up on it? You give a guy a pain in the neck...'



The other waved him to silence. 'Wait a minute, wait a minute! I was polite, wasn't I? I just taps her as I go by an' I says, "What about me an' you anklin' over to Marty's for a little drink?" I says, an' she comes back with "Keep your hands to yourself, you dirty bum!" A cheap skirt like that, sittin' round here to make her taxi home!'

Dene glanced at the girl. She feigned to be busy powdering a pert little nose in a mirror she had drawn from her bag which lay on the bar. But her eyes were bright with ire and her hands trembled. She was quite young and in her natty black-and-white frock, absurdly skimpy, her figure was as slim as a boy's. A fuzz of ash-blonde hair curled out on her neck from under her neat little hat and her hands were elaborately manicured, with the nails blood-red and gleaming.

Now she quickly laid her vanity-case upon the bar and twisted herself round on her stool to confront her accuser. 'You gotta nerve!' she cried wrathfully. 'I don't have to take money from men, you dirty chiseller! And if you imagine I'd let myself be seen out, at Marty's or anywheres else, with a poor fish who can't take a drink without making a beast of himself and insulting respectable girls, you've got another think coming. That is, if you've anything to think with!' And she turned her back on him.

'Aw, come on home, will you, Bill?' said the drunk's friend, moving towards the stairs. 'Don't pay any attention to him, Jennie,' he called out over his shoulder.

But now his companion shot out an arm and grabbed the girl's bag. 'Here, put that down!' she exclaimed hotly.

The man laughed. 'If you want it, you can blow over to Marty's an' get it. So long, baby, see you later!' He darted to the stairs.

In a panic the girl swung about and came face to face with Dene. 'Stop him!' she implored. 'Gosh, all my money's in that bag! Oh, please, won't you make him give it up?'

About them people were drinking and laughing, intent on their own affairs. The bar-tender, who had been watching the scene, merely hunched his shoulders and turned his back.

Thus directly appealed to, Dene slipped off his stool to the ground. 'All right,' he told the girl. 'Stay where you are!'

He caught up with the delinquent on the stairs and tapped him on the shoulder. 'The lady wants her bag,' he said simply.

The drunk turned and eyed him truculently. 'Who the hell are you?' he demanded.

Dene crooked his finger. ‘Come on, hand it over, there’s a good chap!’—training in the London police teaches infinite forbearance with the citizen in his cups.

The other hitched the bag firmly under his arm. ‘If she wants it, she knows where to fetch it,’ he said stubbornly.

‘But she wants it now,’ Dene pointed out patiently.

Without any warning the drunk drew back and swung his fist at the intruder’s jaw. The detective’s arm flashed out, the drunk cried ‘Ouch!’ and the bag clattered to the ground. Dene stooped, snatched up the bag, and ran lightly up the stairs, leaving his victim holding his shoulder and groaning dismally.

The girl was leaning over the balustrade, thrilled and vibrant. ‘Oh,’ she gasped, ‘that was jiu-jitsu, wasn’t it?’

‘That’s the idea,’ said Dene breathlessly. ‘There’s your bag!’ He whipped off his glasses and began to polish them on his handkerchief.

‘Oh, thank you!’ the girl vociferated enthusiastically. ‘I’m certainly very grateful to you,’ she added, with a little prim air.

‘Then perhaps you’ll have a drink with me,’ Dene proposed and led the way back to the bar. He made no further reference to the incident. It was the girl who harked back to it.

‘That Bill!’ she volunteered over the Tom Collins she asked Dene to order for her. ‘Just because I took dinner with him one night, he thinks I’ll stand for anything. Some of these cheap skates believe they own a girl simply because she lets them stake her off to a plate of chow mein!’ She gave him a sidelong glance. ‘You’re not going to get fresh with me merely because you’re buying me this drink, are you?’

Dene laughed. ‘This whisky’s pretty strong. There’s no knowing what I mightn’t do...’

‘The liquor’s all right here. You couldn’t run a car on the stuff they serve in some of these places, not without gumming up the works, I guess. You want to watch your step. You’re English, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘I like Englishmen. There was one in a show I was in—a swell guy. I kinda like the way they talk, too. You been in N’York before?’

‘No...’

She laughed drily. ‘You must have a swell impression of us! But N’York isn’t America and this isn’t N’York! I’m not a N’Yorker myself—I was

raised in the country. But N'York's all right. It sort of gets you. But you gotta have a break...'

'A break? Now what does that mean exactly?'

'Why, things have got to break right for you—I dunno. Lissen, I'll explain. We meet as we did tonight, see? You're a producer and you're putting on a show and I'm the type you're looking for...' She fluttered her small hands. 'That's a break for me, see?'

The young man nodded thoughtfully. He could do with a break himself, he reflected. 'Do you come here much?' he asked.

She shrugged. 'I meet a friend of mine here sometimes. But he went flat on me tonight...'

'You don't happen to know a man called Rontz who comes here, do you?'

She laughed. 'And how? You a friend of Hermie's?'

'Not exactly. But I want to meet him—it's a matter of business...'

She laughed again. 'Now *you* got a break. Hermie Rontz is the feller I came here to meet...'

Dene echoed her laugh. 'That certainly is a break. Where am I likely to find him, do you know?'

'What time is it?' she asked.

Her companion looked at his watch. 'Twenty-five past eleven...'

'As late as that? Well, I guess he's not coming here any more tonight. He'll be over to Mike's if he's anywheres.' She put down her tumbler. 'This dump is on the fritz, anyway...'

Enquiringly the young man peered at her through his spectacles. '“On the fritz”? I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid I'll have to ask you what that means...'

She flashed her pearly teeth at him. 'You've got a whole heap to learn, haven't you? It means—well, kinda dead, see? Do you want to come over to Mike's and look for Hermie?'

'Right-o. What about another drink before we go?'

'I guess not. Give me a rain-check, will you?'

'A rain-check?'

She giggled. 'Boy, you don't know nothin'! Did you never hear of a rain-check over in England?'

'No...'

‘It means you can buy me a drink some other time.’ She patted his sleeve. ‘Never mind, I’m simply crazy about your English accent. You talk like those announcers on the radio...’ She puffed out her cheeks and began to intone with ludicrous pompousness, ‘This prohgarm comes to you from the stwdios of the Nashional Broadcarsting Company in Noo York!’ With that, she picked up a spoon and tapped three glasses in imitation of the radio chimes.

There were grins behind the bar and Dene laughed. ‘Aren’t you going to tell me your name?’ he said to her.

‘Jennie Lindsay,’ she replied. ‘Don’t you hate it?’

‘I think it’s charming. It sounds Scottish!’

‘My old man’s a Kentucky Scotchman, I guess,’ she said rather soberly.

‘And you’re on the stage?’

‘Yeah. When I can land a job, that is. But things are simply fierce in the theatre. If it weren’t for a bit of modelling in between...’

‘An artist’s model, do you mean?’

She gave him a scathing look. ‘Say, listen! I can starve just as well in the theatre without having to stand for a bunch of lousy artists getting an eyeful of me in my skin. When I step out it’ll be high, wide, and handsome...’ She broke off. ‘I model dresses. I got a figure, see? And I know how to wear clothes. They photograph me for the Sunday rotogravures. Kinda nice work, but hard on the old dogs...’

‘Dogs? What dogs?’

She thrust out a slippered foot. ‘Standing around—it’s fierce on the feet.’ She paused. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Trevor Dene.’

She seemed to savour it. ‘Kinda cute,’ she pronounced, and slipped down from her stool. ‘Well, Trev, do we go to Mike’s?’

‘Okay, Jennie,’ said Mr. Dene.

## CHAPTER VI

THE girl gave the taximan an address on Fifth Avenue. She did not explain what Mike's was and Dene did not think to ask her. He assumed it to be just another speakeasy—he had heard there were thousands of these places in New York; and it was not unusual in his experience of individuals of Rontz's stamp to find them frequenting the 'monde où l'on s'amuse.'

Lofty buildings, ruby and emerald traffic lights, and later, the dark verdure of a park, flashed past his unheeding eyes. He was overwhelmed, to the exclusion of every other consideration, by his amazing luck in thus fortuitously stumbling upon someone actually acquainted with this man he had come three thousand miles to see. Cautiously he began to sound his companion about Rontz, watching, as he placed his seemingly idle questions, the play of the passing lights on her piquant face.

'I'll say I know the old buzzard!' she cried wrathfully. 'Well enough, anyhow, to tell him what I think of him, running out on me in a dump like that! You don't suppose I'd go to a joint like Angelo's alone, do you?'

'It struck me as being rather amusing. Quite a smart place, too. What's wrong with it?'

'Smart?' She sniffed. 'Say, lissen, a speak don't have class simply because some of these society dames, like that old haybox at the bar tonight, think it's tony to park their fannies alongside a lot of gunmen and yeggs. Hermie only goes there because he's in with Angelo and get his drinks on the house, the old so-and-so!'

Dene chuckled. He found her flow of language refreshing. 'In the booze racket, is he?'

The movement of her shoulders was expressive. 'He's in with all the big shots, anyway...' She burst out again: 'Say, can you tie that? Dating me up and then going flat on me! What does he think I am? One of these gun molls who runs around with Rocco's crowd or Waxy Ginsberg's?'

'Tell me about this chap Rontz,' said Dene.

She turned her face to his. 'I thought you knew him?'

'I've never met him. I've... I've heard of him,' Dene improvised.

'Hermie's all right,' she said briefly.

'Do you know him well?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'You know what these old guys are...'

‘Old, is he?’

‘Fifty or sixty, I dunno. With a guy like Hermie you can’t tell...’

‘Pretty good friends, are you?’

‘He’s kinda taken a shine to me. N’York’s full of these old bozos who like a girl to eat with them once in a while...’

‘Bit sweet on you, is he?’

‘Don’t get Hermie wrong. He’s no sugar daddy. He’s not like that cheap cloak-and-suiter at Angelo’s. He don’t expect anything back: he’s not that sort. To look at him, you’d say he was just an old kyke, I guess, old enough to be my grandfather, almost; and people say he runs around with a bunch of grafters and racketeers. But he’s got a darned sight more to him than a lot of these college boys I meet. I like to hear him talk. He knows about life, see? And human nature. And he’s got brains...’

‘A lawyer, isn’t he?’

She nodded. ‘About the cleverest in New York, I guess. No one ever put a fast one over on Hermie and got away with it, and, say, he has that bunch of grafters at the City Hall just eating from his hand. Why, last year when a drunken stooge pulled a gun at a party I was on and me and two other girls were pinched, I had the station sergeant call Hermie at his house in the middle of the night and two hours later we were out and never heard another word about it—Hermie had them tear the ticket up, I guess. He never ran out on me before, I will say that for him...’

Dene exulted inwardly. This was no wild-goose chase then that had brought him helter-skelter across the Atlantic. Here was the underworld cropping out already from this man’s background—graft, the booze racket. Rocco’s name was unfamiliar; but even distant Scotland Yard had heard of Waxy Ginsberg, New York’s biggest beer baron—Rocco, no doubt, was in the same line. So Rontz was ‘in’ with the ‘big shots.’ And Rontz was ready to squeal!

‘He’s got a big criminal practice, hasn’t he?’ he asked casually.

‘I guess he did have. But he told me the other day he didn’t do much work in the courts any more. Are you a lawyer?’

‘I’m studying law...’ He paused. The next question was difficult to frame. ‘I suppose he never talked to you about this Cloan case over in England?’

‘Gerry Cloan, you mean? This guy who’s going to be hung? No, Hermie never said anything about it to me. Why?’

Dene covered his embarrassment with a laugh. ‘Only that it’s created a lot of talk and I wondered what he thought of it, that’s all...’

‘Those guys can’t get away with it over there,’ she remarked soberly, and relapsed into silence.

‘Anyhow, you think we shall find Rontz at Mike’s?’ he questioned.

‘I guess so,’ she returned absently. ‘Gosh,’ she added, ‘I’d certainly like to know what became of Hermie tonight...’

‘What time was he to meet you?’

‘Round ten, he said. I was to take dinner with him, really. He called me on the ’phone yesterday and fixed it. Then he rang me this morning and said he couldn’t manage dinner and would I be at Angelo’s round ten? I was home all evening if he’d wanted to call me. Say, I’m certainly going to tell that baby what I think of him...’ She gathered up her bag: the cab was slowing down at the kerb.

A towering apartment house confronted them. A uniformed janitor, a palatial entrance hall, a line of elevators with doors of hammered brass—clearly, Dene decided, Mike’s was several notches above Angelo’s in the social rating of speakeasies. Both the janitor and the liftman touched their caps to Jennie as to an old acquaintance, and, without waiting for instructions, the liftman took them soaring aloft to the topmost floor—the twenty-eighth, the indicator showed.

A supplementary door in the side of the elevator opened directly into a quiet vestibule. Through closed double doors at the far end the tinny strains of a radio warring with the buzz of voices came drifting.

‘Hello there, Toni,’ Jennie greeted a short, sallow man who advanced to meet them. ‘So, Mike’s back from Chi?’

The man beamed all over his face. ‘Sure, sure. You finda da Boss inside...’ He took charge of Dene’s hat which he added to a variegated collection of hats piled on a side-table.

‘Is Hermie here?’ the girl asked.

The attendant shook his head, his face stony. ‘I no see Hermie tonight,’ he said.

Jennie turned to Dene. ‘I guess he’s been delayed some place. Guys drift in on him with business at all hours. But he’ll be along...’ She took Dene’s arm. ‘Come on in and meet the boys.’ They moved towards the double doors. As she passed the attendant, her hand went out and patted his olive cheek. ‘You’re one swell little gorilla, aren’t you, Toni?’ she said caressingly.

Toni grinned sheepishly. ‘Show the boy friend where you park your gat,’ she cried gaily. And when the other made a deprecatory movement of the shoulders, she pulled open his coat and displayed to Dene’s bewildered gaze the butt of an automatic projecting from a holster slung under the armpit.

Laughing, she drew Dene along the hall. ‘A gunman, eh?’ he said lamely, staring at her in perplexity.

‘You betcher,’ she answered. ‘That’s Mike’s private guard...’

Dene smiled back at her. But his smile was perfunctory. He was meditating that, not three hours in New York, he had already been confronted with two hired assassins. The reason was, of course, that, from the moment of landing, he had been touching the fringe of the mysterious Hermie’s activities. Slowly the figure of the man who held Gerry Cloan’s life in his hands was beginning to emerge from the background the girl had all unconsciously depicted, this dim Erebus of rum-running, crime, and gang-slayings. In that luxurious apartment, with the aroma of fine Havanas in his nostrils and a syrupy radio voice crooning soft love lyrics in his ears, he found it hard to realize that death, as typified by the little, sallow man fiddling with his hats, lurked ready to pounce upon treason. Well, presumably Hermie knew what he was doing; but it was a desperately dangerous game. In that *milieu*, Dene knew, not only the informer but also his confidant was doomed to pay the price of discovery with his life...

As they approached the door at the end of the hall, and even before it had opened to admit them, the characteristic whirr of the wheel and click of the ball, promptly identified by the detective’s experienced ear, had explained the *raison d’être* of Mike’s. The roulette was installed along the far side of a splendid salon, square and lofty, with French windows all round folded back upon a broad, open-air terrace. The decorations were ultra-modern in tendency, the walls panelled in some light wood like birch or poplar, the furniture of stainless steel tubes bent into all manner of bizarre shapes, the lighting concealed or masked behind panels of frosted glass.

A mixed crowd pressed about the long table. Women as well as men were there. Business suits and even golf clothes were more in evidence than dinner-jackets; and several of the men had discarded their coats. Most of the women were in summer frocks and hats. Dene felt relieved—no need to be ashamed of his flannel suit, he told himself.

A radio set was in full blast in an adjoining room. Waiters moved to and fro with drinks. From time to time the chant of the *croupier* forced a hearing



above the murmur of voices. The air was warm. Outside, the terrace, where lamps glowed softly through greenery, looked cool and inviting.

‘Mike runs the smartest game in N’York,’ Jennie confided to Dene as they strolled towards the table. ‘It’s kinda quiet now with folks away on vacation. But later on, in the winter, he gets the swellest crowd. Michele’s his real name—he’s some kind of a wop, I guess—but everybody calls him Mike. Pst, here he is now!’

A large, suave man in a dinner-jacket would have passed her with a perfunctory hand-wave. But her ‘Say, Mike!’ stopped him.

‘Hello. Jen! How are you, kid?’ he said abstractedly.

‘I’m okay...’

‘That’s fine, fine...’ His eyes were flitting about.

‘What’s become of Hermie tonight, do you know?’

The other glanced at her quickly. He had a fat, rather harassed face, and it seemed to Dene that his eyes, cold and fishlike, were suddenly watchful. He remembered that the mention of Rontz’s name had produced much the same effect upon the barman at Angelo’s and, now that he came to think of it, on Toni outside as well. Evidently, in these circles Rontz was a power to reckon with.

‘Why,’ said the big man, ‘I only got back to New York this morning and I haven’t seen Hermie in a week. He’ll be around presently, I guess...’ He broke off, and, with a glance at the girl’s companion, added, ‘Take your friend inside, why don’tcha, and have Harry fix you a drink. Pardon me!’ He drifted away to greet a new arrival.

‘And that’s not such a bad idea at that,’ Jennie pronounced. ‘Gosh, but it’s certainly hot here.’ She fanned herself with her hand. ‘Lo, there, Willie! Meet my friend Trev!’

The somewhat scorbutic man in the blue coat and white flannel trousers who had loomed up beside them was pleased to meet Trev. With a guarded air he then announced that he had a bone to pick with Jennie. ‘I’ll be right back,’ the girl told Dene, and retired with Willie to a settee against the wall.

Left to his own devices, the Englishman went and stood on the fringe of the crowd round the gaming-table. He was wishing that Rontz would arrive.

Almost the first person he set eyes on, as he peered between the heads of the throng, was the girl—*The Girl*—he had seen outside the purser’s office when the Megantic was at the pier. He recognized her instantly: indeed, she was in the same green-and-black frock and little white hat she had worn at the dock. She had a seat at the table, looking down the room, and her brown

arms rested on the green cloth, her hands toying with a pile of counters that stood before her.

She was playing as the fancy took her, now laying a single chip *en plein*, now strewing three or four on pair or impar, colour or *passee*, now letting several rounds go by without betting, but always with the same bored and distracted air. From time to time she would address a remark to a man who sat at her side, a rather horsy-looking individual who was gambling heavily. But it was clear that her mind was not on the game. Again and again she would raise her eyes from the table and stare out over the faces of the players opposite. Thus her glance encountered Dene's, and at first he fancied, with a slight thrill, that she had recognized him. But she was not looking at him. She was gazing down the room: she seemed to be watching the door.

An attendant offered him a place at the table. Dene had no desire to play and moved on through the rooms. Beyond a smaller salon where the radio was installed and people were playing backgammon, he came upon the bar. It had a line of small tables ranged along one wall and at either end a French window open on the terrace which surrounded the apartment on four sides.

The place was gay and bright and noisy. There were couples at the tables. The proprietor was with a cluster of men standing up at the bar. Dene ordered a drink and helped himself to an olive. Nobody paid any attention to him.

As was his invariable habit, he let his eye rove appraisingly over the company. It dwelt on the group of Mike's friends—four men, all more or less of the same stamp. They were hard-faced and hard-eyed and rather showily dressed—one sported a fob and another a large diamond ring. Racing mob, Dene analysed.

A loutish fellow in evening dress, with the swelling torso and battered features of the pugilist, sidled up to the proprietor and whispered in his ear. 'Well, I'm here, ain't I?' that gentleman exclaimed irascibly. A sudden silence had fallen on the group. Mike glanced round frowning, his heavy jaw thrust out.

An obese, swarthy individual was in the doorway. On catching sight of the proprietor, he came forward. The knot of men divided to give him passage. No one spoke. Dene, standing apart, was instantly sensible of electricity in the air. He had a thrill of suspense.

Was this Rontz?

## CHAPTER VII

BUT the newcomer's first words disillusioned him. In dead silence and with a deliberation that was in itself a menace he had walked up to the bar. 'Where's Hermie?' he demanded.

He spoke with the brusqueness of one who is accustomed to being obeyed. His Palm Beach suit was clean and well-pressed: he wore no jewellery or loud colours: he looked like an ordinary prosperous business man. The small, black eyes and the dark shadow of his beard, extending from the eye level to the folds of his thick-set neck, hinted at Latin or Jewish blood. He was dissolved in perspiration. His scant, raven hair, plastered down over the low, broad forehead, was dank. The moisture coursed down his cheek in glistening channels and his collar was a wreck.

'Why, hello there, Rocco!' exclaimed Mike, with hand outstretched. 'You're quite a stranger. Have a drink?'

Rocco? Dene pricked up his ears at the name. The 'big shot' of whom Jennie had spoken! Unostentatiously he shifted his position a foot or two along the bar in the direction of the two men.

'Where's Hermie?' Rocco reiterated, ignoring the proffered hand.

Dene was watching Mike and it seemed to him that a shadow fell athwart the latter's mobile face.

'I haven't seen him in a week,' said Mike, with a glance round the circle of deeply attentive faces. 'I only got in from Chi this morning...'

'And so you can't tell me what's become of Hermie, is that it?' The small eyes flashed vindictively.

The other laughed uneasily. 'Why, what should have happened to him, Rocco?'

'Or of this Englishman he was expecting by the Megantic tonight?' the fat man persisted.

Dene repressed a violent start. Here was a complication with a vengeance. This could only mean that Rontz's associates had got wind of the lawyer's intention to blow the gaff. His spirits sank to zero. He cast an apprehensive glance at the stony countenances about him and his heart went cold within him. Fortunately, no one in the bar was paying any attention to him.

The proprietor's face was a mask. 'I haven't seen Hermie, I tell you,' he retorted sullenly. 'And I don't know anything about any Englishman, either...'

'No?' spoke Rocco with deadly calm. 'And if I tell you that Nick and Pete were at the ship and saw him arrive?'

The other humped his shoulders. His glance sought encouragement from the tense faces around him and laughed:—obviously, his *sangfroid* was returning. 'Then why don't you ask Nick and Pete?' he countered.

'Because they let him slip through their fingers...' Rocco's voice was suddenly raucous: he seemed to be losing his calm. 'This Englishman has disappeared. He is where Hermie is. I ask you again, Where's Hermie?'

'Gee, Rocco,' Mike broke out, 'what's the matter with you? I haven't seen Hermie, I tell you. He's home, I guess, or at Angelo's, or the club or some place...'

'Hermie is not home, or at Angelo's, or at the club,' the fat man cried fiercely. 'He's slid out and taken the Englishman with him. Do you deny it?'

'How can I deny something I don't know? If Hermie was expecting anyone from the other side, it's the first I've heard of it. Who is this guy, anyway?'

The jet eyes blazed. 'You ask me that, you double-crossing...' He checked himself with an effort. 'Listen, you, Michele! I want to see this Englishman *pronto*, and you tell Hermie I said so...' The flaccid cheeks shook with rage.

Mike laid his hand on the other's shoulder. 'Hell, Rocco, you've got me all wrong. Where d'you get this stuff about Hermie and...'

He was not suffered to complete his sentence. 'Where do I get it?' Rocco rasped savagely. He shook himself free and, plunging a hand into an inside pocket, plucked out a folded paper. 'Read that!'

With an impassive face Mike took the paper and opened it out. 'This isn't signed,' he said.

'Yeah?' sneered the other. 'And you know damned well why it isn't signed...'

It was a wireless message. Dene, craning his neck forward, recognized the form. It had been despatched from the SS. Megantic at sea. 'MANRON NEWYORK,' he read—then the typewritten characters were a blur before his eyes.

It was his own message sent off that morning to Rontz.

The proprietor's glance, frigid and unrevealing, swung significantly round the circle of attentive faces. 'Where did you get this, Rocco?' he asked.

'Never you mind where I got it,' cried the other, snatching the radiogram away. A slow smile spread over Mike's heavy face.

'I told Hermie a month back to fire that typist of his,' he remarked, and a little ripple of laughter went through the group.

Rocco thrust his face into Mike's. 'You tell your friend Hermie,' he snarled raucously, 'that this English buddy of his made the mistake of his life when he came to America. But we'll find him and give him what's coming to him. And that goes for Hermie, too...'

The activity of the bar swirled about them. People came and went. There was the buzz of voices, laughter, the incessant chatter of the radio, the rattle of ice in the shakers behind the bar. Neither of the two antagonists had raised his tone above the normal. The faces of the men grouped about the pair were as impressive as a Red Indian's.

'Wait a minute, can't you...' Mike began, his hand stretched out in conciliation. But the other turned brusquely on his heel and blundered out of the place. At the door he collided with a tall figure and, without apology, rushed by. With a mildly reproachful air the new arrival gazed after him, then sauntered in, correcting the set of his tie.

He was a distinguished-looking individual, in evening dress, with silvering hair and a small grey moustache. 'What's the matter with Rocco?' he demanded in a well-bred voice, helping himself to a potato chip from the basket on the bar.

The proprietor's demeanour had become suddenly deferential.

'It's nothing,' he said, his eyes on the other's face. 'He was only looking for Hermie...' Their glances crossed.

The grey-haired man laughed quietly and chose, with some care, another potato. 'The trouble with Hermie,' he pronounced delicately, 'is that he has such odd friends!'

Without speaking, Mike crossed the bar and disappeared through a door in the wall opposite. The new arrival drained the highball which the barman, unasked, had set down at his elbow, lit a cigarette, and composedly strolled across to the same door and vanished in turn.

Dene went cold all over. The veiled significance of the last remark had not escaped him. Were they all in the secret of his mission? Where was Rontz? With every step he took, Dene mused, the figure of the lawyer seemed to grow dimmer and more elusive. It was more than ever urgent that

he should find him without delay. The heat of the bar was oppressive: he longed for air.

He turned to the window behind him and came face to face with Jennie. She stood on the terrace staring at him, her candid blue eyes wide with dismay and fear. She did not wait for him to join her, but forthwith sped away.

Slowly he went out on the terrace. He made no attempt to follow her—he was wondering how long she had been there and how much she had heard.

The air on the terrace was delightfully fresh. It smelt of geraniums and damp earth. There were flower-boxes all along the parapet, and here and there a lamp, pink-shaded, spilled a rosy glow. Between the bright windows of the apartment and the night panorama of New York spread out far below the terrace was a quiet, dim haven.

There were voices to Dene's left, where the terrace turned the angle of the house; but to his right all was dark and silent. He went a little way along in this direction: he craved solitude, to think out this situation which had so unexpectedly developed and resolve upon a plan of action.

The view from the parapet was fantastic. As in an aeroplane one seemed to hover over a vast map marked out in pinhead lights. From that height the park, immediately below, was like a patch of heath covered with low scrub save where the arc lamps held a clump of trees in their cold, white radiance. Avenues picked out in lights and gemmed with the crimson and green of the traffic signals threw up a watery glare from the rigid parallelogram of the city or climbed like fiery snakes to the far horizon. Electric signs flashed intermittently; lakes, and patches of water, and, in the distance, the broad bosom of a river, glinted under the moon that rode over all. From tall buildings in the foreground wisps of steam floated idly up and below them, on dwelling-house roofs clusters of chimney pots seemed to be putting their heads together gravely in the moonlight.

If Rontz and Rocco were ever associates, Dene was telling himself as he regarded the fairylike scene, they were at daggers drawn now. If the Oldholme Priory job had really been worked from New York, was it not conceivable that the two men had been in the scheme together and had fallen out over the division of the spoils? For the moment, however, that was not the point. The point was that a certain excitable gentleman in a Palm Beach suit was looking for Hermie Rontz and the latter's friend from London. If the trap was not to be sprung under Gerry Cloan on Tuesday, one would

have to reach Rontz before Rocco could get at him. And at the same time keep out of Rocco's way. The man with the spotted tie came into Dene's mind. A nasty piece of work—he had been astonishingly lucky. Odd to think that the gunman had been waiting for him, no doubt with a gun packed neatly under the armpit like Toni's, and he had dodged him. That was the way things happened in life. He smiled. He was rather diverted to find himself, for a change, in the rôle of hare instead of hound. But he would have to go warily—he could not depend on his luck holding out. He realized that every step he took towards Rontz would bring him nearer the fate that Rocco and his gunmen were reserving for the pair of them impartially.

The situation was desperately difficult. Apart from Jennie, no one at Mike's knew him, and he was not sure that Jennie had overheard Rocco's outburst. All the same, he was not too anxious to face Jennie; yet if he went away he might be destroying his last chance of catching Rontz.

There was a step on the terrace. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a figure approaching. It was a woman. For an instant, he thought it was Jennie; but then he was reassured—this girl was taller and her carriage was different. She did not appear to notice him. She halted by the parapet a few yards away, contemplating the view.

The little white hat identified her. It was The Girl.

## CHAPTER VIII

THE young man was suddenly aware that he welcomed the diversion. He felt a quiet glow of contentment. She looked well-groomed, and the sight of her was a sedative for his nerves still vibrating from the scene he had just witnessed. This girl was of his own world, his own class; unlike poor little Jennie with her bewildering slang, she would speak his own language. Against this background of crime and violence upon which he had blundered, she stood out as something sane and normal. He thought he would like to talk to her.

A tub of flowering azaleas hid him from her as she stood at the parapet. He was glad of this screen—it enabled him to study her at close quarters without being observed. Her face was pallid in the moonlight—once more he was struck by the suggestion of strain in her expression. With unseeing eyes she contemplated the night. Now that she fancied herself alone, she had discarded the rather haughty air of indifference he had remarked in her on the ship and again at the gaming-table. She looked forlorn, unhappy.

And then, to his consternation, he saw a tear glisten on her lashes and slide slowly down her face. The spectacle made him uncomfortably conscious of the fact that he was eavesdropping. He glanced behind him, but only to discover that the terrace ended in a high blank wall and a circular flower-bed surrounding a statue:—he could not leave the terrace without disclosing his presence. Keeping the azalea between himself and the girl, he tiptoed away.

At the end of the terrace he turned to survey her again. She was dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief. He looked away. When he glanced in her direction again, it was to see her with a cigarette in her mouth raking over the contents of her bag as though in search of a match.

Dene came forward, this time letting his feet ring on the tiled floor. Startled, she looked up.

The young man halted beside her. ‘Can I give you a light?’ he said.

So saying, he sprang his lighter. But it refused to work. ‘Aren’t these contraptions the limit?’ he said easily. ‘They never work when you want them to...’ He was aware that the girl had given him one glance and had then turned away. The lighter proving obdurate, he felt in his pockets and found a folder of matches. He struck one and, cupping the flame in his hands, stooped forward to her cigarette.



‘Thank you...’ The acknowledgement was perfunctory. Flicking a speck of ash from the front of her frock, she turned her eyes once more to the view.

It was an unmistakable gesture of dismissal. But the young man did not accept it. He had produced a cigarette in his turn and now lighted it from another match.

‘What an amazing view!’ he remarked, flicking the burnt match-end over the parapet. ‘I feel as if I could stay here all night looking at it.’

The girl gave no sign of having heard him. Mr. Dene indulged in a strictly private grimace and, with a laugh, persisted. ‘It’s a funny thing about New York—all these high buildings, I mean. They’re positively Alpine. I should think New-Yorkers would finally end up by going all Swiss, goitres, you know, and bare knees, and ... and yodelling. I almost feel like yodelling myself. I shouldn’t be in the least surprised to see a fellow come bobbing over the parapet here with an ice-pick and a length of rope and offer to show me the glacier. But perhaps you don’t know Switzerland?’

Stony silence. Her shoulders were obdurate. The young man was quite unabashed.

‘Judging by Lucerne in August,’ he remarked suavely, ‘you’d think that every blessed man, woman, and child in the United States went to Switzerland at least once in their lives. Great little country. Chief industry, hotel-keeping; chief export, waiters; chief import, English parsons. You know, the breezy kind. Oh, Lord!’

He was beside her now, his elbows on the flower-box, leaning against the parapet and chatting away with the greatest *bonhomie*. He was watching her out of the corner of his eye. He observed that she made no attempt to go away and the discovery gave him hope.

‘I noticed you playing inside, didn’t I?’ he ventured. ‘Have any luck?’

For the first time she faced him: an instant long, her cool grey eyes rested on his. ‘Would you mind telling me the time?’ she said. Her voice was low and musical.

He held his wrist up to the lamp. ‘Twenty minutes to twelve...’

The smooth forehead was puckered. With an impatient sigh she turned from him.

The young man considered her out of compassionate eyes. ‘I know you think I have an awful nerve, talking to you like this...’ Her shoulders outlined a listless movement, but she did not speak. ‘There was a reason,’ he went on hurriedly. ‘You see, I was here when you came out just now and—well, I couldn’t help noticing that you were upset about something and I was wondering whether there was anything one could do about it...’

There was a forbidding lift to her eyebrows as she looked at him.

‘Despite my somewhat disconcerting appearance,’ he explained serenely, ‘I’m considered quite a sympathetic person, really. I’ve received a lot of confidence in my time—it’s in my line, as you might say...’

She shifted her gaze to the level of his collar. ‘You’re English, aren’t you?’ she asked coldly.

‘Yes...’

‘Do you know why I like England?’

Her tone puzzled him. ‘No,’ he said, and laughed. ‘Why?’

‘Because people in England mind their own business!’

He coloured up to the roots of his hair: for once, he was taken aback. For a moment he was silent; but his eyes were reproachful. With a hand that was not very steady he took the cigarette from his mouth and, flaking off the ash with his finger, said huskily: ‘I think that’s rather rude. After all, if a fellow finds a girl crying all over the place, I think it’s his business to ask her what’s the matter.’

‘I wasn’t crying all over the place.’

‘You were. I saw you.’

‘And even if I were, it’s no affair of yours...’

‘I don’t agree with you,’ he answered, more placidly. ‘However, have it your own way...’ He crushed his cigarette out in the earth of the flower-box and turned to leave her.

‘Wait a minute!’ she cried. He stopped, his back towards her. He heard her light step on the flags behind him. ‘You’re quite right. I *was* rude and I’m sorry.’ She laid a hand on his coat and turned him round. ‘There *is* something you can do for me if you like—that is, if you still want to...’

He had been staring down at the ground. Now he looked up. ‘What?’

Her air was faintly embarrassed. ‘There’s someone I have to see tonight,’ she said rather breathlessly. ‘But it’s at a night-club and I can’t go there alone. And I can’t persuade the man who brought me here to leave—he’s winning, and he’s drunk, anyway. What I was going to ask you was, would you mind taking me to this place?’

‘I should be delighted,’ said Dene. ‘Only, you see. I can’t really leave now...’

‘We needn’t be there long: you can be back here in half an hour...’ Her manner was strangely earnest.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ the young man declared reluctantly. ‘But, you see, I’m here to meet a man and I don’t want to miss him. It would never do if he

blew in while I was away...’

Her face fell. With a little movement of the shoulders she glanced away. Dene contemplated her thoughtfully. There was the risk of Jennie giving him away, he reflected, to say nothing of the possibility of one or other of the two gunmen who had shadowed him at the dock arriving in search of him. Surely, the counsel of prudence was to get out of Mike’s while he could, especially as Rontz seemed to be keeping out of the way; besides, if he left Mike’s with the girl, his departure would attract less attention than if he went alone.

‘Oh, all right,’ he said, ‘I’ll go...’ and saw her features light up at the words; but, before leaving, he decided, he must try and make sure that Rontz had not arrived while he had been outside on the terrace:—he could always have a word with the lawyer and come back.

‘That’s simply great of you!’ she exclaimed joyfully and, with a little air of intimacy that enthralled him, slipped her arm into his. A charming companion, he decided, gazing down at the eager face at his side.

She was giving him instructions. They must pass through the roulette room as quickly as possible in case Gilly—that seemed to be her friend’s name—should notice her leaving and ‘start up something,’ as she expressed it. Mike might give her away, but—she peered, tiptoeing, through the window—it was all right: he was nowhere in sight.

They entered the gaming-room from the terrace. The place was more crowded and hotter and noisier than ever. The man Gilly was still at the table, but he never raised his eyes from his game. There was no sign of Jennie.

At the door Dene had a moment of suspense. If the presence at Mike’s of Rontz’s mysterious English friend were known. Toni, the gunman, would be the first to be advised. With an inward qualm he handed over his hat check and felt the attendant’s basilisk eye upon his face. But the hat was forthcoming without comment and Dene decided to risk his question.

‘Is Mr. Rontz here?’ he asked.

The gunman shook his head stolidly. ‘I no see ’im tonight.’

Then Dene joined the girl at the elevator and they dropped to the street together.

## CHAPTER IX

‘CLUB CALDERON,’ the girl told the taximan and added the exact address. Her manner was direct and business-like. Dene had the impression that, having secured his services as escort, she meant to waste no time on social amenities. Scarcely were they under way when she opened her bag and sought to thrust some money upon him. ‘... to pay the check,’ she explained briskly.

Dene waved the twenty-dollar bill aside. ‘Please don’t trouble about that,’ he said.

Nevertheless, she continued to hold out the note. ‘Don’t be absurd,’ she retorted crisply. ‘Of course, you’ve got to take it.’

He laughed. ‘Really, I’d rather not. I’m tickled to death to be seeing New York under such expert guidance. I consider this part of my education...’

She did not follow him into his bantering tone. ‘You surely don’t imagine I’m going to let you pay for me, do you?’ she said haughtily.

‘It’s exactly what you are going to do,’ was the good-humoured rejoinder. ‘What do you suppose I am? A gigolo? When I take a girl dancing, I pay the bill...’

At that she rounded on him. Her air was frigid. ‘Please understand we’re not going to this place to dance. I only have to see this man for a moment and then I’m going home.’

Dene shrugged his shoulders and gazed out of the taxi window. ‘It was merely a figure of speech,’ he murmured. The girl said no more; but he noticed out of the corner of his eye that she replaced the bill in her bag.

With the professional detective it is instinctive to classify human nature by types. The Scotland Yard man had instantly tagged his new acquaintance with her appropriate label: it was Society, with a capital S. But, remembering the look of fear he had surprised on her face on the boat, her tears on the terrace, he could not help feeling that the description was inadequate. This was one of those cases, he thought, in which the general has little bearing on the particular.

Who was this girl, and what was she doing at Mike’s? He asked himself the question as the taxi whizzed down Fifth Avenue. Of course, she might be a decoy—what the French police called a *racoleuse*—he had met with instances before of society women being hired to bring in customers to gaming-houses. But scarcely a girl of her stamp. For one thing, she was too

young—not above twenty-one or twenty-two, he estimated; evidently of good family, too. And despite her resolutely impersonal attitude towards himself, he seemed to divine a great store of tenderness, of courage, too, behind those rather proud, grey eyes of hers: these were not the attributes of the common run of adventuresses. Yet, obviously, she was in a scrape of some kind: he wondered what her business might be with this man she was so anxious to see. It was something very urgent, clearly: she sat bolt upright at his side in an attitude rigid with nervous tension. A love affair, he judged, some mix-up with a dancing professional, perhaps, or an affair with the usual married man. He suppressed a sigh. A pity, a charming girl like that!

The cab had stopped in a stuffy, shabby little side-street. ‘CLUB CALDERON’ gleamed in electric lights above an entry. A porter in a soiled uniform assiduously opened the taxi door. His tarnished gold lace and greasy jacket struck Dene as being in keeping with the sinister air of the place. Third-rate, the Scotland Yard man instantly pronounced it to himself—he knew a bit about night-clubs. This one reeked to him of extortion, blackmail, vice. As he gave his companion his hand to alight, his wonder deepened at finding a girl of her class in such a *milieu*.

A flurry of managers, head-waiters and bouncers, gimlet-eyed and blue-chinned, greeted them effusively. The soft beat and rattle of a rumba song came echoing along the hall. In the long room into which they were ushered, couples were dancing languidly on the dance floor in the centre. Almost the only people in evening dress were the waiters. The place was fairly well filled. Electric fans and blocks of ice disposed about kept the temperature moderately cool.

They were given a table at the end of the room near the orchestra. With her listless air the girl ordered orangeade and Dene followed suit. As she pulled off her gloves, he noticed that her eyes roamed round the room with the same straining eagerness he had remarked in her before. He gave her a cigarette from the packet he carried. She accepted it and let him light it for her, always with the same anxious, preoccupied mien.

When the waiter brought their orangeade, she asked for the ‘check’—evidently, Dene told himself, she had no intention of staying a minute longer than was necessary: she certainly was business-like. She manifested no desire to talk with him and, her survey of the room ended, sipped her drink in silence. While the waiter was fetching the bill, Dene ran his eye over the gathering. It was a motley crowd. He noticed that girls, rather scantily dressed in stage costumes, were at some of the tables—there must be a cabaret show of some kind, he decided.

A man in a light suit, who was at a table with one of the dancers, a charmingly pretty little blonde, seemed to be looking across at Dene's companion. His clothes were well-cut and he was lean, and sunburnt, with an air of good breeding—the Scotland Yard eye fastens upon these things. Then the waiter brought the bill. Dene grabbed it.

It was for eight dollars—about forty-five shillings, the young man mentally noted. Pretty stiff for a brace of orangeades. But a hazy recollection of having read of something called a 'cover charge' as being an institution of the New York night life came to his aid and he paid without demur. The girl merely shrugged her shoulders and went on with her drink.

'Why, Nancy!' a voice said in his ear. The man he had perceived staring at them from across the room stood beside their table.

At the sound of his voice, the girl looked up. 'Hello, Ted!' She seemed to expand at once—this man, Dene told himself, was her class. She had a nice smile—it made her look very young.

'Well, well, well,' remarked the newcomer cheerfully. 'I didn't know *you* ever came to the Calderon. Stepping out, aren't you?'

'I'm just showing a friend from London the town,' she answered casually; but her eyes flickered a warning at her companion.

Dene had stood up. The newcomer held out his hand. 'Stayton is my name,' he said cordially.

'My name's Dene,' the young man rejoined and they shook hands.

'Mind if I sit down a minute?' Stayton enquired and dropped into a chair. 'And how's Nancy?'

'All right...'

'I saw Ernest downtown on Monday...'

She laughed nervously. 'Oh, Ernest...' She paused. 'For goodness' sake, don't let on to him you met me here, will you?'

'Of course not. Ernest has a plan to stop the depression. Have you heard it?'

'Has anyone not heard Ernest on hard times?'

They laughed together. 'How's Ruthie?' he asked.

The girl's face softened. 'She's fine...'

'Are you both still down at Freshwater Cove?'

'Yes.'

'I must come over and shoot a little golf with you one of these Sundays. How's Aunt Clara?'

‘All right except for her neuritis. She always gets it in hot weather... Don’t you want a drink or something?’

‘No, thanks awfully, I must be getting back to my table...’

‘Whom are you with? Anybody I know?’

He laughed. ‘Scarcely...’

‘I see,’ she remarked with a smile.

‘If you will go slumming...’ he chaffed her.

She was glancing across the room. ‘Who’s the latest, Ted?’

Grinning, he turned half-round. ‘My particular baggage, if you must know, is the authentic blonde walking into chicken salad over there...’

‘She’s awfully pretty...’

‘You missed the first show, didn’t you? It’ll come round again. You ought to stop for it. It’s terrible!’

Nancy laughed gently. ‘And what does the baggage do?’

‘Dances the hornpipe. She’s too godawful for words.’ He stood up. ‘Well, chaps, I’m on my way...’

‘Ted,’ said the girl suddenly. ‘You know Hermann Rontz, don’t you? Has he been here tonight?’

Dene felt the blood rush to his face. To hide his confusion he dropped his cigarette and stooped out of sight to retrieve it from the floor. He was dumbfounded. This was, what? The third person he had encountered that night who was chasing the elusive Hermie. The girl’s question put an entirely new complexion on her character and antecedents. What, in Heaven’s name, was this shyster lawyer to her?

‘Rontz?’ Stayton repeated. ‘Yes, I know him. He’s here every evening as a rule, but I haven’t seen him tonight...’

‘Could you find out whether he’s expected?’

‘Sure...’ He beckoned to the head-waiter. ‘Oh, George...’

‘Meester Stayton?’

‘Has Hermie been around tonight?’

‘No, sir...’

‘Are you expecting him?’

‘Sure, sure. Mos’ nights, Meester Rontz, ’e comma around. Pretty soon ’e’ll be along, I guess...’

‘Thank you, George...’ He turned to Nancy. ‘Quaint bird, Hermie. I didn’t know you knew him. Well, bye-bye, Nancy. Be good!’ He raised his hand languidly in salutation to Dene and strolled back to his table.

‘I didn’t realize it was Rontz you came here to see,’ Dene ventured when Stayton had left them.

For the first time her grey eyes rested on his face with interest. ‘Do *you* know Hermann Rontz?’ she asked in a low voice.

Her evasiveness was his corroboration. He had a sudden sense of bewilderment. His meeting with Jennie had struck him as a piece of miraculous good fortune; but here it was simply raining coincidences. A coincidence that repeated itself, however, was no longer a coincidence: it became a habit. He was deeply mystified.

Better not admit anything until he knew more, he resolved with a quick decision born of experience in a hard school. ‘Why, no,’ he answered, with his most ingenuous air. ‘I heard them talking about him at Mike’s, that’s all, and remembered the name. Quite a night bird, isn’t he?’

She shrugged her graceful shoulders. ‘He’s the proprietor of this club...’

All in keeping with the impression of the man he had formed, Dene told himself—booze, roulette, now this raffish night-club, the whole bag of tricks. But where the dickens did this charming, cultured girl come into it?

‘They tell me he’s a very smart lawyer,’ he remarked tentatively, nibbling an almond.

‘Is he?’ Her tone was not encouraging.

The Scotland Yard man forbore to probe further for the moment. Questions had the habit of begetting questions, and he was in no mood to be cross-examined. So to change the subject he said, ‘Your friend seems to be an amusing person...’

‘Stayton?’ With an indifferent air she flaked the ash from her cigarette. ‘He’s not a friend of mine, really. He’s been married three times, I believe, and I’ve never even met his wife—not one of them. We know the same people, go on the same parties, that’s all. New York’s like that. You meet dozens of people without ever knowing any of them well. You’re more conservative in London...’

‘You know London?’

‘Uh-huh.’ Her manner was listless. ‘London’s nice in June. I wish I were there now...’

They had not been paying any attention to the orchestra on the little platform behind them. Dene was suddenly aware that the music had stopped playing: it had broken off abruptly in the middle of a stave. The young man glanced behind him. The musicians were huddled together, staring down the room. Whatever had attracted their attention had disappeared when Dene



followed the direction of their eyes: the couples on the floor had ceased dancing and had their faces turned enquiringly towards the band.

Fingers snapping, the head-waiter now bore down upon the orchestra. ‘What da hella da matter with you?’ he snarled. ‘Go on playing, you bunch of bums!’ Forthwith the orchestra swept into the melody again.

But Scotland Yard training makes a man sensitive to atmosphere. Dene divined immediately that something untoward had occurred. His glance sought out the head-waiter: the olive-skinned face was tinged yellowish white; the man was shaking with fear. The detective smiled rather grimly to himself. A police raid, eh? He knew the symptoms.

He looked round to find Stayton back at their table. ‘Listen, Nancy,’ he was saying to the girl, ‘I’d slide if I were you. There are a couple of tough guys outside looking for someone and there’s apt to be a little fancy shooting...’

The grey eyes sparkled. ‘No? But, Ted, what fun!’

‘Fun, my elbow,’ was the dry rejoinder. ‘If somebody gets bumped off, you won’t think it so darned funny. “Society Butterfly in Club Shooting”—can you *see* the tabloids? Nancy, I’m serious. You get out of here, d’you hear me? You’re not sleeping at Long Island tonight, are you?’

‘No. I’m over at Beekman Place...’

‘My car’s outside. You take it...’ He turned to Dene. ‘You’ll see Miss Ayleswood home, won’t you?’ He glanced swiftly over his shoulder. ‘Gosh... I believe it’s too late!’

Angry voices, the trample of feet outside, interrupted him. The door at the far end of the room was flung violently open and a cluster of cringing figures stumbled in backwards, their hands above their heads. A woman screamed and Dene’s eye registered a snapshot of a fat youth, at one of the tables beside the dance floor, diving out of sight under the cloth. In the sudden tense hush that followed, two men wearing their hats appeared in the doorway. They carried pistols.

One glance at the intruders and Dene had faced about, his back to the entrance. Stayton gripped his sleeve. ‘That door’—he indicated a swinging door in the wall behind their table—‘it leads out through the kitchens. Take her through there. My car’s at the kerb—a black Buick Sedan. You know it, Nancy? Dene’ll run you home and bring it back for me. Quick...’

‘A hold-up!’ the girl exclaimed breathlessly. ‘I think it’s too thrilling!’

Dene caught her arm and pulled her to her feet. Indignantly she tried to shake him off. ‘Leave me alone!’ she said hotly. ‘I wouldn’t miss this for worlds. It’s the most marvellous thing that’s ever happened to me!’

‘Come on!’ Dene rasped and, tightening his grip, propelled her by sheer force towards the service door.

She fought against him, curving her back and protesting violently. ‘Let me go! Are you crazy? Ted...’ Furiously, she flung herself about.’

But Stayton was holding the door. A shout rang out from the room behind them as they whirled through. ‘Stop him! Stop that feller!’ They took the stifling kitchen at a run, scattering a white-capped chef and a couple of half-naked kitchen hands in their passage. The girl never stopped struggling, but she was powerless in the standard grip as taught to aspirants in the Metropolitan Police. ‘You’re coming with me, do you hear?’ Dene told her through clenched teeth. For answer she twisted herself round and struck him with the flat of her hand across the face. On that the young man gathered her up in his arms and, kicking open a swing-door with his foot, bore her at full speed through a dingy lobby and so out into the street.

He was wasting no time. A glimpse of a spotted tie had told him all he wanted to know about the disturbers of the peace at the Club Calderon. The gunmen were Nick and his companion in the biscuit-coloured suit who had shadowed him on the pier.

## CHAPTER X

PANDEMONIUM broke loose in his wake as the Scotland Yard man, a hundred and twenty-five-odd pounds of rebellious womanhood clasped to his bosom, burst into the street. There was the hollow crash of a shot, followed by a second, and thereafter a wild hubbub of shouts and cries and screams, interspersed with the frantic shrilling of a police whistle.

For the instant, the quiet side-street was deserted. A dozen yards along from the kitchen exit the club's electric sign glittered over the main entrance: a line of cars was parked in front of the building. Dene's eye immediately picked out the black sedan with the characteristic bonnet.

The driving-wheel was nearest to him as he reached the car. It was the work of a second to pluck the door open and, hoisting his burden clear of the steering, to dump the girl down beside it and slip himself into the driving-seat. His glance had already discovered the key inserted in the switch: a second to back, while that infernal whistle sent its clamour into the night, and they were pulling out into the roadway—as it seemed to the man at the wheel, before the girl, her hat over her nose, had had time to recover herself.

As they shot past the club entrance, a man came whirling out. At the sight of the car gliding past him, he stopped short, then made a dash for a sedan that waited at the kerb. Dene had no more than a fleeting glimpse of it, but the trained eye noted details—a big brown car with engine running and two men in the driving-seat.

Already the street was vibrant with cries and drumming feet. At the first corner Dene turned right at random into a broad avenue. The next moment there was an angry yell and an enormous truck roared past just missing their wing. A toneless voice said in the Englishman's ear, 'In New York we drive on the right as a rule...'

'Sorry. I was forgetting.' The young man steered over to the right of the roadway and stole a glance at the girl beside him. She had taken a little mirror from the bag open on her lap and was correcting the set of her hat. He noticed that her eyes were bright and that she was breathing hard: she looked thoroughly scared. He had the impression that she had resigned herself to the inevitable.

A tram that came bumping at them unexpectedly out of a cross-street reminded him that there was still a certain amount of traffic about and that

he was driving for the first time in New York. Once more he gave his whole attention to the wheel.

The girl was addressing him again. ‘Forgive my mentioning it,’ she said, with elaborate irony, ‘but the light was against you at the last crossing. A red light. It means “Stop.” They have a green one, too. It means “Go.” I’m not particular, but the police are apt to be fussy...’

‘By George, of course! Stupid of me.’ The young man was quite unabashed. Even as he spoke a ruby lamp sprang into life at an intersection a dozen yards ahead. Dene braked, stopped. At the same moment another car, travelling fast, came up behind and shot over the crossing.

‘Well, that fellow doesn’t let the lights worry him, does he?’ said Dene placidly, as he pushed the gear-level into neutral. The scream of brakes, the grate of tires on the asphalt, interrupted him. A hundred yards in front the car that had passed them had come to an abrupt halt: already it was backing to return by the way it had come.

It was a big brown sedan. At the sight of it Dene clawed at his gear-lever and, as the car answered the touch of the accelerator, swung to the left and was off along the cross-street at right angles to the direction in which they had been travelling. The length of the block they raced and, barely slackening speed, took the next corner, turning right, and then, after another block, bore left, and then right again.

Dene had no idea where he was or in what direction he was heading. Cross-streets that recalled his native London with their monotonous terraces of dingy brown houses alternated with wide avenues sometimes bestrode by the hideous steel scaffolding of the Elevated:—he noted that as their zigzag advance progressed, the neighbourhood grew bleaker and shabbier. His only thought was to shake off that brown car which, as his driving-mirror told him, clung pertinaciously to their heels. He set his teeth grimly: at all costs, he must keep ahead. Weren’t these gunmen’s cars apt to be fitted out with machine-guns? Once let them draw abreast and it would be ‘Good-night, nurse!’

He was vaguely aware that the girl at his side was addressing him, in turn alarmed and indignant. Once she gripped his arm, but he shook her off. ‘Have you gone crazy?’ he heard her cry, almost tearfully. He drove on, always turning when the lights were against him.

At last, swinging into a gaunt avenue dominated by a succession of towering new apartment houses, he saw his chance. One of these blocks which was still under construction displayed a short, semi-circular approach for cars with a deep archway over the front door. He turned into this drive,

halted under the archway, cut off engine and lights, and waited. An instant later, through an opening in the arch, he saw the brown sedan go tearing past his hiding-place.

With a sigh of relief he turned to the girl. She had opened the door of the car and was preparing to alight. He extended his arm and, stretching across her, closed the door.

She rounded on him furiously. 'Will you kindly let me out?'

He shook his head, retaining his hold on the door. 'Best wait a minute. A car followed us from that club of yours. I think we've thrown it off, but it may come back...'

'I don't believe a word of it!' she cried. 'You're either mad or drunk. I thought you were going to kill us both. Let me out of this...'

'If you'll only be patient for a few seconds more,' he told her, 'I'll drive you home...' He peered through the window at his elbow. 'I suppose you don't happen to know just where we are?'

'Do you?' Her tone was scathing.

'I can't say I do...'

'And *you* were going to drive me home?' she said cuttingly.

'That was the rough idea.' He glanced at her humorously. 'Have we come much out of your way?'

'Only about five miles in the opposite direction from where I live! This is Eleventh or Twelfth Avenue or some such ghastly spot...'

'Quite.' His manner was vague. 'Where *do* you live actually?'

'I live in Beekman Place,' she said frigidly. 'But what's the use?' she burst out. 'It'd be the same to you if I told you I lived in the Tombs...'

He chuckled, wagging his head. 'Oh, no, it wouldn't...' He peered out again into the deserted avenue. 'Come on, I'll take you back...'

'You'll do no such thing,' she retorted crisply. 'I'll drive myself. I wouldn't be with you now except that I know I'd never find a taxi in this Godforsaken dump. Will you please get out and let me take the wheel?'

He looked at her dubiously. 'I'll have to go with you, you know, to bring your friend his car back. I may as well drive. It'll be all right now that I know about the lights...'

'Do you imagine I want to spend the rest of the night at the police station or the morgue?' she demanded wrathfully.

He laughed. 'If you feel that way about it...' He opened the door and stepped out, and she moved along the seat to the wheel. Suddenly he clapped one hand over hers and with the other motioned her to be silent. The

silky beat of a motor trembled on the warm air. A car came cruising down the street, a big brown sedan, with two men craning their necks out of the windows. It slid by, turned off at a crossing, and was lost to sight.

In the gloom under the vaulting the girl's eyes were troubled. 'Was that the car?' she asked in a low voice. He nodded. 'But why should it follow us?'

He shrugged. Her sidelong glance considered him. Then she switched on engine and lights and the starter whirred. Dene went round to the other door and clambered in beside her. The car glided out again under the stars.

She drove expertly and very fast. The Scotland Yard man sat back, watching her face. The swift alternation of her moods fascinated him. So she was called Nancy: mentally he savoured the name. It suited her, he decided. He felt a longing to be friends with her, to penetrate that barrier of indifference she had erected between them. Little chance of that after what had happened, he reflected grimly; yet it gave him a gentle glow of satisfaction to think that he had imposed his will upon her—she was not used to being thwarted, he fancied.

'You were well out of that rough-house,' he said presently, his eyes on her face. 'There were two shots, you know. We couldn't have you mixed up in a shindy like that, you see that, don't you?' She maintained a stolid silence. 'Your friend Stayton had the right idea,' he rattled on. 'Good chap, that. I must say, I love a quick thinker. Don't you?'

Even as he uttered the words, he perceived their unintentional significance. So did Nancy. Her eyes were on the road; but he caught a glint of humour in them. 'I hope I wasn't too rough,' he ventured. But she did not answer and they continued on their way in silence.

After crossing what seemed to him a sheerly endless series of avenues, they glided unexpectedly into a little street penned in between the soaring blocks of very new and very ugly apartment houses. Vividly enamelled doors and windows gay with flowers—the little street looked to the Londoner as though it might have been dropped there straight from Brompton or Chelsea. Here they were right on the river: there were glimpses of water and of lights on the farther shore through railings that fenced the gaps between the houses.

The girl drew up in front of a sealing-wax red door and without a word jumped down from the driving-seat. Dene scrambled out after her. She was already at the door, groping in her bag for the key.

'Just a minute,' he implored.

Reluctantly, as it seemed to him, she turned. He began to stumble over his words. 'I do hope you're not still angry with me,' he faltered. 'It was the only thing to do, you know. And mightn't we—couldn't I see you again?'

She shook her head briefly. 'Thanks for bringing me home,' she said, and faced the door again.

'But, I say,' he cried, reaching wildly at any pretext to prolong the interview, 'you've got to tell me how to get back to this club of yours. I don't even know the address.'

She paused, her key in the door, then withdrew it and confronted him. He saw her face alter: she was not looking at him, however, but at the car. Suddenly she laughed softly. 'This is funny,' she remarked very deliberately. 'Do you know what you've done? You've taken the wrong car...'

He gazed at her in dismay, then switched his glance over to the automobile. 'He said it was a black Buick, didn't he?'

She gurgled deliciously. 'Yes. But this isn't Mr. Stayton's, you see. His car has wire wheels, for one thing.' She glanced at him mischievously. 'It's a darned good thing for you a cop didn't catch you burning the lights all over town. And I don't suppose you've got a driving licence, either, have you?'

'As a matter of fact, I haven't,' said Dene, with an apologetic air.

She laughed again. 'This must be your lucky day. What are you going to do now?'

He shrugged. 'Run it back to the Club, I suppose, and chance it...'

'And get pinched for stealing it? They've got a new law for joy-riders, you know. If this isn't the darnedest set-up...' She moved towards the kerb. 'I wonder whose car it is...'

So saying, she opened the rear door. Dene was behind her, so close, indeed, that she stumbled against him as, with a little choking cry, she recoiled. In the cold ray of a street-lamp above their heads, Dene perceived a man's foot protruding from under a rug which lay spread out on the floor of the tonneau.

He whisked the rug away. A man sprawled there huddled on his back. He was rigid, hands and face livid, a small, bald-headed man in a dark suit. The eyes were wide open and glassy, the features set in a stern and horrible grimace. Beneath him there was a great dark stain on the carpet.

Hastily Dene slammed the door to conceal that terrible death-mask from his companion's sight. But he was too late: already, over his shoulder, she had seen what the rug concealed. She whispered a name, and Dene knew that his night's search was at an end.

‘Rontz!’ he heard her gasp.



## CHAPTER XI

RONTZ!

Dene was dumbfounded. Was this to be the end of his New York adventure? So Hermie, the elusive, the unfathomable, was dead. Enigmatic to the last, he had slipped away into eternity, leaving unspoken the word that might have saved Gerry Cloan from the gallows. That was why he had been killed, of course. That grinning death-mask was still before Dene's eyes. Livid and grotesque, it seemed to smile in malicious triumph over his discomfiture.

A torrent of half-formed ideas poured tumbling into his bewildered brain, a flood carrying like straws upon its surface fleeting suspicions, errant clues. He remembered those furtive gunmen waiting at the boat, their irruption, pistol in hand, at the Club Calderon; Rocco and his rasping threats; the girl at his side, so proud, so fastidious, yet so tremulously, so almost pathetically, set upon finding and speaking with this associate of thieves and assassins...

The sudden, stertorous wail of a siren from the river behind the little street shocked him back to the realization of his predicament. To find himself thus landed with a dead body in a stolen car in the middle of the night in the heart of New York—it was appalling, a nightmare. Memories of the Arabian Nights flashed into his mind, that fantastic, creepy story of the hunchback's body dragged from pillar to post: well, hadn't O. Henry christened New York Bagdad-on-the-Subway? But what was he to do?

Rontz was dead. That was the outstanding fact. No doubt he had been slain on his way to the rendezvous—he was dead these many hours. *Rigor mortis* had already set in; Dene had touched a hand and found it cold as marble. Unquestionably the murderer or murderers would have stripped the body of any documentary evidence the dead man had been bringing to the boat; but he would have to make sure, Dene told himself, before turning the matter over to the police. From Rontz's insistence that the police should be told nothing of his intended disclosures, it was pretty clear that the gang had strong protection higher up.

He was leaving nothing to chance, the Scotland Yard man promised himself grimly. But they were in a residential section: even at that hour of the night there were policemen, taxis, about: dare he risk opening the car door again and going over the body there in the open street? It looked very much as though he would have to.

In moments of crisis the mind works swiftly and these reflections were the matter of a second. Almost before the echo of the car door slamming had died away came the chugging of a motor-engine and a taxi whizzed around the corner of the street and with screech of brakes drew up before a tall apartment house at the end. Dene glanced round for the girl. She was no longer at his side. He saw her at the wheel of the Buick and at the same moment the starter whirred and the engine burred into life. The car was already moving off as he sprang on the running-board and, opening the door, hauled himself into the front seat.

The Buick shot round the corner. A man and woman, both in evening dress, had descended from the taxi. They were quarrelling as they crossed the pavement. Their voices drifted to Dene's ear as the car sped past.

'You know you can't stand Harry's liquor, you poor sap!' the woman was saying.

The man's voice, irritable, argumentative, cut across hers. 'Gosh, Mabel, a couple of highballs...'

The car swung into a long, quiet avenue.

Dene turned to the girl. 'Look here,' he said, 'what's the idea? Where are we going?'

She paid no heed to him. The car gathered speed, mounting a long, low ascent and bumping over the cobbled roadway.

'Listen,' he said, addressing her again, 'that man's been murdered. What are we going to do about it?'

'Be quiet,' she answered tensely, 'and let me drive!'

A traffic light gleamed red on their passage; but she ignored it. Dene looked at her anxiously. Her face was ashen: her eyes stared with a fixed intensity upon the road; as she clung to the violently oscillating wheel, her whole body was braced up as though to urge the car along.

'Take it easy,' he bade her gently, 'until we can decide what to do. There's blood all over the carpet back there. If we're stopped, it might be awkward...'

She nodded, catching up her lower lip in her teeth. Her mouth was piteous: she did not speak. Presently the lofty silhouette of an immense double-decker bridge loomed up across the avenue. Bollards bearing black-and-white signs, 'Bridge Traffic,' with arrows pointing the direction, flashed by. They turned left and ran parallel with the gigantic structure of the bridge, came to a curving ramp and mounted by it to the lower roadway of the viaduct, an endless vista of girders and electric arm with glimpses of

buildings and fights and the dark glitter of water through the latticework on either hand.

‘Aren’t you going to tell me where we’re bound for?’ said Dene presently.

‘Anywhere,’ she replied tensely. ‘He mustn’t be found there, outside where I live...’

‘What’s this bridge?’

‘It’s the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge. It leads to Long Island. Now will you please stop asking questions and let me drive...’

‘That’s all very well, but we have to decide something. This is a police matter, you know. We shall have to report it, unless we want to be held as accessories...’

‘Can’t you stop talking?’ Her tone was wrathful.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I can’t. After all, I’m in this, too, remember. If you want to run into trouble, I don’t...’

‘Nobody asked you to come!’ she cried. ‘Another second and I’d have got away without you. I’ll put you down somewhere on the other side of the bridge. And now will you please be quiet! How do you expect me to drive if you keep on arguing?’

‘But, damn it,’ he exploded, ‘even in New York you can’t go careering round all night with a dead body. You must have some plan...’

‘Listen,’ she said coldly. ‘This is Long Island City we’re coming to. I’ll drop you there somewhere and you can get a taxi back to New York...’

‘I’m not thinking of myself. What’s going to happen to you?’

‘You needn’t bother your head about me...’

‘But I do. Has it occurred to you that you’re acting in a devilish suspicious manner? You knew this fellow Rontz, didn’t you? You were looking for him. Do you want me to believe you’re in this, that you know who killed him?’

‘Don’t be absurd!’ Her voice was not very steady. ‘I might say the same about you. After all, I didn’t pick the wrong car. That was your bright idea...’

The bridge seemed without end. Always the cage-like corridor, arrow-straight, between the trellis-work.

‘It’s positively grotesque,’ he broke out violently, ‘our sparring like this with that dead man in the back there. I know this has been a frightful shock for you, and all that, but really you’ve got to take a reasonable view. You say you don’t want to have the car found at your front door; well, I can

understand that. But, sooner or later, you know, we shall have to communicate with the police...'

'No!' she cried, and seemed to shudder. She paused to collect herself. 'You can believe it or not, as you like, but I know no more than you do who killed this man. After all, it was pure chance, our finding him like that...'

'But surely we can explain that to the police. This man's been dead for hours and I can account for all my movements tonight. And so, I expect, can you.'

'That's not the point. I don't intend to be mixed up in this business, that's all...'

'I'm every bit as anxious as you to avoid it, too,' he told her gravely. 'What I'd like to do is to stop in some quiet spot and look him over...'

She shrugged. 'What good'll that do?'

'There's such a thing as justice, isn't there?' he temporized. 'This man has been murdered: we've got to try and find some clue as to his murderer.'

'Justice?' Her tone was mocking. 'It's easy to see you're English. Listen to me: Hermann Rontz was a crook, a blackmailer. He was mixed up with all kinds of gangsters and racketeers. These people have got into the way of taking the law into their own hands in this country. Somebody had an account to settle with Rontz, I guess, and he settled it, that's all. We don't have to get all het up about it...'

They were on a viaduct now, on the farther side of the bridge. It straddled a noisy thoroughfare with houses and shops below. They dropped down to a busy street where a traffic light halted them in a stream of traffic. It was half-past twelve by the clock on the dash, but the life of the city still surged clamorously about them. People on the pavements, motion-picture houses and coffee-bars brightly lit, sky-signs flashing, trams, taxis—did New York never go to bed? the Englishman asked himself. There was a policeman at the intersection directing the traffic: foot passengers crowded about the black sedan as they crossed the road. To Dene, his thoughts always busy with that still form under the rug, the world seemed full of eyes.

Once more they were moving forward. Leaning forward, he said, 'Do you know where you are?'

She nodded. 'I drive down here two or three times a week...'

'And this is Long Island? I thought Long Island was the country. It's where the millionaires live, isn't it?'

She nodded and swerved out to pass a truck. 'Yes. It gets countrified farther on...'

‘And you know your way around? In the country part, I mean?’

‘Sure. I live down here...’

‘I thought you lived in What’s-it’s-name Place...’

‘I’m spending the summer on Long Island...’

He nodded, brows puckered. ‘I see. Can’t you find some quiet road where we’re not likely to be disturbed?’

She moved her head, and in the darkness he felt her eyes upon his face. ‘What are you going to do?’ she asked in an awed whisper.

‘I want to find out how he died. Besides, the murderer may have left some clues behind. When I’ve done that, we’ve got to make up our minds what to tell the police...’

‘We’re not going to the police,’ she broke in hotly.

‘Then just what do you propose to do?’

‘I don’t know.’ Her voice was tremulous, forlorn. ‘But we must keep the police out of it, do you hear?’

‘That’s out of the question. Of course, we must inform the police. I’m beginning to think it would have been wiser if we’d driven straight to the police station in the first place...’

‘Do you know what would have happened if we had?’ she cried passionately. ‘My name would be spread across the front page of every newspaper in America. And the tabloids—do you know what the tabloids are?’

‘Well, vaguely...’

‘They’re the lowest kind of scandal sheets. They specialize in muckraking—any kind of filth. A case like this would be meat and drink to them. My picture and the pictures of all my family would be broadcast and I should be pilloried from one end of the country to the other. They’d call me a society gun-moll, Rontz’s girl friend—God knows what: these people stop at nothing. And my family would be dragged into it, too, and written up and publicized all over the place. Don’t think I’m exaggerating—you can’t exaggerate the things these people get away with. I went to school with a girl—she lived near us in New York—who was engaged to a man who shot himself: he got into some jam with a woman, I believe. Well, by the time the tabloids were through with *her*, she and her sister and her mother and father—the entire family—had to sail for Europe under assumed names and stay abroad until the scandal died down. To this day, whenever Iris’s name crops up in the news, these wretched rags revive the whole miserable story. So now you know why we’re not going to the police!’

‘I could explain the situation to them,’ he suggested. ‘I—er—as a matter of fact, I have a letter to the Commissioner. I’m sure he’ll keep your name out of it if I ask him.’

‘You don’t understand. They couldn’t keep my name out. They’d find out I knew this man...’

He considered her critically through his large glasses, watching her pale face in the glare of passing lights. The traffic was thinning out: they were leaving the city behind. Service stations, gaudy with coloured pumps and festoons of lamps, broke the monotony of tracts of waste land and vegetable plots. The car was travelling very fast.

‘Just how well did you know Rontz?’ he questioned, with careful nonchalance.

Her colour deepened and she indulged in an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders. ‘I’d met him once or twice...’

‘Why were you so anxious to find him tonight?’ And when she made no answer, he went on rather hurriedly. ‘It’s none of my business, I know. But it might help if I knew all the facts...’

She shook herself impatiently. ‘Why I wanted to see this man has got nothing to do with it. I didn’t kill him and I had no hand in his death. Therefore, I see no reason why I should be dragged into it!’

‘All right,’ he said placidly. ‘Then we’ll keep you out of it...’

‘It’s all very well to talk like that. But once you go to the police it’s impossible...’

‘It isn’t, provided you don’t appear...’

She moved her head and looked at him. ‘You mean...? But how about you?’

‘Don’t you worry about me! How far is it to where you live?’

She glanced out of the window beside her. ‘About another twenty miles, I’d say...’

He consulted the dash to see the time, looked up at the sky. ‘We’ve a good two hours before it begins to get light. How’s she off for juice?’

The girl bent forward to the instrument board. ‘The tank seems to be about three quarters full...’

‘Good. We’ll drop you off at your place and then I’ll carry on...’

‘What are you going to do?’

He was polishing his specs. on his handkerchief. ‘I haven’t decided yet. It rather depends on what I find...’ He jerked his head backward. ‘I’m

relying on you to show me a good spot where I'm not likely to be disturbed...'

'It's dead quiet all round us after dark,' she told him. 'You'd be as safe in our drive as anywhere...'

He nodded and replaced his glasses. 'Right. How about a cigarette?'

'I'd love one...'

He gave her a cigarette from his packet and struck a match. The operation of lighting it brought her face very close to his and he was aware of the faint fragrance of her hair. For the first time her eyes were warm with gratitude as she thanked him; it seemed to him that, for the briefest moment, pressed together side by side in the dim interior of the car, a sort of new found intimacy reigned between them. But it was only for an instant: she had her driving to think of, and almost immediately her eyes were back on the road.

'Now tell us about this place where you live,' he bade her.

The first shock of the discovery over, his mind was busy again, trying to formulate a plan. Of course, the girl had acted under the influence of panic, but it seemed to him, looking back, that their precipitate flight was the wisest course they could have pursued. Nancy was perfectly right (he found himself thinking of her as Nancy): Rontz dead was of no more account than a dead dog. The important thing now, as the Scotland Yard man saw it, was not to let this unforeseen development interfere with his investigation. Of course, he was anxious to gather from the examination of the dead body such evidence as the murderer or murderers might have overlooked that would help him in his quest; but he was as little minded as the girl to let himself in for lengthy and embarrassing explanations with the police.

It was bad enough that the gang were after him as they had been after Rontz: to go to the police forthwith, without endeavouring to find out who had killed Hermie and why, would be asking for trouble:—it would simply mean that the gang's protectors among the higher-ups would have an equal interest with the gang in suppressing him. Besides, there was the question of time. He had made no progress as yet and his precious seventy-two hours were inexorably slipping away. Well, problems had a way of solving themselves if left alone. He would take the first available opportunity, he resolved, to go over the dead man. Time enough then to decide on the next move...

Nancy was telling him about this Long Island place of hers. It was on the Sound, the North Shore of the island, and the house was right at the water's edge. One went through Oyster Bay—wasn't that where the great Teddy Roosevelt had lived?—to get to it and followed the shore road.

'It's dead quiet all round us at night,' she explained. 'The only house near us is the Yacht Club and there's nothing doing there after dark—not during the week, anyway. And the village is three and a half miles inland. The road that leads to our place is a dead end—if you follow it you come out on the beach. And as all the beach is privately owned, there isn't much traffic at any time and scarcely a soul stirring at this time of night. I don't say that once in a way you mightn't meet someone driving away from the Club or a patrolman. But the police scarcely ever come over that way: you see, there's no rum-running or anything like that on that side of the island...'

'Rum-running, eh?' The young man's air was meditative. 'Now I come to think of it. I believe I've heard of rum-runners operating on Long Island Sound, haven't I?'

She shook her head. 'Not on the Sound, you haven't. They say the beach is too rocky: the boats can't come in close enough. Montauk and down along the ocean shore is where they land the stuff: they bring it up along the South Shore road. 'Most any night you drive down through the Hamptons, if it's late enough, you're apt to meet the trucks...'

The detective nodded and drew reflectively upon his cigarette. He appeared to fall into a brown study. Seeing that the conversation languished, the girl settled down, more intent than ever, to her driving.

The car gathered speed. The whistling of the wind about the roof, the smooth drumming of the tires upon the roadway, and, where the surface was uneven, an occasional dull bumping thud on the floor behind them, were the only sounds. In silence the three companions, the detective, the girl, and that still form jolting at their backs, went rushing through the night to where on the broad highway, glistening blackly under the contemplative moon, Fate waited to take a hand.



## CHAPTER XII

IT met them in the shape of a huge truck which, stern in the air like a kneeling elephant, effectively barred their progress. They came upon it unexpectedly, round a curve. The screech of their brakes went wailing across the night.

Half the road was being resurfaced. The cement bed had been excavated down to the soil, so that there was a drop of a foot or more between the practicable portion of the highway and the half under repair, which was roped off and festooned with red lanterns. It was clear what had happened. Through a skid or some such cause the truck had approached too close to the brink of the good road and the edge had crumbled away under the weight, precipitating the front of the truck into the excavation and snapping one of the massive forewheels off short.

The road was dark and lonely. There were fields on one side and on the other some kind of park with trees whose foliage was unexpectedly green where the long white beam of the Buick's headlights cut across it. The truck, a tremendous five-ton affair, filled to the roof with a heavy load lashed under canvas, as it sprawled diagonally athwart the road seemed to have been abandoned.

'That's done it,' said the girl crisply as they pulled up. She slipped into first and the car crept slowly forward again. 'Is there room to pass, do you think?' she asked Dene. She sounded the klaxon impatiently. The stranded truck left a scant two yards of the highway free.

'If you go up on the grass, you ought to manage it,' Dene told her. 'As long as there isn't a ditch...' He was craning his head out of the window.

The head and shoulders of a man in a cloth cap had suddenly loomed up beside him. The stranger was a sharp-featured fellow, rather sallow, with a small black moustache.

'Give us a lift as fer as the next town, will yer, buddy?' he said hoarsely. 'I'm ditched, see, an' I gotta find a telephone somewheres an' get hauled outer here...'

'I'm sorry.' Dene replied, 'but we're not giving lifts to strangers...' Through his clenched teeth he whispered to the girl, 'Drive on!'

The gears grated. But the man grabbed the window and sprang on the running-board. 'Gees, mister, have a heart...'

Dene's hand shot out: the palm caught the intruder flat in the chest. Thrown off his balance as the car began to move, he toppled backward.

'We've got to get out of this quick,' the detective urged the girl.

Now they were right under the tail of the truck. At that moment the engine stalled. The girl's foot groped for the starter, but it was too late. The man emerged from the gloom again.

'Whether you like it or not, I'm comin' with youse, see?' he muttered, and laid his hand on the handle of the rear door.

'Get out and run for it!' Dene's whisper, sibilant, rasping, smote the girl's ear. 'Over there—make for the trees!'

In a flash he had opened the door beside him and sprung to the ground. The man in the cap jumped back and Dene stepped swiftly between him and the rear door.

'Where the hell d'you get that stuff?' the stranger snarled—'knockin' a fella off in th' road that way? Stand away from that car, d'you get me, an' make it snappy!'

Something glinted in the reflected glow of the headlights and Dene saw an automatic, held low and close to the body, in the other's hand.

Swiftly he glanced across his shoulder. The place at the driving-wheel was empty, but his eye picked up the flash of a white hat disappearing across the road. A subtle change had come over him when he turned to confront his aggressor again. All the resolution seemed to have ebbed from his face and with shaking hands he fumbled at his glasses. 'What... what's the meaning of this?' he faltered. 'You... you can't do this sort of thing, you know!'

'Like hell I can't!' was the jeering answer. 'Lissen fella! Either you drives me or I drives myself. What's it to be?'

'But... but, look here, I don't know how to drive a car!' The young man displayed all signs of intense nervousness.

The other's hand pawed the air in a reassuring gesture. 'That's all right. The dame'll drive us...' He advanced to the car and halted at the sight of the empty driving-seat. 'Hullo, where did she go?'

'She's run off, I suppose,' the youth declared almost lachrymously. 'And no wonder. You frightened her with that gun of yours. If you must have the car, you'd better take it...'

'You betcher life I'll take it.' The man gazed at him scornfully. 'Kinda yellor, ain'tcha?' Violently, he thrust his face into Dene's. 'And you keep yer trap shut about this, d'you hear? One squeak out of you to the bulls and what'll happen to you is just nobody's business...'

‘It’s quite all right,’ Mr. Dene assured him hastily—he appeared to be almost paralyzed with fright. ‘I don’t want any trouble. You... you take the car.’

The man thrust the pistol into his pocket and opened the forward door. ‘You’ll get it back,’ he said. ‘Call Holt’s Garage on Parker Avenya in the Bronx in the morning and you’ll find it there...’

The door slammed, the starter whirred, the car jerked forward. Precariously, it nosed its way round the tail of the truck, swung on to the roadway beyond, and slid off into the night. Dene watched the ruby rear-light vanish into the darkness. Then he rubbed his chin reflectively, indulged in a humourless laugh, and raced across the road.

It was dark under the trees and the ground mounted steeply. He stumbled about among the bushes until he reached a path. A slim figure was dimly visible at the end.

‘Well?’ the girl demanded as he reached her.

‘He took the car,’ Dene panted.

Her eyes were anxious. ‘He didn’t find anything?’

‘No.’

She twisted her hands together. ‘Was it wise? You know, he saw us—he’ll recognize us again, won’t he?’

‘Probably...’

‘I might have known you’d make a mess of it,’ she exclaimed bitterly. ‘I wonder why I listened to you—we ought to have gone on and chanced it.’

Dene laughed. ‘They have trouble on the rum routes at times, don’t they?’

‘They certainly have. But what’s that to do with it?’

‘Fellows get shot—“bumped off,” you call it, don’t you?—and are found days after behind a wall somewhere, isn’t that it?’

‘Yes, but...’

‘Rontz was in the booze racket, wasn’t he?’

‘I’ve heard so. But I don’t see...’

He laughed again. He was leaning against a tree-trunk, mustering her provocatively. ‘Do you know what was in that truck?’

She stared at him, wide-eyed. ‘Liquor, was it?’ Her face lit up mischievously.

He nodded. ‘Cases of it. As we drew level, I saw them under the canvas. And so, as our friend seemed to want the car, I let him take it...’

Her laugh came gurgling. ‘I see...’

‘He pulled a gun on me,’ Dene explained. ‘I was—oh, so frightened. That didn’t go so well with him: he said I was yellow. But he took the car. The point is, we’ll never hear any more about it: I mean, he won’t go to the police. Or will he?’

She shook her head. ‘Not on your life. These people aren’t looking for trouble. When he finds... *him*, he’ll simply abandon the car somewhere. What puzzles me is what that truck was doing on this road. I suppose there’s been a raid or something on the South Shore Road and they’re routing them up North tonight.’ Her eyes smiled at him. ‘I think it was terribly clever of you to act as you did. It was the best solution...’

‘For you,’ he agreed.

‘And not for you?’ Her tone was mildly ironical.

‘I’d have liked to look him over,’ he reminded her. ‘Even now I’m not sure I haven’t made a mistake. However...’ He doffed his hat and mopped his damp forehead. ‘Have you any idea where we are?’ he asked blandly.

‘We ought to be getting into Jericho, I imagine...’

‘Jericho?’ He began to laugh. ‘We would...’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, wasn’t it while going down from Jerusalem to Jericho that a certain man fell among thieves?’

She laughed. ‘I believe it was. But our friend was the good Samaritan, wasn’t he?’

He nodded rather grimly. ‘That remains to be seen. The point now is, How are we going to get you home? How far have you to go?’

‘A good ten miles, at least...’

He whistled. ‘As much as that. We’ll have to raise a car somewhere...’

‘I know a garage in Jericho...’ she began, but he stopped her—he had a quick way with him.

‘Won’t do. That’s the way the car went, wasn’t it? We don’t want to run into our friend again, not walking, at any rate. Didn’t I see a service station open a piece back, towards New York?’

‘I believe we did pass one...’

He took her arm. ‘Let’s be going, then. We’ll see if we can persuade these people to hire us out a car...’

She stopped and looked at him. ‘But what about you?’

‘I’ll drop you and then take the car on to New York...’ He took her arm again. ‘Let’s make a move, shall we? It’s after one o’clock...’

They started off down the path together.

‘There’s not the slightest necessity for you to see me home,’ she said rather distantly. ‘You ought to have no difficulty in stopping a car on the road and getting a lift back to New York...’

‘That’s all right,’ he told her easily. ‘Ten miles, one way or the other, won’t make any difference to me. Besides, I’d like to know you were safe home after all the excitement we’ve been through together...’

He was thinking that this girl, who knew Rontz, was the only line he held on the dead man, and he had no intention of relinquishing it until he had discovered the link between her and the mysterious Hermie.

‘I wouldn’t dream of troubling you,’ she answered hastily. ‘I’ve imposed on you far too much as it is. And that reminds me, I’ve not thanked you for what you did for me...’

They had now regained the road and were stepping out on the hard concrete. He laughed. ‘You’ve nothing to thank me for,’ he rejoined with some embarrassment. ‘We got into this thing together and went through with it together, that’s all...’ He glanced at her quickly. ‘But I’m not sure we’re out of the wood even yet, you know. Wouldn’t you like... mightn’t it help things if you told me just what business you had with this man Rontz?’

She shook her head. ‘I can’t tell you that. It wouldn’t interest you, anyway...’

‘It might interest the police...’

‘The police don’t have to know anything about it, unless you tell them...’

‘They might trace the connection for themselves...’

‘There’s no chance of that if you don’t give me away.’ She halted there on the road and, with clasped hands, appealed to him. ‘Listen,’ she said very earnestly, ‘I’ve told you already I had nothing to do with this man’s death and, now that he’s dead, the business between us is liquidated. Won’t you take my word for it? Won’t you be a sport and forget all about these hours we’ve spent together? In a few minutes we shall separate and it’s most unlikely that I shall ever see you again. Why not think of the whole thing as a curious experience that we had together and let it go at that?’

His face was stubborn as he shook his head. ‘I can’t do that, I’m afraid...’

She humped her shoulders resignedly and walked on.

‘I mean,’ he added hastily, following after, ‘is there any good reason why I shouldn’t see you again?’ And when she made no reply, ‘You can’t fool me,’ he continued. ‘I can see you’re worried to death about this man. You’re plucky and all that, but it shows in your face. Why, the very first time I set eyes on you tonight I was struck by your unhappy air! I’m not being merely inquisitive, honestly, I’m not. I’d like to help you: indeed, if you’d only tell me what’s behind all this, I believe I can help you. Won’t you let me try?’

‘If you don’t want me to feel sorry that I ever spoke to you,’ she said tensely, ‘you’ll say no more about this...’

‘But...’

‘Oh, can’t you leave me alone?’ she cried passionately.

On that he said no more and they relapsed into silence.

Thus, without further word between them, they tramped for a good quarter of an hour until, rounding a bend in the road, they descried in a blaze of light the service station. Close by was a railway carriage converted into a coffee-stall with an open counter at which, amid the cheerful rattle of china and cutlery, a group of belated travellers was gathered. The coffee-bar was labelled ‘The Old Manhattan Diner,’ and two private cars and a truck were drawn up outside on the road.

As they drew level with the coffee-stall, the girl stopped. ‘I don’t believe I’ll appear,’ she said. ‘You might see if they’ve got a car they can let us have. I’ll wait for you here; I could do with a cup of coffee, I guess...’

‘Right you are!’ Dene’s tone was joyful. This was capitulation: he was going to see her home, at least. He hurried up the road to where, a hundred yards away, a figure in overalls was coming and going behind a phalanx of pumps.

The garage man was reserved, but not unhelpful. He had a car and, what was more, an acolyte in the shape of a towled youth answering to the name of Al, who would drive them and bring the car back. Where did they want to go? At that time of night the rule was payment in advance. Then Dene realized that he had forgotten to ask his companion their exact destination.

He emerged from under the garage porch. One of the two private cars he had observed was just leaving the coffee-stall. He walked down the road to the bar. At the counter were two truck-drivers, a man in a cap, and a very scrubby individual who looked like a tramp; but there was no sign of the girl.

He spoke to the attendant. ‘Wasn’t there a lady here just now?’ he asked.

‘Sure,’ answered the attendant philosophically, ‘but she went away.’

Dene glanced about him. Right and left the road ran, quiet and deserted. 'But...' he began. 'Where did she go?' he asked hastily.

The attendant shrugged his shoulders as he swabbed the bar. 'I seen her get into a car,' he remarked cautiously.

'What car?' demanded Dene crisply.

The man in the cap spoke up: he looked like a chauffeur out of livery, probably the driver of the remaining car, Dene surmised. 'It was Mrs. Hampdon's car from over at Syosset. The lady knew the chauffeur, see, who wuz havin' a cup of corfee, an' she arst him, would he drive her home? Said her car had broke down, or sumpen...'

Dene gasped. For mortification and astonishment he could scarce trust himself to speak. 'Do *you* know the lady?' he managed to ask at last.

The man in the cap shook his head, as he stirred his coffee. 'Never seen her before. But I wouldn't know her. The party I works for lives over Locust Valley way, see? And...'

'Did you hear her say where she wanted to go?' the detective intervened irritably.

'Can't say I did,' was the impassive retort. The man looked interrogatively at the attendant. 'Did you, George?'

But the attendant shook his head. 'I didn't pay no attention to her...'

Dene ordered a cup of coffee. While he was drinking it, he heard one of the truck-drivers say to the other that he was going to New York. In the circumstances, to return to New York seemed to be the obvious thing to do, so the Englishman begged a lift. Two minutes later he found himself enthroned beside a large Swede, headed once more for the city.

The Swede was a man of few words, and those Dene failed to understand, all save one, which was 'dollar.' He passed the money over and relapsed into silence, glad to be left alone with his thoughts. He was raging. To be tricked like that! She had planted him there and vanished into the night, taking her secret with her. A swell sleuth he was!

Well, girls were like that. Unscrupulous, that's what they were: no sense of fair play. He had been all kinds of a fool to sentimentalize over her; but he had learned his lesson. Miss Nancy Ayleswood would have to be investigated, and from now on he would let no compassionate nonsense stand in his way.

But even as he took the resolution, he was aware of two grey eyes that seemed to gaze at him out of the darkness rushing by as the lorry sped along; and he was conscious of a great sense of loneliness.

## CHAPTER XIII

THE SWEDE had slammed his gears into top and kept them there. He drove with the detached, complacent mien of an engine-driver setting out on a non-stop run, as though there were nothing between him and his destination. Rattling and bumping, they bowled along.

Dene took off his hat and let the air fan his brow. That scramble up the hillside, that brisk hike along the highway, in the sultry night, had heated him more than he realized at the time. He relaxed, idly watching the dark ribbon of road unravel itself before them. The motion was soothing and so was his companion's stolid silence. It enabled the Scotland Yard man to collect his thoughts. He began to sort out and analyze the impressions he had gathered.

Had he been at his familiar window-table, encompassed by the demure hush of the Finger-Print Department, he would have taken pencil and paper and jotted down, one by one, the salient points. But his situation, rendering this course impracticable, he closed his eyes and fell to reviewing in his mind the events of the night and the proper deductions they led to. He had trained himself to this species of mental calculation and presently he was glad to find each component part of the pattern (as far as he was able to conjecture it) dropping smoothly into place.

He would start, he told himself, with the personages concerned, taking them, as the theatre programmes say, 'in the order of their appearance.' There was Gerry Cloan: there was Mike; there was Rocco; there was Rontz. For the present, he could not fit the girl, Nancy, in anywhere; besides, she distracted his thoughts. He shut her resolutely out...

He tabulated the *dramatis personæ* in his mind. Gerry Cloan, jailed over a rum-running fracas with the police; Rocco, one of the 'big shots' of the liquor traffic; Mike, his associate and the associate of Rontz; and lastly the lawyer himself, claiming to have in his possession the information to clear Gerry Cloan—link by link, the chain seemed complete, all the way from New York back to the condemned cell in Maidstone Jail.

The presumption was strong that this New York ring of crooks and assassins had planned the Oldholme Priory job. Were they, too, behind the robberies at Cannes and Biarritz? Valda, the 'ace' of Hablard's letter, came into Dene's mind. He was wont to think of him as 'the star turn,' as a man of superior education, suave, plausible, and well-dressed, blending inconspicuously with the ultra-fashionable background of women like the



Princesse Montegattino and Mrs. Gregson. Certainly, he fitted far more convincingly into the surroundings of Rontz and his associates—Angelo's and Mike's, with their lavish furnishings—than did Gerry Cloan, this humble hireling who drove a car for a bootlegger. The ring had money—Mike's luxurious premises showed that—and expert safe-manipulators of the Valda type were expensive. If all three jobs had been organized from New York, what more likely than that the ring had engaged the same star operator for each? Was this the secret Rontz had been going to disclose? And had he been killed in order to seal his lips?

That seemed to be the way of it. Was Valda, or Gutierrez, or whatever he called himself, the real author of the Priory murder? A secret thrill ran through the Scotland Yard man. To save an innocent man from the gallows and clear up two unsolved mysteries at one *coup*, what an unheard-of triumph that would be for him! But Rontz, who could have answered the question, was dead. Dene sighed. So much surmise, so little proof. And the clock was racing onward to Tuesday morning. Proof. He laughed bitterly: it made him think of Manderton, dour and positive, with his incessant clamour for proof. Well, that was the Yard method. His mind ran on...

Rocco and Rontz had obviously quarrelled: over the 'split,' the division of the Cartwright diamonds, presumably—that was why crooks usually fell out. In some unexplained fashion Rocco had got wind of the lawyer's correspondence with Scotland Yard and with the aid of that wireless from the Megantic had set out to 'get' both Rontz and the Scotland Yard emissary he was to meet. But Rocco was not behind the killing of the lawyer: at the time he was breathing fire and flame against him, Rontz must have been dead for some hours.

Who was responsible for the killing? Mike? Hardly: Rocco had implied that Mike was privy to the lawyer's treachery. Did that mean that, with Rontz out of the picture, Mike had the evidence to save Gerry Cloan? It looked like it. Here was a constructive idea, anyway; but, Dene reflected, it would involve his returning to Mike's...

The notion did not especially appeal to him. He mistrusted that chilly and fishlike eye. Besides, there was that fatal wireless... If Jennie had been gossiping at Mike's about an Englishman enquiring after Rontz... Bah, they weren't back in New York yet—time enough for that decision. Meanwhile, the question remained unanswered—Who had killed Rontz?

Who had the most vital interest in stopping the lawyer's mouth? Who but the real author of the Priory crime? He was what they called 'a man-eater,' a killer. He might have gagged and bound poor Hassock, the Cartwrights' butler, but he had chosen instead to silence him forever. And he

had stopped Rontz's mouth in the same way. But wait a minute! If X, the unknown, had killed Rontz, he must be here, in America! Dene thought of Nick and Toni, and smiled to himself. Not necessarily. This was New York—such little matters could be attended to by proxy...

A sort of hoarse animal growling at his side broke his train of thought. The Swede was addressing him.

'You yomp off where, mebbe?' he mumbled.

Dene perceived that they were traversing the same interminable bridge by which he had left the city. 'Put me down on Broadway,' he said, mentioning the first street that occurred to him.

The bridge brought Nancy back to his mind. Damn the girl, why did her face haunt him so? He had tried to help her and she had repaid him by a dirty trick: he ought to be furious with her instead of dwelling like a moon-calf upon that indefinable charm of hers. Where did she, with her haughty, patrician air, belong in this welter of bloodshed and crime? And what was her pressing business with a ruffian like Rontz on this of all nights, the night it was appointed he was to die? He'd get the answer to both questions before he was much older, Dene promised himself grimly. Innocent or guilty, the girl was going to be investigated. Indeed, as things were, she seemed to offer the most promising line of enquiry...

He was still thinking about her when he perceived that the truck was slowing down. 'Broadway' was on the street sign-post at the corner at which it stopped. Dene dropped to the ground and the truck rumbled away.

This was not the Broadway he had surveyed earlier in the evening, the gay street of theatres and motion-picture houses and cabarets, but a rather austere thoroughfare of towering buildings and a quite unusual number of motor-car shops. Standing at the corner, the young man considered his position. High above him on a house-top across the way, a huge electric sign kept flashing. 'Thornley's Motor Oils—They're Clean'—he read the words with his eyes rather than with his conscious mind. Rontz had failed him: Nancy was momentarily beyond his ken: what was he going to do? He dared not go back to his hotel, for Rocco's men would certainly be on the watch. Yet he must find a bed for the night. 'Thornley's Motor Oils—They're...' Oh, damn!

He felt depressed, irresolute, and, of a sudden, incredibly weary. A beggar whined in his ear and he gave the man a coin. A trolley car thumped down the broad avenue; taxis shot by; feet rustled on the sidewalks—the life of this city that never seemed to sleep pulsed strongly about him. Once more he was conscious of a feeling of loneliness; but now, at the thought of

certain basilisk-eyed, soft-footed figures loafing unobtrusively about a shabby hotel entrance, it was doubled by a new sensation for the Scotland Yard man—the sense of being hunted.

It was then, as he cast about in his mind for some constructive move, that he thought of Jennie. She was a good-natured little thing and obviously an habitu  of Mike’s. If she were still there, she could tell him if there had been any developments in his absence, any whisper of Rontz’s fate, any news of the raid at the Club Calderon. It was half-past two; she had probably long since gone home to bed. But he could always telephone Mike’s and see.

In America one telephoned from the corner drug-store; that much the motion pictures had taught him. He walked a block or so and found a place open on the corner of West Fifty-Seventh Street. Mike’s was listed in the telephone directory; but Dene paused an instant before dialling. To bring Jennie to the ’phone he would have to give his name: his English voice would be recognized. Supposing the girl had already left, it would be a senseless risk to take...

Bah, a public call-office! What danger was there? He spun the dial and waited, seething with impatience: from sheer nerve-strain the perspiration coursed down his face as he stood in the stuffy booth.

A man’s voice repeated the number. Dene, adopting the American intonation, asked to speak to Miss Lindsay.

‘Who is this, please?’

‘Just say a friend of hers—she’ll know...’

A long pause, then Jennie’s voice—it was as simple as that, after all:

‘Who is it?’

‘Listen, Jennie,’ Dene said softly. ‘It’s Trevor...’

‘Who?’ He repeated the name.

He heard a gasp; then her rather husky voice, awed and rapid: ‘I can’t talk here. Where are you?’

‘On Broadway...’

‘Yes, but where? What street?’ The query rang impatient.

‘Broadway and Fifty-Seventh...’

‘Fifty-Seventh, eh?’ Her voice was low and hurried as though she were fearful of being overheard. ‘Listen, walk up two blocks to Columbus Circle and meet me at Childs...’

‘At Childs?’

‘Gosh, didn’t you ever hear of Childs? It’s an eating-place, a caff, if you like; everybody knows it...’

‘Right. I’ll find it...’

‘Okay...’ She rang off.

At a corner of what Londoners would call a circus, a round, open space with a monument in the middle, he came upon the place he was looking for and went in. Tiled walls and floor reflected bright lights and rang to the clatter of plates and voices. Large family parties, obviously well-to-do, were installed at the tables as though for the rest of the night, chattering volubly. The average New-Yorker, the young man from London decided as he chose a table a little apart from the throng, could scarcely know what a bedroom looked like.

He had ordered a second cup of coffee before his eye seized the flash of a black-and-white frock in the revolving door. On recognizing him, Jennie raised a hand in greeting and came quickly across. The detective’s intuitive sense, groomed in a hard school to form conclusions at sight, detected a certain air of reserve about her, coupled with a suggestion of suppressed excitement. As she took the chair he offered, he thought how young she looked—certainly not more than eighteen or nineteen at most. That night he had had a glimpse of the pitiless realism of this vital, restless city. A girl of her age should be thinking of beaux, and pretty frocks, and parties: it touched him to find her making her way with such calm self-assurance through this dim underworld which was unrolling itself before his eyes.

‘I didn’t expect to see *you* again,’ she said. Her tone was edged with reproach. ‘Just a cup of coffee, George,’ she told the hovering waiter. ‘What became of you?’ she went on to Dene.

He laughed easily. ‘Oh, gambling always bores me. I just slipped away...’

‘Where to?’

He paused. ‘As a matter of fact, I went to the Club Calderon...’ He watched her face for her reaction to the name.

The allusion passed her by. ‘Was Hermie there?’

‘No...’

She was silent: the waiter was setting down her coffee. She waited for the man to depart, then said, in a matter-of-fact voice, ‘Did you tell anyone your name at Mike’s tonight—anyone except me, that is?’

‘No,’ he answered, and reflected that it was only at the club that Nancy had heard it.

‘Or that you were just off the boat from England?’

She knew about that wireless, then. ‘No,’ he said.

She nodded her blonde head sagely. ‘Okay. Don’t go back to Mike’s, Trev...’

‘Why not?’

‘Because...’ She broke off and poured cream in her coffee.

‘Not much of a reason, is it?’ His tone was deliberately light. ‘Why shouldn’t I go back to Mike’s if I want to?’

‘Because New York isn’t London, that’s why not...’

‘Still I don’t see...’

She gave a little gasp of exasperation. ‘What you’ve got to get into that bean of yours...’ She stopped. ‘Listen, Trev, I never was one to go prying into other people’s secrets. I don’t know anything about you; but you did me a good turn tonight and...’ She broke off again. ‘Gosh, I’ve got to make you understand. If you think you can two-time big shots like Rocco and get away with it, you’re apt to find yourself one of these mornings under the faucet on the cold marble...’

He suppressed a shudder. Not on account of her warning. It gave him a sense of shock to hear this child speak of the morgue as part of the normal background of life.

He said nothing, and she went on, ‘Did you know that Gerry Cloan had a brother over here?’

His eyes snapped, but he did not speak.

‘I’m telling you,’ she said. ‘One of Rocco’s lot, he is...’

‘Was he at Mike’s tonight?’

She laughed disdainfully. ‘Ed? I’ll say not. Ed’s been on the lam for months. But once he hears that you’ve hit town... You want to watch out for Ed: he’s a killer...’

He had stiffened into sudden vigilance. His secret was out then, his real identity known. He would have to deal with this situation: but how?

As though she read his thoughts, she went on with a faintly embarrassed air: ‘You don’t have to tell me anything; but I’m warning you, see? These yeggs are turning this town inside out to find you. If you’re wise, you’ll hop the next boat out and beat it back to England...’

On that he shook his head doggedly. ‘Not me,’ he told her.

She shrugged. ‘Give me a cigarette, will you?’ He passed the packet over, handed her a light. ‘You can tell me this if you like,’ she said, her eyes carefully averted. ‘Is it true what they’re saying about you over at Mike’s?’

‘What?’

‘That you croaked this guy over in England and left Gerry Cloan to take the rap...’ And now she looked him straight in the face.

He had himself well in hand; but for a fleeting instant her question almost threw him into disarray. To mask his discomposure, he affected to be busy crushing out the stub of his cigarette in the saucer of his coffee-cup. Like a flash it had dawned on him that, for some unexplained reason, he had been mistaken for the real author of the Priory shooting. Between the first shock of surprise and the sense of exultation that immediately succeeded it, he could scarce trust himself to speak. Then there *was* a second man involved; Gerry Cloan was innocent; the great Inspector Manderton was wrong; and he, Trevor Dene, the humble novice, right, his three thousand-mile trip across the ocean justified—like a chain of fire the sequence of deductions swept through his mind.

He met her blue eye boldly and shook his head. ‘No,’ he said gravely, ‘it’s not true...’

She sighed happily. ‘Gee, I’m certainly glad to hear that...’

‘But we’re not talking about it, eh, Jennie?’ he put in quickly.

‘Okay, kid...’ Her eyes smiled at him. ‘Gee, you surely had me fooled. Here was I thinking you were just another college boy, and all the time you’re the slickest little safe-worker on the other side. Well, you can’t ever tell about fellas, that’s a cinch.’ Impulsively, she laid a hand on his sleeve. ‘I like your spunk, Trev, but watch your step. You don’t know what you’re up against in this town. They’re out to get you and Hermie, kid...’

‘And what’s Hermie been up to?’ he asked, with elaborate nonchalance.

On that she flared up. ‘Oh, quit stalling, can’t you? They meant to get the pair of you at the boat. Hermie didn’t meet you at the dock, did he?’

‘No...’

‘Is that the truth?’

‘If he’d met me, would I have had to ask you to take me to him?’

She nodded, her chin on her hand. ‘That’s right, too. You haven’t seen Hermie, then?’

‘No...’

‘He’s been missing all evening. I’ve been sort of worried about him. But he’s just standing from under, I guess...’

Dene reflected. Should he tell her of Rontz’s fate? But caution is second nature to Scotland Yard and he decided to say nothing. Instead, he sounded her. ‘What has Rocco got against me, anyway?’

‘You and Hermie ought to know...’

‘Perhaps. But what are they saying up at Mike’s?’

‘That you and Hermie double-crossed them over that job in England...’

‘Who says so? Mike, is it?’

‘In your hat...’ Her pout was disdainful. ‘That prune wouldn’t open his trap to tell you it was a fine day, hardly. I heard one or two things myself, and then that fella, Willie Silberling, I introduced you to, he spilled a piece...’

‘And what did Master Willie have to say?’

She laughed mischievously. ‘A plenty. Rocco is supposed to have nosed these Cartwrights out, on account of Gerry was their chauffeur, I guess. But it was Hermie who found the man for the job, some marvellous Englishman who’d worked for him before. Whadda you know about that?’

Dene laughed. ‘Well, well, well...’

She gurgled back at him. ‘Sez you! Aw, to hell, Trev, as if you didn’t know it all better than Willie, the poor sap...’

Her companion tapped a cigarette to rights on the back of his hand. ‘I’m not so sure. But let’s hear the rest of the story...’

‘That sees Willie through. But I heard someone say that you and Hermie kept Rocco out of his share of the split...’ She shook her head at him humorously. ‘But I don’t have to believe all I hear, Trev...’

He laid his hand on hers. ‘You’re a good little pal, Jennie. And I can’t tell you all I know. Will you remember that?’

She nodded demurely. ‘That’s okay with me...’ Through the long lashes glistening with mascara she gazed at him with a sudden air of tenderness. ‘Just a tough *hombre*,’ she murmured banteringly. ‘And he looks like a kid. But on the level, Trev,’ she went on more seriously, ‘you were plumb crazy to call me at Mike’s. You knew they’d got that radio you sent Hermie from the ship. Suppose I’d told anyone about you...’

‘You didn’t, did you?’

‘No, but I might have. Listen, where are you stopping?’

‘At an hotel. But I’m not going back there...’

‘You mean... they’re watching it?’

‘I shouldn’t wonder...’

She nodded. ‘I was forgetting. Of course, Nick and Pete have seen you: they were at the boat, weren’t they? Listen, I have an apartment of sorts; you’d better come over to my place. You can stay there and welcome until there’s a steamer back to England...’

There and then, he was tempted to go with her. He was unspeakably weary, in mind more than body. But more than this, he craved a respite, if only for a few brief hours, from the chase which, ever since he landed, had sounded relentlessly at his heels. Jennie's offer meant sanctuary, a chance to rest and collect his thoughts: there was so much to straighten out...

His glance shifted to the girl. She was waiting for his answer, her face alert, her small mouth just parted to reveal a line of pearly teeth. He looked at her and saw adventure beckon. She liked him and she was a jolly pretty kid; one was only young once; after all, why not? Or—what was that priceless phrase of hers? Ah, yes—what the hell?

He stifled a sigh and looked away. No, young Dene, he told himself, it won't do. No loafing on the job; besides, what business had he to run her into danger?

'It's terribly sweet of you, Jennie, dear,' he said. 'But I'd better not. I'm a dangerous man to know...'

'Aw, shoot!' she cried. 'It's a walk-up where I live, over on the other side of Eighth Avenue. Who's going to look for you there? It's nothing to write the folks about, of course, but I'd love to have you, Trev, honest I would...'

He shook his head smilingly. 'I know, Jennie darling. But my mind's made up. But give me your 'phone number and I'll ring you in the morning.' He took out notebook and pencil and pushed them across to her. 'I'm going to send you home now...'

At that moment his glance, idly traversing the café, fell upon a man who, without their perceiving it, had installed himself at an adjoining table. He was fat and puffy with a red and pimply face. Dene was surprised to see him there; but he was even more surprised to discover that the stranger was eyeing them attentively. The moment their glances met, however, the man dropped his eyes to the newspaper he was reading, at the same time hoisting the paper almost imperceptibly so as to mask his face.

Dene had done his share of shadowing in his time. He was on the alert at once. With an impassive face he stretched across the table to draw the ash-tray towards him. As he did so he contrived to sweep his packet of cigarettes to the floor with his sleeve. Jennie moved her chair to give him space to recover them. In the act of stooping, her companion whispered rapidly in her ear: 'The man at the table behind you is watching us. Do you know him?'

Without a second's hesitation the girl slipped into her cue. 'Say, where the hell's that waiter?' she cried irascibly, at the same time turning her head.



At a table close at hand a newspaper moved and a pair of gimlet eyes peeped over the top for an instant and were hidden again.

Jennie picked up the pencil from the table. 'I'll give you that telephone number,' she said to Dene. 'And at the same time,' she remarked casually, moistening the pencil on her vermilion lips, 'I might as well give you my address...'

She handed him back his notebook open. He glanced at the page. There was address and telephone number, but underneath, in the straggling, unformed hand, was scrawled, 'No. But let's scam. I'll go first. I'll be outside with a taxi.'

Already she was on her feet. 'So long, kid,' she said brightly. 'I'll be seeing you. Give me a ring some time...' With a smile and a nod she tripped to the door.

A great little actress and sharp as they make 'em, was Dene's unspoken comment as he watched her go. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that the man with the newspaper had not budged.

'Aha,' thought the detective, 'so I'm the quarry...'

The stranger's eye was constantly upon him. It was not difficult to guess what had happened, Dene decided. They were combing the city for him: Jennie's meeting at Angela's with an obvious Englishman in search of Rontz had doubtless been ferreted out. Probably her brief telephone conversation with him had been overheard and its significance realized in the light of the report from Angelo's.

He had no fears for Jennie. She was a good enough actress to feign complete innocence of any complicity with a vague foreigner picked up in a speakeasy; but he wished he had told her to go straight home. Alone he might be able to give the fellow the slip; with Jennie to look after, it might not be so simple.

She had disappeared through the revolving door. Dene collected his check, lit a cigarette. He would give her three minutes, he decided, then stroll out in leisurely fashion. But scarcely had the door swung round behind her than three imperious hoots of a klaxon resounded from outside.

A signal! In the wink of an eye Dene was on his feet. The squeak of a chair on the tiled floor close by told him that the stranger had followed suit. But Dene had the start. By three strides he beat him to the cash-desk, where he slapped a dollar and the bill down under the nose of the astonished cashier and, without waiting for change, stormed out. Outside he scattered a large party of revellers about to enter the café, and, as he saw each one in

succession disappear round the revolving door, thanked his stars for this brief delay.

A hand waved from a taxi at the kerb. Dene sprinted across the wide pavement towards it. As he did so, a self-starter close at hand shattered the quietness of dawn and he became aware of a car parked about a dozen yards away. It was a brown sedan.

Dene's heart sank at the sight of the direction arrows and one-way signs distributed about the Circle, narrowing the possibilities of escape. An old dodge leapt into his mind as he tumbled into the taxi. He did not slam the door: he held it. 'Round the first corner you come to,' he barked at the driver. 'And step on it. There's a car behind us, a brown sedan. We've got to shake it...'

'I getya, buddy,' said the driver dispassionately, and, jaws moving steadily, glanced behind him. The cab shot away.

Skirting the Circle, they swept into an avenue and, almost immediately, swung perilously down a side-turning. Dene was peering from the window and all at once cried, 'Stop!' With screaming brakes the taxi slowed down. Before it had ceased to move, Dene was bundling the girl out on the pavement. 'Under that archway!' he cried to her, pointing to a dark entrance a few yards back, and turned to the taximan. 'We get off here,' he fired at him. 'You drive like hell and give that car behind a run, savvy? It's worth five dollars...'

'You're on, chief,' was the impassive rejoinder. Dene thrust the bill into the man's hand, sprang to the ground, and the cab slid off along the quiet street. As Dene gained the archway where Jennie awaited him, a car came round the corner—it was the brown sedan—and went roaring by. The rear-light of the cab was a ruby pin-point in the distance. The detective uttered a sigh of relief and, doffing his hat, mopped his damp brow.

'Okay, Jennie,' he remarked.

## CHAPTER XIV

THE investigation of crime offers little scope for gallantry. In his moments of introspection Mr. Dene was wont to admit as much with a sigh. In the service of Scotland Yard he had had to buy his experience like everybody else. It had taught him, among other things, to take a sternly realistic view of women and their relationship to the social scheme. He had learnt, for instance, that lovely ladies, whose doings are the subject of interest to the police, are surprisingly ready to succumb to the minion of the law, even if the said minion has red hair and spectacles:—the lovelier, the readier. They couldn't kid *him*! What was the name of that perfectly charming girl in the manslaughter charge at Wembley—she had killed an old man with her car—who had suggested perjury to the young police constable with such engaging frankness? And Blanche Vanetta—what an eyeful she was!—whose bedchamber he had invaded at crack of dawn with a warrant in the Camberwell dope case: that had been a close call! If he hadn't caught sight of that little paper packet protruding from under the mattress...

One had to be practical in this game. Contemplating Jennie with unseeing eyes, he was telling himself that six hours out of his allotted seventy-two had elapsed and he was still no nearer identifying the man whose arrest would save Gerry Cloan from the gallows. Jennie was a sweet kid, but she had told all she knew. Rontz was out of the picture; Rocco and Mike, and their crowd were definitely dangerous; the trail led back to the girl, Nancy. Quite. But how was he going to set about finding her?

Jennie was shaking his arm. 'Snap out of it, can't you?' she cried. 'Or those birds will be coming back...'

They had taken refuge in a service entrance—some hotel or apartment house, he supposed. She linked her arm in his and they stepped outside. The street was empty: the air cool and lovely. They walked back to Broadway. The eastern sky was streaked with the approach of day. High above the house-tops the sign Dene had noticed before still flung its message into the greyness.

The detective had halted on the corner of the avenue, his face turned skyward, contemplating the sign. The girl shivered.

'Come on, let's get a taxi!' she proposed.

A cab, blazing with lights, came crawling, and on her signal, whirled across to where they stood. Dene held the door for Jennie, but remained on

the sidewalk.

‘Aren’t you coming along?’ she asked reproachfully.

He shook his head. ‘No, my dear. I’m not running you into any more danger...’

‘That’s the bunk. These guys don’t know where I live...’

‘You never can tell...’

‘I’ll take a chance. You look all in. There’s a couch in the living-room. Come back and rest for a few hours, at least...’

He shook his head again, smiling at her with a vaguely absent air.

In sudden alarm she laid hold of the lapel of his coat. ‘You’re never going back to that hotel of yours?’

He laughed. ‘That *would* be asking for the marble slab, wouldn’t it?’

‘But what are you going to do?’

‘I’m thinking of calling on a man I know...’

‘At this time of night? It must be three o’clock, isn’t it?’

He smiled. ‘My friend never goes to bed...’

‘Okay...’ Her tone was resigned. ‘But take care of yourself. And ring me in the morning. You know, Trev,’ she went on, as if loath to let him go, ‘you’ve got me guessing. You’re not the type...’

‘Not the...? Oh, I see. What is the type, anyway?’

‘Oh, tough-looking, I guess, and kinda cagey... I don’t know. And you look... well, on the level...’

He made her a mock bow. ‘I know where to apply when I want a reference...’

‘Who are you, anyway?’ she asked suddenly in a low voice.

He put a finger to his lips. ‘Hush! Didn’t you know? I’m Zip, or What-is-it? the mystery man. Solution on this page tomorrow...’

‘Aw, pshaw!’ She drew back within the cab, her face averted.

‘Don’t mind my nonsense, Jennie,’ said Dene, leaning forward. ‘The less you know about me, the better!’

She said nothing, and he went on, ‘Bye-bye, my dear. And I can’t thank you enough for not giving me away. You don’t mind if I don’t drive you home, do you? You must let me pay for the taxi, though...’ So saying, he slipped a bill into her fingers.

She opened her hand, then started. ‘A ten-spot! I can’t take this. You’re crazy...’

‘I’ve nothing smaller. Let’s say the balance is for expenses. All right, driver...’

‘Just a minute, Trev...’

But Dene had signed to the chauffeur and the cab moved off. Once more the detective raised his eyes to the house-tops. But now the electric sign had gone dark. In the growing light, however, he could make out the gaunt, skeleton lettering, ‘Thornley’s Motor Oils—They’re Clean.’ Moodily, he contemplated the sign. He was thinking of something a famous French detective, a former Chief of the Paris Sûreté, had once told him.

A rum old fruit, Monsieur Amédée Boulot, with a nasty trick of prodding with his finger at one’s waistcoat. Dene had met him in Manderton’s room at the Yard—‘Uncle George’ and Monsieur Boulot, it seemed, were friends of long standing. ‘Everybody has a blind spot at times,’ the veteran had said. ‘That’s why criminals are caught. We of the police have our blind spots, too. That’s how criminals escape. The catch about our job, young man, is to realize that we all have these mental lapses and to guard against them!’

How right the old Frenchman had been, Dene ruminated. For instance, had it not required a sky sign, blazing a certain name in letters a good twelve feet high, to bring Bill Thornley back to his mind? He and Bill had seen a good deal of one another in the old days at Cambridge—why the Hades hadn’t he thought of Bill before? Well, it wasn’t so surprising. He hadn’t heard from Bill for years: after all, their undergraduate days past, there was little enough in common between him, the humble police aspirant, and the son of the millionaire oil magnate. All the same, if he had not been so completely absorbed in this, his first independent mission, he would surely have remembered Bill before this and tried to get in touch with him. Detective work was like that—it left you no mind for anything else...

The druggist’s where he had telephoned before was still open. It was a hundred to one chance against Bill being in New York, Dene told himself, as he checked the four-year-old address in his book by the directory. There was Bill’s name—William V. Thornley, Jr., East Seventy-Second Street: at least he had not moved. Dene dialled and waited. Four years was the dickens of a long time: what if Bill had forgotten all about him? He heard the whirr of the bell: it was a ghastly hour to call anybody. Never mind, if Bill had not altered since his Cambridge days, he would still be up and about...

He had a sudden thrill. Bill’s voice—the level drawl was unmistakable—had spoken in his ear. ‘Yes?’

‘Is that you, Bill?’ Dene enquired. ‘This is Trevor, Trevor Dene...’

‘Why, hello there, Trevor!’ The greeting was warmly cordial, but the tone betrayed no surprise. ‘Where are you ringing from? London?’

These millionaires! was the Englishman’s unspoken thought. ‘No,’ he answered. ‘I’m in New York...’

‘Then why aren’t you staying with me? Come on over at once: we’ll send for your traps in the morning...’

‘But, Bill...’

‘Got the right address? Fine. Shoot right along...’

He had hung up. Dene smiled to himself as, with a thoughtful air, he replaced the receiver. Bill didn’t change. A fellow he hadn’t seen since his college days in England drops in on him out of the sky at three o’clock in the morning and he immediately offers to put him up. That was Bill all over. A crazy person but...

Suddenly there was a lump in the Englishman’s throat. He would have a drink with Bill, anyway. He certainly could do with a drink...

Old memories came crowding as he drove across town. They had been at the same college, had occupied rooms on the same quad. Dene had never quite fathomed why they became friends unless it was that he had his pride and, being poor, with his own way to make in the world, he had rather made a point of not running after the American as so many men did. It was Bill who had sought him out. Though reputed to be fabulously rich, he was studiously simple in his ways and steadfastly refused, for instance, to be taken up and toadied to by the snobbish sporting set. Adventure was his hobby. One of his diversions was scaling the college roofs at night, for which purpose he founded the Cambridge Edelweiss Club, of which Dene and one or two other chosen spirits were members. He took a perverse delight in outwitting the vigilance of the college authorities, also in organizing elaborate ‘rags,’ some of which passed into ‘Varsity history. Dene was his associate in most of these exploits: Bill’s extraordinary ingenuity and never-failing resourcefulness made the strongest appeal to Trevor’s nascent detective instincts.

They had drifted apart as college friends do. Bill had left Trevor a newly-fledged constable on probation and had gone back to America. His rare letters were dated from country-places on Long Island, villas at Miami or Palm Beach, private yachts in the Gulf of California or the Caribbean. He appeared to know everybody that mattered socially, but America bored him, he wrote, so that Trevor was not surprised to learn that he was off to shoot

big game in Central Africa. Thereafter, Bill's letters ceased, but, from time to time, Dene heard of him in remote places of the earth. Now it was a man at the club who had run into him at Darjeeling organizing a trip into Tibet; now a telegram in the London *Times* announced that Mr. William Van Deventer Thornley had returned to New York from an expedition to the Belgian Congo undertaken on behalf of the Field Museum of Chicago. He seemed to spend most of his time in trekking after wild animals and in exploration. Pretty lucky to catch him in New York, Dene decided: what Jennie would call 'a break'...

Bill in person opened to Trevor's ring. 'Holmes, by all that's wonderful!' he exclaimed. In a black silk dressing-gown, a battered corn-cob between his teeth, a cheerful grin on his rather saturnine features, he stood smiling a welcome at his visitor. Behind him, at the end of the entrance hall, was the quiet dimness of a lofty studio-room with hangings drawn against the dawn.

'Ah, my dear Watson,' was the visitor's imperturbable rejoinder in the nasal tone made famous by Mr. William Gillette, 'I fear I intrude...'

Their friendship had been like that, a friendship between men that, deeply rooted, requires no nourishment. It had no need of question or explanation to be resumed where it had left off.

'Not at all, my dear fellow, not at all,' drawled the host. 'But won't you let me relieve you of your somewhat moth-eaten deer-stalker? Walk in, Holmes, walk in, and while I prepare your customary stiff shot of morphine, you must tell me what fortunate circumstance brings you to my modest suburban home...'

So saying, he took the visitor's hat and, putting his arm on Trevor's shoulder, gently propelled him along the hall. Dene chuckled delightedly. That old joke between them, born of his undergraduate enthusiasm for criminology, had put the clock right back.

'Good old Bill,' he chortled, 'we did have some good times, didn't we?'

Telling him to find himself a chair and a cigarette, Thornley left him in the big room and disappeared through a door at the far end. It was quiet here on the topmost story, fifteen floors above the avenue, the voice of the sleepless city muted down to an occasional raucous klaxon blast. The only light was from a hand-lamp that stood on the telephone table beside the big settee. The fragrance of pipe tobacco accentuated the bachelor note of the apartment. Tall bookcases, one or two pieces of Chinese Chippendale, a somewhat dilapidated Tibetan wheel of life over the fireplace, were the unobtrusive furnishings. In the silence the tinkle of ice in a glass in the

adjoining room was the only sound. The Scotland Yard man dropped onto the big couch and, lighting a cigarette, gave himself up gratefully to the peace of his surroundings.

In a minute his host reappeared with two tall glasses on a tray. They exchanged Anglo-Saxon drinking salutations. 'Cheers!' said the one, and 'Here's mud in your eye!' the other. Dene drank deeply: his club tumbler was half-drained when he set it down.

Out of a darkly humorous eye his host considered him. 'Oh, boy, oh, boy,' he murmured, 'what have they been doing to you in this Prohibition country of mine? Finish that up and I'll fix you another peg...'

'That's all right, Bill...'

'Down with it! You look all washed up!'

On that, the Englishman complied and his host replenished the glass. Then, drawing up an armchair, he began to cram his pipe from the jar at his elbow.

'Business or pleasure, Trevor?' he questioned casually during this operation.

'Business,' said Dene. 'Bill, who's Nancy Ayleswood?'

The American shook his head, tamping down his pipe with his finger. 'Search me. What is she? Follies, motion pictures, or just a plain crook?'

Dene laughed. 'Nothing like that. Merely an ordinary American girl, good style and all that, and very attractive. You don't know her?'

'Can't say I do. Should I?'

'I can't tell you. She's a friend of a man called Ted Stayton and she lives in Beekman Place. But just now she's stopping down on Long Island—Freshwater Cove...'

'Stayton I've heard of. He's in Wall Street. He's what the tabloids call "a wealthy play-boy." Freshwater Cove I know, of course—as a matter of fact I belong to the yacht club there. But I can't think of anybody called Ayleswood living round about...'

He picked up the telephone directory from the table at his side, ran through it, then lifted his eyes to Dene, his finger on the page. 'There's a Russell W. Ayleswood living at Beekman Place,' he announced. 'Let's take a peek at the Social Register...' He rose and fetched a black book from a rack of reference books on the desk.

'And what's the Social Register?' the detective demanded.

'It's the American Debrett,' said Thornley, flipping over the pages, 'the yardstick of our social presentability... Ah, here we are!' He read out,



“Ayleswood, Russell W. Clubs, Racquet, Union, Piping Rock. Harvard 1900...” And here’s your girl: “The Misses Nancy and Ruth Ayleswood.” She’s his daughter, obviously. There’s no mention of the mother—she’s dead, I guess, or possibly divorced...’

‘Then they’re well-connected and that sort of thing?’

‘Absolutely. What’s the girl been up to?’

Dene hoisted his shoulders. ‘I can’t tell—yet. But I’m going to find out. I came across her in curious circumstances in connection with this job I’m on...’

He broke off. Thornley sighed heavily. ‘You’re lucky to have something to do. Gosh, I get so bored. Strictly speaking, I ought to be in Rome fixing up a trip I’m planning to Italian Somaliland next winter. But I don’t know—New York’s the devil of a place to get away from... By the way, you’re staying with me, you know...’

‘I’d like to sleep on the couch here for an hour or two if you’d let me...’

‘Couch nothing! There’s a room ready for you...’

‘But isn’t it a nuisance? I mean, aren’t you married or anything?’

Bill laughed stridently. ‘Not even that. You stay here just as long as you like. The Colonel of the Japanese General Staff who looks after me will fetch your things in the morning...’

‘A Japanese colonel?’

His friend grinned. ‘Jap servants always are colonels, aren’t they? Or don’t you ever read secret-service yarns? Where are you registered?’

‘At the Hotel Paraguay. You’ve never heard of it. It’s over on the West Side. It may be a bit awkward—about fetching my luggage, I mean...’

‘If you want any money, old boy...’

Dene flushed up. ‘Good Lord, it’s not that. Only there are probably a couple of gunmen watching the place...’

‘Gunmen?’

‘Honest-to-God gorillas!’

‘If it isn’t the very devil!’ his host broke out. ‘Here am I, born and bred in New York. I frequent the most disreputable speakeasies; I give expensive presents to the most questionable females; I wander about the streets at all hours of the night; and do you suppose I’ve ever as much as set eyes on a gangster? When did you arrive?’

‘Last night...’

‘There you are! You haven’t been twelve hours in the place and already they’re trying to put you on the spot. And I’m always hearing of strangers like yourself who have the darnedest adventures—hold-ups, kidnappings, blackmail, and what have you. If I want a little mild excitement, I have to go all the way to Kenya or the Malay States or somewhere to find it. So far as adventure is concerned, New York is just poison ivy to me. It’s rank conspiracy, that’s what it is...’

His friend laughed. ‘You’re welcome to my share of trouble. All I want is to bag my man. As for adventures, between ourselves, I haven’t done so badly since I landed about six hours ago. Let’s see: I’ve been a hold-up, I’ve stolen a car, I’ve driven without a license, and I’ve connived at murder, to say nothing of helping to dispose of the body...’

‘That leaves out arson, mayhem, and barratry, doesn’t it?’

Dene shrugged. ‘You think I’m kidding. But I’m perfectly serious...’

‘The man,’ said his host, addressing the ceiling, ‘is undoubtedly plastered...’

‘I’m stone cold, I assure you...’

‘Some of the liquor we get here is just terrible. One has the most original experiences after a few drinks...’

‘Shut up, Bill. I’m dead sober, I tell you...’

With a bewildered air, the other removed his pipe and sat up. ‘You mean, these things really happened to you?’

‘As sure as I sit here...’

The American wagged his head dubiously. ‘This beats tiger-shooting every time. You’ve got to tell me about this, Trevor. Or do you have to go to bed?’

‘I don’t mind sitting up a bit longer. It’ll do me good to think aloud. Besides, I want your help, Bill. You’ve got to find out Nancy Ayleswood’s address on Long Island for me and all about her...’

‘I can do that all right...’

‘Then chuck over that cushion... thanks.’

A cushion came sailing across. The Scotland Yard man caught it deftly, thrust it under his head, and put up his legs on the couch. ‘I’d better tell you the whole thing from the beginning,’ he said.

The sunshine was streaming through the curtain tops by the time his tale was done. Thornley, his strong teeth clamped on his pipe, his body sunk in

the big chair, heard him through in silence to the end.

‘This is Saturday,’ the detective wound up. ‘I have today, tomorrow, and Monday to work in if I’m to save Cloan. It’s running it devilish fine, Bill...’

Thornley nodded. ‘You bet. The trouble is, old man, that I don’t know how to help you. You see, you’ve butted into a world of which I and most New-Yorkers know very little. This guy Rontz, for instance: you say he’s a well-known lawyer. Well, I’ve lived in New York most of my life and I’ve never heard of him, of Rocco either, though, quite possibly, he sold me this putative Scotch we’re drinking. But the police know all about these turkeys, I guess. One of the Assistant Commissioners is a friend of mine and, if you liked, I could take you along and...’

With a resolute headshake Dene broke in: ‘No, Bill, not the police. Not yet, anyway. If anybody’s still ready to squeal, I’m not going to risk frightening them off—Rontz was obviously scared of a leak at Police Headquarters. The only chance I have of getting Cloan off is by laying this mystery man of mine by the heels. That’s why I’m going to concentrate on Miss Nancy Ayleswood...’

‘I don’t see the connection. Am I being denser than usual or is it just the master mind racing ahead of poor bloody Watson?’

Dene laughed. ‘Sorry, Bill. As a matter of fact, it came to me only just now as I was telling you the story. Let’s see if I can bridge the gap. We’ll take the girl first. As I told you, on the boat tonight she spotted someone who sent her off in a panic. Who was it?’

‘Rontz?’

‘I don’t think so. When the Megantic docked, I believe he was already dead. I know a bit about the temperature of dead bodies. In warm weather rigor sets in more slowly than in cold. Rontz was stiff when we found him: he’d been dead five or six hours, at least, I’d have said...’

His friend shuddered. ‘Spare us the grisly details, old chap, do you mind...’

‘Anyway, he’d been shot earlier in the evening. Round about seven or eight, I’d judge. So it can’t have been Rontz that frightened the little lady. Yet I can’t help thinking it was this encounter on the ship that sent her scurrying off in search of him. Supposing she and Rontz were scared of the same person, what would she do, if she caught sight of this person unexpectedly? She’d rush off and warn Rontz, wouldn’t she?’

‘Yes, I suppose she would. But who could it be?’

Dene crushed out his cigarette with a meditative air. ‘What’s your deduction from the fact that Rocco and his mob have mistaken me for

Rontz's star operator?'

'That they don't know this guy by sight, obviously...'

'But why did they assume that this wireless was from him?'

'Because they were on the lookout for him, I suppose. Didn't Rocco say that this bird and Rontz had been double-crossing him?'

The Scotland Yard man seemed to pounce. 'Doesn't it show,' said he tensely, 'that the fellow has been all this time on the other side and that Rocco and Company had good grounds for believing that he might arrive unexpectedly at any minute?'

Thornley nodded. 'Yes, I suppose that's logical...'

'If Rocco and Company had known of Rontz's letter to Manderton, they couldn't have made this mistake, could they?'

'No, I guess not...'

'Yet Rontz's death was undoubtedly tied up in some way with the Megantic's arrival, wasn't it?'

'That's right, too...'

'Rontz could have cleared Gerry Cloan only by giving away the real murderer. That's agreed, isn't it?'

'I guess so...'

'Then who had the greatest interest in shutting Rontz's mouth?'

'The real murderer, I imagine...'

'Then we know whom Rontz had to fear. And anyone in his confidence who happened to spot this man...'

'You mean the girl?'

'Exactly...'

Thornley took his pipe from his mouth and stared at him. 'Then the murderer—the star turn, as you call him—was on the boat? Is that what you're driving at?'

Dene shrugged. 'It's only surmise. But that's the rough idea...'

'Is there anybody you suspect?'

The other laughed. 'Out of one hundred and seventy-odd first-class passengers...?' He shook his head. 'No, that's not the end to tackle it from. If it was the star turn the girl recognized coming off the boat, we know at least that there is one person in America, besides Rontz, who knows him by sight. At any rate, my theory would explain her refusal to tell me her business with Rontz and her giving me the slip the way she did. And so, Bill, old hoss, I propose to concentrate on Miss Nancy. That's where you can help me...' He

swung his legs to the floor, stretched expansively, whipped off his glasses and stood up.

‘You can leave her to your Uncle Dudley,’ his friend promised grimly. ‘What time breakfast, Trevor?’

Dene glanced at his watch and rounded his lips in a silent whistle. ‘Nine o’clock too early for you?’

‘Make it ten,’ said Bill, ‘and I’ll dish up the dirt about the lady with your coffee!’

## CHAPTER XV

TREVOR DENE opened sleep-heavy eyes. His mind was vaguely troubled. He was listening for the gentle stamp of the Megantic's propellers; he was looking for the cramped surroundings of his cabin; and both were missing. True, a white coat moved noiselessly about a room which, to his drowsy gaze, appeared to be of vast proportions. But surely Bligh was a fat man with a bald head: how had his girth been reduced to this slight compass and where had he grown that thatch of smooth black shiny hair? The detective closed his eyes again: it was all very puzzling.

A ringing voice stirred him to consciousness, a rather nasal drawl that brought with it a flood of insistent, inescapable worries. 'Well, is he awake yet, Kami?' the voice said.

Dene's eyes were open now. Bill was there, tubbed and shaved, and very spruce in a grey cashmere suit. A brown face wrinkled like an apple, with slit eyes, looked up over the open lid of a suitcase—Dene recognized his own modest luggage. The pleasant bedroom with its cream walls was bathed in brilliant sunshine.

The figure in the bed grunted and groaned and gnashed its teeth and stretched, then sat up abruptly. 'Bill...'

'Lo, Trevor. Well, you certainly wanted a sleep...'

'Whatever time is it?'

'A quarter past eleven...'

Dene took a flying leap out of bed. 'Ye gods, and I have so much to do...'

His host grinned. 'Hold your horses, boy. Papa's been working while you slept...' He pointed across the room to a door. 'You'll just have time for a bath while Kami's fixing breakfast...'

The Japanese had noiselessly disappeared. 'Kami brought your kit along,' said Thornley. 'I put him wise before he went, fortunately...'

Dene gazed at his friend in dismay. 'You mean, they're still watching the hotel?'

Thornley laughed. 'Apparently. Some bird who was hanging about the entrance followed Kami in a taxi. The honourable Kami spotted it and, with true Oriental guile, told his taximan to drive him to Grand Central, where he put your suitcase in the check-room. Then he shook his fellow in the crowd,

came home on the subway, and sent the chauffeur down with the ticket to collect your grip. Wouldn't it knock your eye out?"

The Scotland Yard man chuckled. 'I guess you must be right about him being in the Secret Service...'

'Absolutely what I told him. But he says he's a Communist. Now I've a couple more telephone calls to make...'

'Oh, Bill! About Nancy, is it?'

'Sure. I've collected all the dope on her. Shake a leg, gob, we've got to get busy...'

Clean linen and a suit that had been miraculously pressed while he slept did much to raise Dene's morale when, some twenty minutes later, he entered the studio-room. The air was agreeably fragrant with the mingled odours of coffee and ham and eggs, and from the radio in the corner issued forth, discreetly muted, the cheerful strains of a dance orchestra. The wrinkled Japanese was fussing about the breakfast-table, but there was no sign of the host.

'Mr. Thornley, he coming right back,' announced the servant, forestalling the detective's question. 'He go down to buy newspaper!'

Dene took the opportunity to question the Japanese about the man who had followed him from the hotel. Kami was vague.

'A red chap,' he called him, 'and fat like a pig!'

Near enough a description of the watcher at Childs to fit, Dene decided.

Then Thornley came in like a tornado, an orange-coloured journal in his hand. His face was troubled. 'They've found him,' he announced, pitching his straw hat on the couch.

Dene started. 'Already?'

The other nodded and handed the newspaper across. 'The news came over the radio,' he explained, 'so I went out to see if I could get an extra...'

Bold headlines, tall and black, were spread over the front page:

LAWYER PUT ON SPOT  
EAST SIDE PLEADER'S BODY FOUND  
ON WEST 155TH STREET

'I didn't stop to read the whole story,' said Thornley. 'What does it say?'

Dene read out:

The body of Hermann Rontz, an attorney well known in the New York underworld, was found early this morning under a

tarpaulin covering building materials in front of the branch of the Museum of the American Indian at 635 West 155th Street. Bullets had penetrated heart and neck. Although no one could be located who had seen a car pause in that vicinity and then speed away, there was every indication that the slain lawyer had been taken for a most business-like ride. Rigor mortis had set in many hours previous to the discovery and the police believe that the killing must have taken place in the early hours of yesterday evening. The body was found by a workman who telephoned the West 152nd Street station. The street, only a block from Trinity Cemetery, is one of the quietest of the Washington Heights section.

There was a momentary silence between them.

‘Let’s have breakfast, anyway,’ said Thornley, sitting down and attacking his grapefruit. ‘You’ll have to go to the police now, won’t you, Trevor?’

Firmly the Scotland Yard man shook his head. ‘I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb,’ he remarked dubiously. ‘Since I didn’t report it last night... Bill,’ he broke out violently, ‘I’ve got to find out more about this girl before I decide what to do. What have you unearthed about her?’

‘Nothing that’s not ultra-respectable,’ Thornley replied. ‘Her father, Russell Ayleswood, is a broker downtown, but he’s away ill in a sanitarium. So Nancy and her sister Ruth spend most of their time with their aunt, Mrs. Howard Brenzler, down at Freshwater Cove...’

‘Brenzler?’ Dene snapped. ‘Know anything about her? Who is she?’

‘She’s the widow of a manufacturer in the Middle West—Grand Rapids or somewhere. She’s a funny old dear who has buried two husbands. Her first was Russell Ayleswood’s brother. She’s rolling in money with no one to spend it on but herself, with a Peke and a houseful of servants—you know the sort of thing...’

‘Do you know her?’

‘Everybody knows Mrs. Howard Brenzler. I was dragged to the Beaux-Arts Ball last winter and she was there looking like the wrath of God as a Watteau shepherdess with about a million dollars’ worth of jewellery hung on her...’

‘She has jewellery, then?’ Dene’s voice was eager.

‘You bet. The old girl’s jewels are famous. But to go back to your fair Nancy: she’s engaged to a fellow called Ernest Robotham...’



His friend nodded. 'I remember. Stayton spoke of someone called Ernest. Who is he?'

'He's a banker in Wall Street...'

'Do you know him?'

'No. But I know about him. He's not young, about forty-five, I'd say, and quite well off. They think a lot of him downtown. He's said to be one of the coming financiers...'

Dene shook his head dubiously. 'Forty-five, eh? That's a big difference in age. Why, she's not a day more than twenty-one, I'll swear...'

'She's twenty-three, if you want to know. Robotham's an old friend of her family...'

The Scotland Yard man reflected. 'You haven't heard of her being in any trouble, have you?'

Thornley emitted a whoop of delight. 'With Ernest? Oh, my gawd! He's a pillar of respectability, neither drinks nor smokes, a church warden and on the boards of half the charities in New York. *And* he lives with his mother...'

'I didn't mean that sort of trouble, confound you,' said the other. 'What I meant was, is she hard up? After all, she was playing roulette at Mike's. You know what women are for gambling: have you heard anything about her being in the money-lenders' hands? Did Rontz, for instance, hold any notes of hers?'

'There I can't help you, I'm afraid,' his friend replied. 'But I'm told that her father was quite wealthy at one time. He's supposed to have lost a packet in the crash and has been in a sanitarium for the past twelve months with nervous prostration...'

'Did he fail?'

'They say not. He's still got his seat on the Stock Exchange. Carthways, Ayleswood and Gould is the firm...'

Dene paused to make a note of the name.

'Of course,' Thornley went on, 'if she gambles as a regular thing, there's no knowing what straits she's in. Mike runs a pretty high game, they tell me. Otherwise, she ought to be on velvet. She's going to marry a rich man and the aunt's full of money...' He glanced enquiringly at Dene, who had pushed back his chair and was filling his pipe. 'What's the next move, Chief?'

'I was wondering how you'd like to take a little run down to Long Island in the car and present your fashionable and attractive friend from London to Mrs. Howard Brenzler...'

Thornley grinned. 'I scarcely know the lady. But I'm on...'

‘Do you know where she lives at Freshwater Cove?’

‘The house is called Rosemount. I’ve never been there, but I’ve seen it from the water. It’s a piece along the beach from the Manhattanienk Yacht Club:—I’m a member there. I’ll tell you what we’ll do. We’ll lunch at the club and crawl round to Rosemount afterwards. How’s that?’

‘Swell,’ said his friend. ‘But there’s this, Bill. Is there any hotel down there where I could spend the night if I have to?’

‘There’s the Yacht Club...’

‘But I’m not a member?’

‘I’ll get you a card. You’ll want your things repacked, won’t you? And Kami will have to fix me a bag, too...’ He raised up his voice and called, ‘Oh, Kami...’

‘Half a minute, Bill,’ Dene stopped him. ‘I’m not going to drag you into this any farther than is absolutely necessary...’

‘Oh, rot...’

‘I’m playing a lone hand. I shall be terribly grateful if you can introduce me into the Brenzler household, but if I stop down there, it’ll have to be alone...’

‘Alone, my foot! D’you think I’m going to be left out now that you’ve got me all jazzed up with your gangster stuff! Not on your sweet life...’

‘I’m serious, old boy. You live in this country: I don’t. This Ayleswood girl seems to be mixed up in a pretty nasty business, and if I can pin anything on her, I’ll have to go to the police. You don’t want your name in all the papers, do you?’

‘I don’t give a damn for the papers!’

‘It’s not good enough, Bill. Frankly, I’m going down to Freshwater to spy on these people. It’s a rotten job, but it’s my job and I’m thick-skinned about it. But it’s not your job and I won’t have you in it. It’s bad enough using you to get at these people at all...’

‘That’s all right, Trevor...’

‘Besides, I’m relying on you to keep me posted on what develops out of the Rontz investigation. What I’d like you to do is to see your friend, the Assistant Commissioner, some time today and let me know what’s going on...’

‘That’s easy. But I can do that on the telephone from Freshwater just as well as here in New York...’

Dene had fallen silent. He was staring down at the newspaper in his hand.

‘Well,’ said the American jestingly, ‘another brain wave?’

The Scotland Yard man started. ‘I was just wondering,’ he answered, ‘whether she had seen this yet...’ He folded the paper and thrust it in his pocket. ‘Come on, Bill, let’s go!’

## CHAPTER XVI

THE JUNE sun, striking diamonds out of the sparkling waters of the Sound, was filtered a cool green through the striped awnings of the terrace. A lawn sloped to the water's edge where a little wooden pier projected, dividing the bathing-beach, with its bobbing raft and gay cabañas, from the mooring-grounds where some yachts and a cluster of power-boats rode serenely at their buoys. Behind was the little clubhouse, spick-and-span in its white paint, with French windows folded back upon a verandah, and sleeping-porches above.

To Trevor Dene, seated over a late lunch on the terrace, the peace of the place was as a draught of water to a thirsty man. There were drowsy reverberations on the air—the sputter of a motor cruiser crossing the Sound, the clear-cut staccato of hammering on one of the yachts, the droning voice of a jersey-clad figure at the end of the pier arguing with a man in a dinghy. After the bewildering series of abnormal adventures which had befallen him since the previous evening, these things were normal—the party of sun-browned men in yachting clothes and women in summer frocks who had eaten a light-hearted lunch and trooped down to the dock to be rowed out to one of the gleaming white yachts; the dancing waters; the sunshine; the verdant lawns and flowering shrubs: and he found content in the mere contemplation of them.

But not for long. Relaxation was not for him. Always the hands of the clock were fretting at his mind. Even as he sat there, idly smoking his pipe and gazing at the boats, the hours were slipping away. The first of his three days was already half-spent and he still plodded in the dark, or, at best, in the half-light, while, with Rontz's murder, the shadow of the gallows fell, broader and blacker than ever, athwart a certain haggard countenance which was never far removed from his thoughts.

In face of this development, would Manderton use his influence to gain a respite? The London evening papers must have carried the news of the finding of the body; and, relying on this, before starting out from New York that noon Dene had cabled his Chief in veiled language (since he had no code) stating that, 'notwithstanding our agent's unexpected illness,' he was still hopeful of 'securing order' within the appointed three days, but begging earnestly, against accidents, for more time. He gave Thornley's address in New York for the reply.

Would Manderton come up to scratch? Would he exert himself to have the execution deferred? Even a twenty-four hours' postponement might prove of crucial value. Dene put little faith in his Chief's willingness, or, indeed, his ability to achieve anything, failing the production of evidence a great deal more specific than anything he had as yet to offer. The scales were powerfully loaded against Gerry Cloan—Manderton himself, the Assistant Commissioner, the Home Office, public opinion:—the clock had powerful allies in these.

Doubts and fears assailed the young man. Had he done right to abandon the trail in New York and pursue what might well prove to be a false scent to this idyllic spot where time, his merciless driver, seemed to stand still? Should he not have followed Bill's advice and gone straight to the police? And how far had he been justified in promising Manderton results?

Crime investigation is a matter of infinite patience. His training in the London police had given young Dene the secret of passive waiting. But under his mask of lazy indifference, as he sat at his coffee under the awning while Bill was away at the telephone, he was on fire to be up and doing. He wanted to meet this girl again, to reassure himself that his judgment was sound in selecting this line of enquiry as the one best calculated to furnish speedy and fruitful results. But he had to know soon: every tick of his wrist watch shortened the time at his disposal supposing he were wrong and had to start afresh.

The Saturday exodus from New York had delayed them and it was half-past two by the time Bill's twelve-cylinder purred to a halt in front of the bright window-boxes and striped sunblinds of the Manhattanienk Yacht Club. Bill's plan was not to disturb Mrs. Brenzler at her luncheon, but to call her up on the telephone afterwards. His friend, whose instinct would have been to drive immediately to Rosemount and confront the girl, acquiesced with a sigh. This was Bill's show: he would have to manage it in his own way. He even suffered the steward to show them some bedrooms before they went to lunch, a precaution suggested by Bill, who said the club was apt to fill up over the week-ends. But the week-ends were still pretty quiet, the steward assured them. It was only later in the season that the rush set in: they could let him know at any time about the rooms. Luncheon over, Bill went into the clubhouse to telephone Mrs. Brenzler; he also wanted to ring up his friend, the Assistant Police Commissioner—they had telephoned before setting out from New York, but the Assistant Commissioner was in conference and could not be disturbed.

From where he sat, Dene had a view of the club bathing-beach, still deserted in the after-luncheon period, and, on the high ground, of the two

*en-tout-cas* lawn tennis-courts where a bent figure in a broad-brimmed straw hat plied a roller in solitude. Beyond the courts a tall screen of elms ran almost down to the strand. This, Dene knew from Thornley, was the dividing line between the club domain and the Rosemount estate. The house itself was hidden in the trees, but through the lower branches of the elms Dene had a glimpse of dark-green, shaven lawns descending to the beach between blazing rhododendron clumps in full bloom, carmine, mauve, and white. Below, a small landing-stage on struts jutted out from among the rocks. It was the Rosemount private dock.

Dene's nostrils sniffed the aroma of an Havana. In the wake of it Thornley appeared. He wore a faintly disconcerted air.

'Well, old boy,' he remarked when he reached the table, 'I believe a week-end in the country would do you good, after all...'

The Scotland Yard man's eyes narrowed. 'What's happened, Bill?'

'Your friend, Nick Mazzini, was in the line-up at Police Headquarters this morning...'

'Nick Mazzini? That's the fellow who trailed me at the dock. And he followed me on to the Club Calderon, afterwards...'

'That's where they pulled him in. At the Calderon last night. And his boy friend with him, a certain Pietro Pagano...'

Dene nodded. 'That'd be Pete. He was at the dock, too. How did they come to pinch 'em?'

'Someone turned off the lights and these two birds couldn't get out at once. When they did, they walked into the arms of a cop. But that's not the point. The police have evidence that Nick fired at some man who escaped with a girl through the kitchens, a young man in spectacles...'

'Ah?' said Dene impassively.

'The two prisoners will say nothing. The police thought it was an ordinary hold-up until the news came that Rontz had been found murdered. Then, as Rontz was the proprietor of the Calderon, they naturally began to put two and two together...'

'And...?'

'These two bozos are professional gunmen. The police want to know where they got their orders. And they're trying to trace their movements. In the mean time, Messrs. Nick and Pete are being given the works in the good, old-fashioned way...'

The Scotland Yard man smiled cheerfully as he shook the ash from his cigarette.

‘I don’t see what you’ve got to grin at,’ said Bill. ‘These gorillas may spill something yet. And then where’ll you be?’

‘I was just thinking that they are the only two who can positively identify me,’ Dene answered. ‘And they’re under lock and key...’

‘That’s true, certainly. But if the police get out a description of you, it’ll be a bit awkward, won’t it?’

‘That doesn’t worry me. I can always justify myself to the police at a pinch. But once the other side get a line on me, I’m sunk. And, believe me, Bill, I’ve been damned lucky to have side-stepped them so far. They’re tenacious and their organization is good. It’s a fight to a finish and time is on their side.’ He broke off. ‘Well, do we go calling?’

‘I rang up Rosemount. Mrs. Brenzler was resting. We’re to go there to tea at half-past four. I didn’t mention I was bringing you,’ he added as an afterthought.

Dene nodded his approbation. ‘Just as well. I don’t want to scare the girl away...’

‘The same idea occurred to me. You see, she answered the telephone...’

‘No?’

‘It’s a fact. I asked who was speaking and she told me her name. Fairly knocked me for a loop. If the rest of her is as nice as her voice...’

The Scotland Yard man made no answer, his eyes moodily contemplating the vista of glowing blooms and smooth turf through the trees. He had a vision of a dead man’s livid hand thrust up from the underworld into that atmosphere of luxury and refinement and of the proud, unrevealing face of this girl, nursing her strange secret in that paradise of sea and sunshine and flowers.

‘Let’s get a boat in the mean time,’ Thornley suggested, breaking in upon the other’s musings, ‘and I’ll show you Rosemount from the water. And, by the way, what about telling the steward to keep us a couple of rooms?’

‘There’s no hurry about that, Bill,’ Dene said unwillingly. ‘In any case, if I stay, I stay on alone. I told you that before...’

His friend laughed good-humouredly and took his arm. ‘You can please yourself about that, old Trevor. But don’t, for the love of Mike, go back to New York just yet...’

‘“For the love of Mike” is good,’ the Scotland Yard man commented drily.

Laughing, they strolled down to the landing-stage. There the man in charge sculled them across to an outboard motor, spun the engine for them, and left them to their own devices. Bill put the boat's nose about and at half-speed they began to chug-chug along the coast.

The clubhouse with its mast and flag and little brass starting-gun post, Rosemount came into view. The house, perched on an eminence and girdled by a drive, faced the sea. It was an old-fashioned structure, long and two-storied, with a high-pitched roof and white façade which time and the weather had tempered to a dull cream. A broad verandah, bright with gaudily striped chairs and coloured cushions, faced the sea, with balconies, draped with crimson rambler roses, above.

The gardens were lovely. The velvety lawns were stepped in terraces where roses ran riot over pergolas or dripped from huge plaster vases. It was as though a wedge had been cut in a dense wood to make way for the formal precision of an English garden, for a deep belt of greenery ran up from the lawns on either hand in a leafy patchwork quilt of hues ranging from the tender green of birches to the deep russet of copper beeches and Japanese maples.

Thornley pushed the tiller with his elbow and they came about in a wide circle towards the shore. There was a bath-house at the top of the beach, but no one was in sight. The gardens were deserted: only the snick-snick of shears, borne on the warm, still air, showed where the gardeners were at work among the roses.

‘Quite a place,’ Thornley remarked as they cruised by. ‘About a hundred acres, the steward was telling me. She keeps it well, too. Let’s take a peek at the yachts...’ He stooped to the throttle and sent the boat driving through the water in a vertiginous curve. There were sailing yachts large and small, some with furled sails and fastened hatches that seemed to dream of the open sea, others with canvas flapping and brass gleaming and glimpses of neat bedrooms through the open ports. From the deck of one such, where three men and a woman played bridge under an awning, their boat was hailed.

‘Oh, Bill...’ A man in white ducks rose up and came to the rail as they foamed by. ‘Want to dine tonight and play bridge?’ he bawled through cupped hands.

But Thornley merely waved back and kept the launch on her course.

‘Bridge!’ he exclaimed disgustedly. ‘Highballs and bridge! And they’ll go back to town on Monday and tell everybody about the wonderful weekend they had yachting. Can you wonder a fellow prefers the desert?’



A big white craft, with curiously high bows, was anchored farther out than the rest. 'Submarine chaser converted,' Bill pronounced with an expert air. 'Pretty nice. I don't remember seeing her round here before. But then this is the first time I've been out here this year...'

They were circling the cruiser now in a bold sweep. She was a serviceable-looking vessel with no pretence at elegance. But her brasswork gleamed in the sun and her decks were scrubbed clean. 'ASTARTE' was the name on her bows.

'Built for speed all right,' Bill commented. 'They've taken out her deckhouse to lessen the wind resistance, I see. My goodness,' he went on, as they sputtered by, 'I bet she can shift along. The trouble about these hookers is that they burn up the gas like nothing at all...'

A stalwart figure in spotless white drill had appeared from a companion, presumably leading from the main cabin whose skylight was just visible above the Astarte's railing. With a casual glance at the passing power-boat he went forward and seated himself at a table under the stern awning.

'D'you know what I think?' Thornley remarked suddenly to his companion. 'I think she's a rum-runner. Let's go back and give her the once-over. If I'm right we might get you a bottle of the real McCoy to see you over the week-end...' His hand went out to the throttle to slow the engine down.

'It's about four, Bill,' said Dene. 'We ought to be getting back...'

'We'll go round her once more,' Thornley suggested.

'Oh, to blazes with it!' the Scotland Yard man exclaimed with sudden feeling. 'Don't you think I've seen all the bootleggers I want?'

The other laughed good-humouredly. 'Have it your own way...' He pointed the boat for the shore.

The steward was in the lobby when they reëntered the clubhouse. At the sight of him Dene paused.

'Let's ask him whose boat that is, shall we?' the Scotland Yard man suggested.

'The sub-chaser? Sure,' Thornley replied.

The Astarte, the steward informed them, belonged to Mr. Hilary Pedder.

Thornley shook his head. 'Never heard of him. New member, is he?'

Mr. Pedder, the steward said with a slightly condescending air, was not a member of the club. He had that new bungalow on the beach past Colonel Robinson's—'Oceana,' they called it. He had only recently rented it for the season.

‘The house with the glass verandah? I know it,’ said Thornley. ‘And what does he do with that big boat of his?’

The man shrugged his shoulders. ‘Well,’ he remarked, ‘he comes down from New York in her at the week-ends and goes back on Mondays. And I guess he takes a cruise in her whiles and again...’

Thornley laughed drily; but it was Dene who put the next question.

‘What does he do, do you know?’ he asked the steward.

‘He’s in business in New York, I believe, sir,’ the steward answered.

‘What business?’

‘Antiques, or so I’ve heard...’

Thornley guffawed. ‘The sort of antiques that age in the wood,’ he observed caustically.

The steward grinned. ‘That’s what we thought when the Astarte first come down,’ he said. ‘But there’s nothing of that sort about Mr. Pedder. He runs a big place, furniture and interior decoration, off Fifth Avenue...’

‘Hilary Pedder, eh?’ Thornley remarked. ‘Now I come to think of it, I think I have seen the name...’

Dene had turned to the steward. ‘I believe I’ll take that bedroom, after all,’ he said.

‘Just the one room?’ The man looked enquiringly at Thornley.

Thornley shrugged broad shoulders. ‘I have to return to town...’

Then the telephone rang and the steward went to answer it.

‘I think you’re wise,’ Bill said to Dene rather soberly. ‘I can always let you know when it’s safe for you to come back to New York...’

His friend laughed. ‘It’s not that, exactly. Did you happen to notice the man who came on deck on the Astarte as we went by?’

‘Not particularly. Why?’

‘He’s a friend of Mike’s. I told you about him. A grey-haired man, rather distinguished looking. He came into the bar at Mike’s just after Rocco left and made a sort of sneering remark about Rontz, something about Hermie having such odd friends. Remember?’

‘Sure. But if you’re going to shadow everybody who goes to Mike’s...’

‘Hilary Pedder isn’t everybody. This oily rascal Mike had a sort of cringing attitude towards him...’

‘He may be one of Mike’s backers. These things do happen, you know...’

‘You’ll have to find out for me whether the police know anything about him, Bill...’

‘“If it’s possible, it’s done; if it’s impossible, it will be done!”’ his friend quoted flamboyantly. ‘But I may as well tell you, my old Sherlock, that lots of quite respectable people in this town find the oddest employment for their spare capital...’

‘I wasn’t thinking of that,’ said Dene. ‘There was knowledge behind that sneer of Pedder’s. I believe he knows something about Rontz’s murder and I’m going to get after him...’

‘In the mean time,’ Thornley put in serenely, ‘the muffins are getting cold at Mrs. Brenzler’s...’

They went out to the car.

## CHAPTER XVII

‘AND this,’ said Bill, ‘is my friend, Trevor Dene. We were at Cambridge together. He’s staying with me, so I thought you wouldn’t mind my bringing him along...’

Mrs. Brenzler extended a plump, heavily gemmed hand. ‘From England?’

‘Yes,’ the young man admitted.

‘I like Englishmen,’ Mrs. Brenzler pronounced. ‘They’re so restful. Find yourself a chair, Mr. ...’—she glanced appealingly at Bill. ‘I’m just terrible at names...’

‘Dene,’ Thornley put in. ‘He’s stopping at the Yacht Club for a few days. New York is too fast for him. He’s reading for his Bar examination...’

This was the story that they had concocted between them. ‘Then I hope we shall see something of him,’ said Mrs. Brenzler amiably. ‘He must come over for some tennis. Ruth declares she’s sick of beating Nancy. Have you met my nieces, Mr. Thornley?’

They were on the verandah at Rosemount. Behind them was the gilded splendour of Mrs. Brenzler’s rigorously authentic Louis Quinze drawing-room with its Watteaus and its Fragonard, its huge, ornate mirrors and chairs in *petit point*. Under the superintendence of a portly butler who radiated for yards around him the atmosphere of Grosvenor Square, a statuesque footman in livery had appeared from the drawing-room rolling a tea-wagon. It was set with a Queen Anne silver tea-service and cups and plates of eggshell porcelain.

Mrs. Brenzler and Thornley had dropped into polite small talk. Dene glanced about him for any sign of the girl. A shady white Leghorn hat, a little handkerchief, and an open book laid face downward on one of the long chairs seemed to reveal the recent presence of her or her sister; but the gardens, shimmering in the mellow afternoon light, were deserted.

A maid, very *chic* in black satin, came noiselessly from the drawing-room, a hand-bag in her hand.

‘J’apporte le sac de Madame,’ she said.

‘Merci, Célestine,’ Mrs. Brenzler remarked, taking the bag.

Dene’s eye rested on the spreading figure of his hostess as she poured the tea. Her white hair was exquisitely dressed; besides the rings on her

hands, she wore two magnificent ropes of pearls; her filmy dove-grey frock was of unquestionable Paris origin. This was a rich American household, the detective told himself, the real thing. What possible connection could there be between this girl, living in the luxurious surroundings of a country place like this with a flock of trained servants to wait on her, and the sinister figure of Hermann Rontz and his associates in the world of crime?

‘Henry,’ said Mrs. Brenzler to the tall footman, ‘you’d better go down to the tennis-court and tell Mr. Robotham and the young ladies that tea’s ready.’

But before the servant could obey, there were voices on a path that wound away out of sight through a shrubbery on the left of the verandah. ‘If you will insist on facing the net,’ a man’s voice was saying—a precise, rather precious voice—‘you’re infallibly bound to put them out. The only correct way to get the backhand drive is to face the side line, keep the head of the racquet down and, of course, to follow through...’

A girl’s voice, listless and rather bored, replied, and Dene had a sudden thrill: ‘I know, Ernest. But this is one of my off days, I guess...’

‘I should say it was,’ exclaimed a third voice, young and scathing. ‘Four double faults on end! And when I take Ernest on alone, I can beat the tar out of him, can’t I, Ernest?’

‘Oh, Ruthie, shut up!’ said her sister. ‘You know how Ernest hates slang!’

‘They may teach girls to play tennis at school nowadays,’ the man’s voice put in, ‘but they certainly don’t teach them the speech of the educated classes...’

A young girl came dancing along the path. A blue bandeau encircled a shock of bobbed hair, golden as ripe corn, and she wore a white sleeveless jumper and a short pleated skirt revealing slim, brown legs bare save for the little socks turned down over her tennis-shoes.

‘Gosh, you could poach an egg in the sun down there...’ she cried; then, catching sight of the men, broke off short, eyeing them with complete self-possession.

‘It’s much too hot to be playing tennis,’ Mrs. Brenzler told her. ‘Come and be introduced. This is Mr. Thornley and this is Mr. ...’—her be-ringed hand groped in the air. ‘Dene,’ the Englishman amended with a smile. ‘Dene, of course,’ said Mrs. Brenzler. ‘Sit down there, Ruthie, next to Mr. Thornley, and cool off. Mr. Thornley is a very celebrated explorer. If you’re nice to him, I dare say he’ll tell you all about hunting bears and coogars and things...’

‘Not *the* William Deventer Thornley?’ exclaimed Ruth in an impressed voice. ‘My goodness, I saw that marvellous film of yours, Shikar...’

But Dene had ceased to listen. Nancy Ayleswood had appeared at the verandah.

She was in white, like her sister. She carried her plain white béret and the sun struck copper tones out of her warm brown hair. The green-and-black scarf knotted loosely about the open neck of her man’s polo shirt was the only touch of colour about her. With her was a rather undersized and very damp man with a pedantic air who wore a cream flannel jacket and a muffler.

That she recognized him on the instant, Dene could not doubt. Her face told him nothing: it was only her eyes that betrayed her. In the fleeting glance they exchanged before a word was spoken at the tea-table, he saw their expression change with lightning rapidity from indifference to anger and then—he was touched with sudden compassion for her—to humble entreaty. With measured deliberation she turned aside to stack the two racquets she carried against the verandah pillar.

‘You two must be dying for a cup of tea,’ said Mrs. Brenzler. ‘Nancy, dear, you haven’t met Mr. Thornley; Mr. Thornley, Mr. Robotham. And this is Mr. Deacon, a friend of Mr. Thornley’s from England...’

This time Dene did not correct her.

The men shook hands. There was a chair vacant beside Dene, but Nancy passed it and seated herself on the couch beside Thornley.

‘If you’re going to sit next to us, Nancy,’ exclaimed her sister, her mouth full of tea-cake, ‘don’t you dare to interrupt! But what exactly do you think of,’ she demanded excitedly of her neighbour, ‘when you see a wild elephant charging straight at you?’

Rather ostentatiously, as it seemed to him, Nancy had turned her back on Dene. Ernest Robotham had dropped into the empty chair at his side and was watching intently while Mrs. Brenzler brewed him some special beverage from a bottle of patent food and the hot-water kettle. ‘And how do you like America, Mr. Deacon?’ Mrs. Brenzler demanded.

He was telling himself that he must contrive, by hook or by crook, to secure five minutes alone with this girl. It would be so easy for her to avoid him. The moment she had her tea, she could announce she was going off to bathe and change and he would see her no more. So he answered his hostess at random that he liked what he had seen of America very much.

He realized his error when his neighbour immediately turned to him and asked how long he had been in America—the Scotland Yard man had

intended to disclose as little information about himself as possible. But now he was fairly caught and, because his training had taught him that non-essential lies should always be avoided, he replied that he had arrived on the previous evening.

‘You didn’t come by the Megantic, did you?’ Robotham enquired.

From her seat on the couch the girl affected to be following with close attention Thornley’s amused answers to her sister’s perfervid cross-examination. But at her fiancé’s question an almost imperceptible movement of her head told Dene as clearly as though she had faced about that she was listening for his reply.

‘Yes,’ said the Scotland Yard man.

Sir Alfred Wellow, it appeared, was bringing a letter of introduction to Mr. Robotham from business friends in London. On which Mr. Robotham desired to know Mr. Deacon’s impression of the state of affairs in England and, without giving Dene the chance to answer, launched forth into a disquisition upon the causes of the existing depression. Mrs. Brenzler, who appeared to be one of those placid souls who enjoy doing nothing, had lit a cigarette and relaxed among her cushions and Bill and Ruth were laughing and joking together. Mr. Robotham’s absorption in his own eloquence enabled Dene to drift away on the tide of his own thoughts, gazing at the slim, straight back so resolutely turned towards him. He found it hard to believe there could be any sentimental tie between these two—this alluring, haughty creature and this rather fussy, quite estimable but undoubtedly priggish old young man.

He stole a glance at his watch, that watch which was inexorably ticking Gerry Cloan’s life away. It was twenty-five to six; presently, he and Bill would have to take their leave. Then his eye fell on his hostess and an idea came to him. He waited impatiently for Mr. Robotham to finish.

It was Mrs. Brenzler who came to his aid. ‘Excuse me, Mr. Deacon,’ she said, ‘but Mr. Robotham must really not sit about in his damp clothes—he takes cold so easily. Go up and have your bath, Ernest,’ she told Mr. Robotham. ‘By the way, you haven’t forgotten that Dr. Gastein is dining tonight...’

‘On the contrary, my dear Aunt Clara,’ replied Mr. Robotham, ‘I am looking forward with the greatest enjoyment to a long talk with him...’

‘Dr. Gastein,’ Mrs. Brenzler explained to the Englishman as Robotham went into the house, ‘is a great authority on Chinese art. He’s coming to see my jade...’

‘I’ve heard so much of your wonderful things,’ said Dene promptly. ‘Isn’t that a Fragonard in the drawing-room?’

‘Yes, indeed...’ Mrs. Brenzler was beaming. ‘Are you interested in Louis Quinze?’

‘Rather,’ the young man lied fervently. ‘It’s the only period of French art that lives for me. It’s so... so divinely artificial. They created a world of their own, shepherdesses, and... and milkmaids, and all that...’ He paused and, out of the corner of his eye, perceived that the stolid figure on the couch was again all ears. ‘I wanted to tell you: I met someone in London who admired you tremendously at the Beaux-Arts Ball last year. He said you were the most perfect Watteau shepherdess he’d ever seen...’

Dene was aware that Thornley had raised a perfectly blank face and was staring at him intently.

Mrs. Brenzler blushed like a bride. ‘Why, you don’t say! Well, I certainly took a lot of trouble with that costume. It was pale blue silk, wadded, and I carried a gilt crook and a real lamb, the sweetest little creature, its fleece all tied up in blue bows—Célestine and I washed it ourselves in the bath. I had to put it in the check-room afterwards’—she giggled coyly—‘not house-trained, you know. Who was your friend, do tell me!’

‘Some fellow at the American Embassy,’ the young man retorted glibly. ‘His name’s on the tip of my tongue—Higgins, or Pennycuick, something like that...’

‘I danced with a diplomat called O’Flanagan once,’ said Mrs. Brenzler thoughtfully, ‘but now I come to think of it, he wasn’t an American, but a Chilean. I remember thinking what a curious name he had for a Spaniard or whatever they are down there... Nancy’—she touched her niece’s sleeve—‘Mr. Deacon here has a friend who simply adored me in my *bergère* dress...’

On that, at last, the girl turned round. Her eyes were scathing. But young Mr. Dene did not give her the chance to speak, if she were so minded.

‘I was going to ask Miss Ayleswood if she’d show me the gardens,’ he said, with a cajoling look at Mrs. Brenzler through his spectacles. ‘They’re looking so lovely...’

Miss Ayleswood froze promptly. ‘I’m the housekeeper here,’ she said, ‘and I’m afraid I have to see the butler about dinner. But Ruth would love to take you and Mr. Thornley round...’

‘You don’t know him,’ Dene countered swiftly. ‘He simply hates gardens. All he cares about is killing things...’



His friend sat up abruptly. ‘Say...’

‘I know him of old,’ said Dene. ‘You’ll never get him to stir from that couch...’

‘You’ve got loads of time before dinner. You take him, Nancy,’ Ruth broke in. She turned to Thornley, ‘Go on about the giant panda, Bill...’

‘I’m terribly afraid I’m making a nuisance of myself,’ the Scotland Yard man interposed with a fine simulation of diffidence.

‘Not in the least,’ Mrs. Brenzler declared. ‘Of course, Nancy will go with you, won’t you, Nancy? And I was going to suggest...’

But the girl did not give her time to finish. ‘Come along, Mr. ...’—she paused deliberately and her smile was faintly sarcastic—‘Mr. *Deacon!*’

## CHAPTER XVIII

IN silence they descended a flight of shallow steps cut in the turf and found themselves under the pergola of the first terrace. But the girl did not stop there—it was obvious she was anxious to put them out of earshot of the verandah. Without even looking round to see if he were still behind her, she preceded him down more steps to the next terrace. Here she turned and led the way along under the dense archway of greenery. It was dimly green under the pergola, the air fragrant with the scent of roses and sweet briar, and the sun, striking through the tangle of foliage, cast a dappled pattern athwart her face and arms. At the end of the walk she swung about and faced him. Her grey eyes blazed with wrath and the slim hand that clasped the gay scarf about her neck was trembling.

‘What are you doing here?’ she demanded with such fierce anger in her voice that, for the moment, Dene forgot that it was he who had the explanations to demand and lost his habitual self-possession.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘Bill Thornley brought me down to the Yacht Club for the week-end and as he’s a friend of your aunt’s, he suggested...’

‘Mrs. Brenzler scarcely knows Mr. Thornley,’ she broke in irately. ‘But of course she’s flattered to meet him. Please don’t imagine, however, that I’m so easily deceived. What do you mean by coming here to spy on me?’

He was silent, leaning against a post, his hands behind his back, contemplating her gravely.

‘You force your way in under false pretences, under a false name...’

‘That’s not true...’

‘Didn’t you tell Mr. Stayton that your name was Dene? Why does my aunt call you Deacon?’

‘Because she got my name mixed up. I can’t keep on correcting her...’

‘Perhaps you’ll deny that I begged you not to try and see me again? Do you call it chivalrous to take advantage of me like this?’

‘If it comes to that,’ he retorted rather stubbornly, ‘do you call it chivalrous to play a trick like you played on me last night?’ With a bland air he took off his glasses and stowed them away in his pocket.

‘And what else was there for me to do? I saw last night you were the sort of man who’d take advantage of my stupidity in mistaking you for a gentleman...’

He had grown rather red. Without his horn-rimmed spectacles his face had regained its normal contour. His features were regular with a firm, good-humoured mouth and very blue eyes that now sparkled dangerously.

‘You seem to be proud of making use of a complete stranger and then planting him in the depths of the country at two o’clock in the morning,’ he said scathingly.

‘And why not? It was the only chance I had of getting rid of you. Even so, I thought you had sufficient manners to take a hint. I never dreamed you’d be thick-skinned enough to come butting in where you’re not wanted...’

With rather an uncertain hand he dredged up a crumpled cigarette from the pocket of his jacket. ‘That’s where you’re wrong,’ he remarked bluntly. ‘I’m extremely thick-skinned. What are we going to do about it?’

‘Merely because I asked you to do me a trifling service last night,’ she went on wrathfully, ‘you imagine you have the right to pry into my private affairs. Let me tell you that American women aren’t used to that kind of treatment. Simply because you’re an Englishman, I suppose you think you’re entitled to behave as you like. Mrs. Brenzler is easy-going, but I prefer to know something about the people I have to associate with. I know all about your millionaire friend Thornley, of course. But who’s Mr. Deacon—or is it Dene?—of London? Or am I supposed to know about you?’

The young man smiled good-humouredly—he had a sunny smile—his self-composure quite restored. ‘This is all wrong, according to our English ideas. We’re always supposed to patronize Americans, aren’t we? But you’re patronizing me. It ought to be the other way round...’

‘Your sense of humour doesn’t appeal to me,’ she rapped back biting. ‘Least of all, when you exercise it on a good-natured, kind-hearted woman like Mrs. Brenzler...’

Dene raised his blue eyes to hers. ‘You’re quite right,’ he told her humbly. ‘It was a caddish thing to do. But I was desperate. You were trying to avoid me. I had to contrive some means of seeing you alone...’

‘Why? I’ve nothing to say to you. Who are you? And what do you want here?’

He looked at her fixedly. ‘I want you to tell me what business you had with Hermann Rontz last night...’

At that she flushed up, but almost as soon the colour drained out of her face again. ‘I told you before, I won’t talk about it...’

‘Did you go to meet him on the dock when the Megantic arrived?’

She laid a hand on her bosom: her delicate face was ghastly. ‘Was *he* there?’ she asked in a husky, toneless voice.

He side-stepped her question. ‘Was it to see him that you went on board the ship?’ he demanded.

Her eyes wide with fear, she shook her head. ‘I went with a girl I know to meet her mother who was arriving from Europe...’ She broke off and with sudden suspicion added, ‘You saw me, is that it?’

He nodded, his eyes on her face. ‘Why did you disappear?’

She faltered: her hands moved vaguely. ‘My friend met her mother. I had nothing to wait for. So I went away...’

He shook his head. ‘You recognized someone who scared you and you rushed off. Wasn’t that it?’

‘No, no!’ she cried, and buried her face in her hands.

‘To look for Rontz, isn’t that so?’ the Scotland Yard man persisted. ‘Why?’

On that she plucked her hands away and confronted him. ‘For God’s sake,’ she said, in a despairing voice, ‘go away from this house and leave me in peace. I tell you again I know nothing of the death of this man...’ She put her hand imploringly on his sleeve. ‘I was upset just now: I said things I shouldn’t have said. But I’m... I’m distracted...’ Her mouth twitched. ‘I didn’t sleep a wink last night... I kept on seeing him lying dead there in that car and...’ She broke off and gave him a wan smile. ‘Last night you said you wanted to help me. The way you can do that is to go away and forget you’ve ever seen me...’

He laid his hand on her shoulder. ‘I can do better than that. If you’re really in trouble, I might be able to get you out of it. But you’ll have to tell me the truth...’ She had turned her head away. Now he placed his hand gently against her cheek and made her look at him. ‘I like you so much, I want to help you...’

‘Even if I told you nothing...’ Her eyes were averted.

‘Even then...’

At that moment there was the flash of a white skirt at the end of the pergola and Ruth came flying towards them. ‘Nancy,’ she panted, ‘I’ve been hollering like a lunatic! You’re wanted on the telephone...’

‘Who is it, Ruthie?’

‘Ted Stayton...’

‘Ted Stayton!’ She turned and in the questioning glance she gave him Dene saw fear, stark and unashamed, peer from her eyes. Then, without a

word, she hurried away.

Her sister had drawn down towards her a flame-coloured Madame Herriot and was delicately inhaling its fragrance. ‘Your friend’s the grandest person,’ she confided presently to Dene. ‘Next winter, he tells me, he’s going after lion in a country called—wait a minute...’

‘Italian Somaliland...’

‘No. Eri... Erithrea...’

‘It’s the same thing...’

‘Is it, though? My geography’s not so hot. D’you think he’d take me along? I could write articles for the newspapers like Rosita Forbes and make a lot of money...’

‘Why don’t you ask him?’

‘I did. He said he doubted whether a chaperone would stand the trekking so well. A chaperone, I ask you! Rosita didn’t have any chaperone that I ever heard of...’

The young man laughed. ‘You seem to have made a hit with Bill...’

She heaved a deep sigh. ‘Well, it’s time someone liked me. Nancy collars all the presentable men as a rule. Don’t you think she’s stunning?’

‘Yes, I do. You’re a good-looking family...’

She dropped him a little curtsey. ‘Thank you. But Nancy will always take the shine out of me. Never mind, after she gets married in the fall, it’ll be my turn. You know she’s going to marry Mr. Robotham?’

‘Yes, I did hear it...’

‘I shall miss her most frightfully. She’s the grandest person, really. What do you think of Ernest?’

‘He seems very intelligent...’

‘If I were to marry Ernest, inside of a week I should be in a mental home, or I’d have run off with the janitor or something. I tell Nancy she’s absolutely nutty to imagine she’ll ever be able to put up with him...’ She broke off, aghast. ‘But I oughtn’t to be talking to you in this way...’

Dene laughed. ‘It’s all right. But aren’t you being rather hard on him? I mean, he strikes one as being quite harmless...’

‘He’s very fond of her, of course, and very rich. And he’s not one of these tightwads—I’ll say that for old Ernest; he’ll give Nancy all the money she wants. But, my hat, he’s slow. And how he loves to talk! You should have heard him on the court this afternoon, holding forth on the principles of the spin service—all about trajectory and... and velocity and... and contacts. Or is it impacts? Ouf!’

The young man laughed. 'How does your sister feel about it?'

'Nancy? I don't know. She's kind of slow herself lately.' She broke off and raised a pair of large and limpid eyes to Dene. 'Have you met Nancy before today?' she asked.

'Me? No,' he lied brazenly. 'Why?'

'Nothing. I only thought you two might have met over in Europe. Nancy went abroad last summer, you know...'

'Where did she go?'

'Oh, London, Paris, Biarritz...'

'Good spot, Biarritz!' the young man observed thoughtfully. 'When was she there?'

'September, I think. She had a marvellous time. She met the Prince of Wales...'

'She was with your aunt, I suppose?'

'No, worse luck. With friends. They took her along as their guest. I never get a break like that. Gosh, if you knew how I hated being seventeen...'

Dene laughed. 'You seem to bear up pretty well...'

'It's only because I'm a stoic. I bear with people. But it's not easy, what with Aunt Clara raising Cain about my plucking my eyebrows, and Nancy kicking if I drink more than two cocktails, and Ernest beefing about my using slang...' She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. 'It's the hell of a life, said the Queen of Spain! Do you know, I wouldn't half mind marrying your friend Bill, and going off for trips into the jungle with him between babies. I think he's simply terribly attractive. By the way, you're both coming back to dinner tonight to meet Dr. Whoosis. You and Bill have gone over with Aunt Clara in a big way. Especially you. She thinks you'—she paused for dramatic effect—'an exceptionally nice young man. What's *your* first name?'

'Trevor...'

'Trevor? Trevor Deacon? Rather nice, I think. I'm going to call you Trevor and you can call me Ruth...'

'Thank you, Ruth. It's of no consequence, of course,' he added, 'but my name isn't Deacon. It's Dene. I tried to tell Mrs. Brenzler, but she wouldn't have it...'

Ruth gurgled. 'Aunt Clara's adorably quaint about names. I often wonder what she called old Ernest the first five or six times she met him. It has possibilities, hasn't it?' And she went into a ringing peal of laughter.

‘Well, come on, Trevor,’ she resumed. ‘If I don’t get into a bath soon, that damned dinner gong will beat me to it again...’

They made their way up to the house together. Bill was alone on the verandah, thoughtfully nursing a large drink. Nancy had disappeared. ‘Eight-thirty, dinner,’ Ruth informed the two men collectively. ‘Don’t be late or Aunt Clara will have your lives. I’ve got to fly...’ She fluttered a little brown hand at them and was gone.

Thornley silently indicated the tantalus and siphon. Dene shook his head: he looked pensive.

‘Stayton telephoned Nancy,’ he said.

Bill canted his glass and regarded its contents. ‘Ah,’ he remarked enigmatically.

‘You don’t know what he wanted with her?’

His friend shook his head, drained his glass and set it down. ‘No. I haven’t seen her since she went to the telephone. She’s gone off to change, I guess. By the way, I’m glad I brought that bag. We’re asked to dinner...’

‘I know. Ruth told me. You accepted for yourself, too?’

‘Sure...’

‘I’m sorry you did that...’

Thornley shrugged his shoulders. ‘I can always go back to New York afterwards if you still think it’s best...’

Dene glanced up at the windows. ‘We can’t talk here. Shall we go?’

They walked round to where the car was parked on the drive at the back of the house.

‘This is a damnable situation, Bill,’ said Dene, ‘and I’ve got to handle it alone...’

‘Did you have it out with Nancy?’

His friend shook his head sombrely. ‘She won’t talk...’

‘Does she know that Rontz’s body has been found?’

‘She does now, I imagine. From Stayton. I don’t think she’d heard and I didn’t have the chance to say anything about it. She was pretty mad with me, at first, at any rate. Accused me of spying on her...’

Bill opened the door of the car and hoisted his long legs into the driving-seat. ‘I can’t help thinking you’re wrong in suspecting that girl, Trevor...’

Dene’s face had clouded over. A bird was calling in a tree near the house, a bird with a metallic, unfamiliar cry. The young man contemplated the tree. ‘What’s that bird, Bill?’

‘Whippoorwill... I was watching her face at tea. Honestly, old boy, it’s fantastic to suppose that she’s mixed up with a gang of criminals. There’s probably a perfectly simple explanation of her dealings with Rontz—she may owe him money or something...’ He glanced into Dene’s face as the latter took the seat beside him. ‘You’d much better come back with me to New York tonight and we’ll toddle round and see Brent at Police Headquarters in the morning...’

‘So that’s the famous whippoorwill all the Blues are written about,’ his companion remarked irrelevantly.

‘Meaning you’re going on with it?’

The Scotland Yard man’s nod was curt, uncompromising. ‘Yes...’

‘They’re good sorts, she and her sister. And simply wrapped up in one another. It seems pretty rotten to run her into a show like this...’ The car glided away down the drive.

‘Bill,’ said Dene suddenly, ‘do you know that Nancy Ayleswood was at Biarritz last summer?’

‘No. But what’s odd about that? Everybody goes to Biarritz...’

‘Including Valda, alias Gutierrez, the star turn!’

For an instant Thornley took his eye off the road to flash a rapid glance at him. ‘I see,’ he said softly. ‘All the same,’ he added stoutly, ‘I don’t believe you’ll be able to pin anything on Nancy. She’s a winner...’

‘You don’t have to tell me that,’ the Scotland Yard man put in rather miserably. ‘Good God, Bill,’ he went on vehemently, ‘don’t you realize that if she *is* innocent, the surest way of dragging her into all this sordid business is by going to the police?’

Thornley looked at him in surprise. ‘You’re right at that...’

‘Then now you know why I’m staying on...’

That was the last word between them as the car sped down the avenue in the golden evening light.

But, as they swung out of the entrance gates, Dene said: ‘We’ve lots of time. Suppose we take a look at this bungalow where the man Pedder hangs out. You know it, don’t you?’

‘Sure...’ The tires rasped the asphalt as he braked. The car backed. ‘It’s on the beach, on the far side of this, that’s to say, Rosemount is between it and the club. You can get to it along the beach; otherwise, you have to take the road we came by, at the back of the clubhouse...’

They followed the surrounding wall of Rosemount along under overhanging trees, past a couple of other country-places with the owner’s



name inscribed on little notice-boards planted in the turf at the entrance gates—a practical idea which was new to the Englishman. Coming to a road that branched off to the left, still following the outer wall of Rosemount, they dropped down a winding hill, where presently a gap in the trees spread the blue waters of the Sound at their feet. The road ended in a leafy lane with glimpses of the sea through the trees on one side and open fields behind neat stone walls on the other.

Thornley drew in to the roadside, cut off the engine, and jumped out. ‘We won’t drive up,’ he said. ‘The road ends here, anyway...’

They walked along the lane. It was little more than a rough track. The roofs of a handful of houses, gaily-painted, week-end affairs, protruded at intervals from the belt of woodland guarding the top of the beach. The sea was so close that they could hear the water lapping drowsily among the rocks. ‘It’s that yellow house,’ said Thornley, pointing.

A long, greyish-green roof emerged from a hedge of tamarisk. The bungalow was built on two floors, its weather-boarding painted primrose with windows and shutters picked out in green and a green front door under a little porch. There was a small, neat garden with a tiled path leading up from a gate in the tall wire fence enclosing the place. A copper plate inscribed ‘Oceana’ was affixed to the gate. At one side was a garage with doors folded back, before it a large black limousine fresh-coated with dust as though it had just come off the road. There was no sound audible within the house, though windows were open and a newspaper protruded from the letter-box.

A fenced-in path ran along one side of the bungalow, giving access to the kitchen door and, beyond it, to the beach. ‘Let’s look it over from the sea side,’ Dene suggested, and they went down the path.

The rear of the bungalow displayed a long sun-porch erected on concrete pillars close to the water’s edge. The open windows revealed a glimpse of a pleasant lounging-place brightened by wicker furniture and cushions in vivid colourings. The beach was bare and rocky and very shallow. A rather decrepit-looking landing-stage ran out into the sea.

Three or four hundred yards from the shore they discerned the rakish silhouette of the Astarte. Bill drew his companion’s attention to a small motor-boat that lay alongside. ‘He’s still aboard, I guess,’ he remarked.

Even as he spoke there was a movement on the cruiser’s deck and they saw a white figure clamber down into the motor-boat. The measured throbbing of the engine floated across the water to them as the boat put off for the shore.

‘We’d better be making a move,’ Dene proposed.

‘And how do you propose to investigate our friend Pedder?’ Thornley enquired as they drove home.

Dene roused himself from a despondent silence. ‘I was just thinking,’ he said, ‘that, as he’s a friend of Mike’s, Jennie should be able to help me there. I told her I’d telephone this morning, but I forgot all about it. I’ll give her a ring as soon as I get in...’

At the clubhouse Bill waited in the lobby while his friend went into the telephone box.

The Scotland Yard man’s face was deeply troubled when at length he emerged. ‘Gone!’ he announced curtly.

‘What do you mean, gone?’

‘Some foreign woman, a Swede or something of the kind, answered the ’phone. All I could get out of her was that Jennie wasn’t there. “Miss Lindsay, she bain’t here no more,” she kept repeating. I hope to heaven nothing has happened to her. I should never forgive myself...’

‘Don’t worry. These chorines flit from one address to the other like birds hopping about on a tree. Did you leave your name?’

‘No fear. Only the number here. Jennie will guess who it is. I gather this woman knows where the girl has moved to, but she won’t let on. I tried to make her understand she was to tell Jennie to call this number as soon as possible, but the Lord knows whether she knew what I was saying...’

Bill’s hairy paw pressed his shoulder. ‘Never mind, old chap. If Jennie doesn’t ring through tonight, I’ll look her up in the morning. Where the hell did the steward put that bag of mine?’

A friend of Bill’s, who insisted on dragging them off to the locker-room for a cocktail, delayed them and it was half-past eight before they set out for Rosemount. The result was that they were the last to arrive.

The first person Dene saw on entering the drawing-room was Mr. Hilary Pedder.

## CHAPTER XIX

SLEEK and well-groomed, he stood in the centre of the room listening with an air of polite deference to the conversation which his hostess, resplendent in black velvet and diamonds, was carrying on with a lanky, elderly individual in an ill-fitting evening tail coat with a pronounced stoop and a rampant shock of grey hair. A fine figure of a man, Mr. Hilary Pedder, well-strapped into the smartly tailored dinner-jacket with a black pearl gleaming in his shirt-front, clear-eyed, sun-browned. His six feet of brawn and muscle had taken on the curves which good living brings and there were pouches under his eyes and blue veins in the massive, handsome face. But his regard had a snap to it and his features radiated a vitality which belied the evidence of his abundant, silvering hair.

‘Just in time for a cocktail before we go in,’ Mrs. Brenzler hailed the new arrivals. ‘Do you two know one another?’ she demanded, looking from Pedder to Thornley. ‘You’re both hunters,’ she added archly to Dene’s companion. ‘The only difference is that Mr. Pedder hunts antiques. Dr. Gastein...’—the lanky man clicked his heels and bowed stiffly—‘Mr. Thornley. Oh, and this is Mr. ...’—she wavered, then went on triumphantly—‘Mr. Bishop.’

Pedder’s glance, authoritative, commanding, sought Dene’s face. ‘Glad to know you, Mr. Bishop,’ he said, extending a large, firm hand, and ‘Gastein!’ the Herr Doktor introduced himself in the German manner, putting forth a small, rather limp one.

These introductions disposed of, Dene glanced about him for Nancy. His heart melted within him at the sight of her. The severe simplicity of the little black lace dinner dress she wore stressed her slim elegance and the lustrous whiteness of her neck and shoulders. She was talking to a hard, glittering matron whose hair was dyed to such a vegetable blue-blackness that she seemed to be wearing a cap of sable plumage. Ernest Robotham was close by holding forth to a scrawny, big-boned girl who had a peculiarly strident laugh. Ruth had not yet appeared.

‘Oh, Nancy, dear,’ cried the hostess, ‘will you see that Mr. Bishop gets a cocktail?’ Dene went across. Grey eyes smiled into his, politely, indifferently. ‘Irene,’ said Nancy to the black-haired woman, ‘you haven’t met Mr. Bishop, I think? Mr. Bishop, Mrs. Cosborough!’ With a slightly bewildered glance at the girl, Dene shook hands with the black-haired woman. Was it a joke? Nancy’s features were serene, unruffled. ‘Ernest you

know,' she went on and, indicating the scrawny girl, 'Gertrude, Mr. Bishop. Miss Vince,' she explained, 'spends a lot of her time in England.'

The tall footman came forward with a tray of cocktails. The scrawny girl allowed Dene to give her one.

'English, are you?' she asked him.

'Yes,' he told her.

'Hunt, do you?'

He shook his head. 'I'm afraid I don't...'

She laughed her hyena laugh. 'That lets me out. I can't talk about anything except ridin' to hounds. Stop a minute! What do you think of this foul country?'

Dene laughed. 'Believe it or not, but I like it...'

'I'm an American,' said the scrawny girl, 'and I think it's simply foul...'

'Well,' the young man observed blandly. 'I've met Americans who think England's simply foul, too...'

'They must be simply foul Americans,' Miss Vince announced. 'But perhaps they don't hunt. My brother and I take a house at Melton every winter. Know Melton?'

His sole memory of Melton Mowbray centred about an inquest he had once attended there. But he did not tell this to Miss Vince. Instead, he answered at random that the Americans seemed to be keeping English fox-hunting alive, at the same time asking himself desperately how he might contrive to get Nancy alone and discover what Stayton had wanted with her. Miss Vince, who, with her weather-beaten countenance and bony frame, might easily have been mistaken for a ploughboy thrust into a woman's evening gown, was contentedly babbling hunting shop in her fruity tenor. Dene was not sorry when, presently, the butler announced that dinner was served.

The dining-room was formal English. Lace mats on gleaming mahogany mirroring Georgian silver, Waterford glass. A long Sheraton sideboard. Family portraits, among them an Oswald Birley of their hostess, very sylphlike in white satin, and a grave little girl clutching a spaniel: an unmistakable Nancy in ringlets—the brushwork looked like MacEvoy's.

Just as they had taken their places, Ruth in a pale blue frock, prettily flushed, appeared and, with a breathless 'Terribly sorry, Aunt Clara,' slid into her seat between Ernest Robotham, at the foot of the table, and Bill Thornley. Dene found himself at the other end on his hostess's left, as she presided at the head of the table, with the black-haired woman on his other

side and Dr. Gastein and Nancy facing him. The Herr Doktor was discoursing learnedly, in a thick, guttural accent, on the Cernuschi Museum of Chinese art in Paris and Mrs. Brenzler was listening with her vaguely bewildered air. A typical German savant, the Herr Doktor, with a high-bridged nose and gold spectacles with lenses so thick that they quite blurred the expression of his face, a ragged grey moustache, and a tufted topknot of hair that put one in mind of a cockatoo.

As his neighbour on the other side was rattling away to Pedder, the Englishman was free to feign an interest which he certainly did not feel in the Herr Doktor's remarks, while keeping his ears open to snatches of the talk that went on around him. In measured, authoritative tones Hilary Pedder was praising their hostess for what he called 'dear Mrs. Brenzler's undoubted flair for art.' It was he who had found for her the Watteaus and the Fragonard in the big drawing-room and she had told him immediately she must have them, no matter what they cost. 'I won't tell you the price she paid for them, Mrs. Cosborough, but, even in the present slump, they represent an excellent investment.'

Across the table, poor Ruthie, who sat next to Bill, was quite neglected. Bill and Nancy were deep in conversation. Bill was doing the talking, Nancy crumbling her bread and listening to him. Names floated over to Dene. *Chambre d'Amour*, *Côte des Basques*—Gad, they were talking about Biarritz! Good old Bill, he lost no time! Ernest Robotham's metallic voice, drooling on at the end of the table, kept drowning the others out: he was laying down the law on horse-breeding to an enraptured Gertrude Vince and a bored and rather miserable Ruth. Dene spooned his turtle soup and sipped his sherry, very content not to have to talk.

Suddenly a name, spoken in Bill's drawling, vibrant voice, rang like an alarm-bell in the Scotland Yard man's ear. The name was Gutierrez. Dene was all watchfulness at once, his eyes on Nancy's face—damn it, Bill had no business to do these things without consulting him.

'...an Argentine,' Bill was saying to Nancy. 'You didn't meet him, I suppose? I ran across him at an American woman's, a Mrs. Gregson...'

The proud features were unruffled. 'I met a lot of Spaniards and Frenchmen,' the girl replied casually, 'but I don't remember an Argentine. I believe I heard of Mrs. Gregson, though. Didn't she have that big villa on the cliff?...'

Dene lost the rest of the conversation, for the black-haired woman was speaking to him. 'Mr. Pedder was just telling me,' she remarked, 'of the

wonderful collection of jewellery Mrs. Brenzler has. He was saying I ought to ask her to show it to us after dinner...'

'My dear Mrs. Cosborough,' said Pedder in an impressive undertone, 'Mrs. Brenzler would never forgive me if she knew I'd put you up to any such thing. Between ourselves,' he went on, leaning forward to speak to Dene, 'all these hold-ups have made her exceedingly nervous and she doesn't like taking her jewels out of the safe. But I dare say if this charming lady here were to ask her very nicely...'

'You'll have to back me up,' Mrs. Cosborough told Dene.

'We'll get Gastein, too,' Pedder suggested.

'She has *the* most marvellous emeralds,' Mrs. Cosborough confided to Dene in a stage whisper. 'Where did you say they came from?' she asked her neighbour on the other side.

'From the Abdul Hamid sale in Paris before the War,' Pedder rejoined. 'The famous Sultan of Turkey, you know. I was at the sale: I never saw such emeralds in my life. Mrs. Brenzler's necklace is one of the best pieces—almost too large to wear, as fashions go nowadays. I tell her she ought to get them reset. But she won't: she regards them as an historical piece, as, of course, they are. Interesting character, old Abdul Hamid: never slept two nights running in the same bed...'

Mrs. Cosborough sighed. 'I always thought that life must be delightfully unexpected for a woman in a harem...' she observed pensively.

'I didn't mean that,' Pedder retorted with a chuckle. 'He was afraid of being assassinated...' The talk drifted to other channels.

Dinner over, the men were not suffered to linger at the table. They might bring their cigars to the drawing-room, their hostess announced, while she showed Dr. Gastein her jade. There was a cabinetful of it, to which Nancy produced the key, and soon they were all gathered round while the erudite Mr. Robotham officiously did the honours. There were tear-vases, and necklaces, and bracelets, and rings, and seals, and carved pieces, flowers or grotesques. Each object in turn was elaborately explained by Ernest while the Herr Doktor minutely scrutinized it, holding it painfully within a few inches of his thick spectacles and bursting into guttural ejaculations of 'Fabelhaft!' 'Prachtvoll!' or 'Wunderschön!' Hilary Pedder stood by, occasionally putting in a word of elucidation.

These four, Ernest and the savant, Hilary Pedder and Mrs. Brenzler, were completely absorbed and presently the rest of the guests lost interest. Ruth and Bill were the first to slip away to the verandah. Miss Vince hoarsely demanded to know, in Dene's ear, whether he played backgammon, and on

Dene, most untruthfully, denying this, carried Mrs. Cosborough off to the verandah for a game. Dene remained at the jade cabinet, unostentatiously regarding Nancy who was listening with a brooding, absent air to the discussion. Then she caught the young man's eye.

'Let's go out and get some air, shall we?' she said, to his astonishment.

He followed her into the grounds. The warm night was jewelled with fireflies and strident with the frog chorus. This time they did not descend to the terraces. Instead, the girl conducted him along the path to the left which, Dene knew, led to the lawn-tennis court.

But they did not go as far as the court. At a little rustic summer-house that loomed up suddenly out of the darkness under the trees, she stopped and faced him. It was a circular structure, topping the wall of the estate, open on the near side and furnished with table and chairs. Below it, at the foot of the wall, ran a narrow lane which seemed to divide the Rosemount and the Yacht Club domains, for beyond it and high above the ground level were visible the tall wire screens of the club courts.

The girl had a cigarette between her lips. But now she plucked it away and let it smoke in her fingers as she leaned back, her white arms out along the balustrade behind her, and calmly regarded him.

'You asked me some questions this afternoon,' she said with her haughty, listless air. 'Now it's my turn to be curious. Who are you and what are you doing in America?'

He made a vague movement of the hands. 'My name's Dene...' he began.

'You were at Cambridge with Mr. Thornley, you're reading for your Bar exam, and you're here on a short holiday—you needn't tell me all that again. What do you really want here?'

'You know all there is to know...'

'Don't lie to me. The police are looking for you. It's about the murder of Hermann Rontz. Did you know they'd found the body?'

'Yes. Was it Stayton, too, who told you the police were looking for me?'

'Yes. One of these gunmen who came to the Club Calderon has confessed. He says he was looking for an Englishman who arrived in the Megantic last night, a fair man with glasses. The head-waiter at the club remembered you and told the police he'd seen Ted Stayton talking to the girl you were with. The detectives have been to Mr. Stayton about it...'

'They have, have they? I hope he didn't give you away...'

The grey eyes were coldly veiled. 'Mr. Stayton's a gentleman. And, anyway, I'd never been to the Calderon before...'

'What did he tell the police?'

'He made up some story about meeting me casually on a party, he couldn't remember where. He said he didn't even know my name...'

'Did the police know it was he who helped to get you away?'

'He doesn't think so. In the confusion nobody noticed him at our table, apparently...'

The Scotland Yard man nodded. 'So much the better for you,' he observed cheerfully.

'We're not discussing me,' she returned distantly. 'We're discussing you. You don't realize that the police know your name...'

He frowned quickly, his eyes wary. 'Oh? How's that? Did Stayton tell them?'

'You've got to understand that Mr. Stayton told them nothing: his only thought was to keep me out of it. He said he'd never seen you before and didn't know anything about you. But he gathered from the police that a detective on the dock saw you talking to this man, Nick Mazzini, after the ship arrived and got your name at the purser's office...' She looked at him fixedly. 'Mr. Stayton warned me against you. He believes you know something about the death of Rontz...'

'Perhaps he thinks I killed him, does he?'

'No. The police say that Rontz was killed before the ship arrived...'

'And did you tell your friend Stayton about our finding the body?'

She shook her head. 'No...' Her voice was almost a whisper.

'But didn't he want to find out from you where you'd met me and all about me?'

'I said we got talking at Mike's, that you told me you were going to the Calderon and invited me to go with you. I said as I'd never been to one of these places and was feeling bored, anyway, I went, just for a joke...'

'And you mean to tell me Stayton believes you'd go to a low dive like the Calderon with a casual stranger you met in a gaming-house?'

'I explained that you were quite presentable,' she answered loftily.

Dene bowed. 'You overwhelm me,' he observed drily.

'Stayton knows I can take care of myself,' the girl went on. 'Besides, this isn't London, you know. In New York nothing matters. We all do just as we please...'



‘Didn’t Stayton want to know why you were so anxious to find Rontz?’

She flushed. ‘He did say something about it, I believe...’

‘And how did you explain it?’

‘I said you’d asked me to point him out to you...’

Dene laughed. ‘Well, I certainly seem to be holding the baby...’

‘What does it matter to you?’ she said. ‘The police are after you, anyway. Now, listen to me. I’m going to give you the chance to get away. Your friend told me he’s motoring back to New York tonight. Go with him and don’t come back, and, if the police come here asking questions, I give you my word of honour that neither I nor anybody else will know anything about any Mr. Dene...’

The Scotland Yard man paused. ‘So that was why you took advantage of Mrs. Brenzler’s mistake to introduce me as Bishop! The idea was that, if the police should follow me to this house, there’d be no trace. Wasn’t that it?’

‘What does it matter what the idea was?’ she retorted nervously. ‘The important thing is that you should go, do you understand?’

‘No, I don’t,’ he answered bluntly. ‘I’m registered at the club in my real name and once the police started enquiring down here, they’d find out quick enough that Bill Thornley brought me to dinner at your house tonight. Wash it out, my dear: it’s childish...’

‘Are you going to force me to bring up the police?’ she demanded tensely.

‘No. For the simple reason that, if you give me away, you give yourself away. So, if you don’t mind, we’ll leave your word of honour out of it...’

‘Then you intend to stay on at the club?’

‘I certainly do...’

With a suddenly desolate air she turned from him.

‘And now that’s settled,’ pronounced the young man briskly, ‘let’s stop sparring, shall we? You don’t really think I’m a gunman, do you?’

She shrugged her shoulders, biting her lip, her eyes averted.

‘Then why not let me help you?’ he went on. ‘Do you think I don’t see how desperately unhappy you are? You live in this beautiful house, surrounded by people who are fond of you, and yet you strike me as being utterly friendless. I’m not trying to pry out your secrets now, but haven’t you some friend here in New York to whom you could go for advice?’

His voice, warm and pleading, seemed to melt her anger. Her eyes were less hostile now as her glance considered him. ‘You don’t know New York,’ she said. ‘So much is on the surface here. We live too fast for anyone to

have time to go down very deep, I guess. Besides, nothing's normal any more. We're all broke. You English say we care only for money, but even dollars don't matter if you haven't any. Most of us just drift along, quite content as long as there's another drink left in the shaker and a dollar bill or two in our pockets to pay for the next meal...'

'If it were a question of money—gambling debts?' he suggested.

She gave a hard laugh. 'You say that because I was at Mike's last night. What would you think of an English girl, I wonder, whom you saw playing at a gambling-hell escorted by a drunken man? I'm not a gambler, really, any more than Gilly Borthwick's a drunkard. I can't afford to lose two hundred and fifty dollars as I did last night, but I played because there was nothing else to do, just as Gilly was tight because it was a hot night and he felt thirsty. I'd been to Mike's before—a party of us dropped in one evening just to see what it was like. I knew that Gilly Borthwick went there, so I got him to give me dinner and take me along. Of course, Aunt Clara and Ernest would be horrified if they knew. But none of the people I run around with would think anything of it. Our generation's pretty hardboiled—in America, anyway...'

'That may be true of some people,' said Dene stoutly, 'but it's not true of you. I know it's the fashion among girls to pose as cynics nowadays, but you're no cynic at heart. At bottom I believe you're as old-fashioned as they make 'em. Let me ask you something'—he smiled—'It's another question, but I can't help it. How would you like your sister Ruth to run wild like so many of the kids are doing?'

Her delicate face was transfigured by a happy smile. 'Ruthie's rather sweet, isn't she? She has no mother, and I'm so anxious not to have her spoiled...'

'Your mother's dead, I suppose?'

'No, divorced. Father was given the custody of us two children. Ruthie and I see Mother sometimes. But she has a new family and she's not much interested in us, really. So I have to keep an eye on Ruthie. Girls of her age in America want holding back...'

'There you are,' said Dene. 'You're conventional at heart, just as I said...'

'It doesn't matter what *I* am,' she answered soberly. 'My future's settled. In the fall I shall marry Ernest and live in a disgustingly luxurious house in the East Sixties and go to the Opera on Mondays and arrange enormous and extremely dull dinner-parties for his friends...'

Dene clamped his hand over hers. 'It's none of my business,' he said. 'But... why do you do it? It's his money, is it?'

She did not withdraw her hand. 'Someone's got to keep this family together,' she replied, her face turned away. 'Father went down in the crash. We can't go on living, Ruthie and I, as Aunt Clara's pensioners. Ernest is very good-hearted—it'll be all right...' She smiled into his face and took away her hand.

Moodily the young man stubbed the edge of the path with his toe. 'I suppose I oughtn't to say this. But things like that always seem to me to be unspeakable, like... like sins against the Holy Ghost. This Ernest, no doubt, is a good enough sort of chap; but, heavens alive, what romance will he bring into your life?'

'Oh, romance...' Her tone was bitterly indifferent.

'Yes, romance. Romantic love is the natural birthright of anyone like you. You pretend to be bored and listless and all the time you're hungry for a great passion. Oh, don't misunderstand me: I'm not just handing you a line of talk, as you say over here. I'm speaking quite generally: I'm merely telling you something you ought to know. I study people a bit, and the moment I saw you, last night on the dock, I said to myself, "There's someone who could sweep a man off his feet!" If you're going to sacrifice yourself, my dear, don't do it!'

'Oh, don't,' she murmured tensely, miserably.

'The man anyone like you should marry should take you out of yourself, shake all this cheap cynicism out of you, carry you up to the stars so that you'd walk in the clouds and see the ugliness and... and heartbreaks of ordinary life as a mere blur far below, like... like that view of New York we looked down on together from the terrace at Mike's, remember? If ever there was a girl to marry for love, it's you...'

'Love?' she said sadly. 'What is love but passion and broken hearts? Romance is all very well in books; but does it exist in reality anywhere today?'

'Of course it does. It's right round the corner for everybody if only you know where to look for it. Back there in New York'—he pointed over his shoulder—'in dirty tenements and shabby boarding-houses romances every bit as passionate and thrilling and lovely as Tristan's or Dante's or Abélard's are being lived out by people whom you and I would probably consider dull and uninteresting and even downright ugly. We've all got the capacity for romantic love somewhere inside us. It's deep down and mysterious and full of strange, unexplored possibilities like those glands modern doctors are

always gassing about—what do they call them again?—the endocrines. It's there all right, but it often takes courage and enterprise and determination to find it. Look at me. I've no money and no position and I make no hearts flutter. But somewhere among all the millions of women on the earth is one whom I shall want and who I shall want to want me. When I find her, I'll know it and I'll try to get her. I may fail, but if I don't I'll have the laugh on all the poor fools who've been dead for years without knowing it. I'll have the laugh, anyway, because at least I have my dreams...'

The girl was gazing at him earnestly. 'Dead without knowing it! How terrible that sounds! I used to think as you do... once,' she added wistfully. She checked herself. 'You make me curious about you. I wish you'd tell me who you really are...'

Dene laughed and shook his head. 'If I told you, you wouldn't believe me. And it wouldn't interest you, anyway. Think of me,' he went on with an air of mock gallantry, 'as a troubador who troubles the hearts of lovely women with an old song!'

Her soft eyes smiled at him and his heart leaped. 'If I confided in anybody,' she said, 'I think I could confide in you.' She gazed away, her expression wistful again. 'Tell me this: if one has loved and... and failed'—she paused to steady her voice—'to lose heart afterwards, is that—what did you call it?—a sin against the Holy Ghost?'

'You must never lose heart,' he gave her back sturdily.

At that moment a soft whistle rang out behind them. It was short and sharp and deliberately muted, as though the intention were to attract their attention unobtrusively. Issuing forth from the dark trees surrounding them, it had a sinister sound.

It seemed to come from the lane below the summer-house. They turned to see a man standing on the path below. His face was a blur in the obscurity under the overhanging branches: the straw hat he carried made a white patch against his dark suit. He was alone; and any doubts they had as to the object of his signal were settled by the curt 'Pss-t' that followed.

With an enquiring glance Nancy laid an arresting hand on her companion's sleeve and went forward to the edge of the sunken road. Dene remained a few paces in rear: from where he stood he commanded a view of the stranger, a slight, neat figure.

'Pardon, lady,' the man said, 'but I'm kinda lost in the dark. Can you tell me where this road will bring me out?'

'Only to the beach,' the girl's clear voice answered. 'It's a private road. You're on private property, you know...'

‘Is zat so?’ the stranger replied unmoved. ‘What’s the name of this place, anyway?’

‘Rosemount...’

‘You live here, I guess?’

‘Yes...’

The man shifted his feet uneasily. ‘You wouldn’t know where a guy called Michele is stopping round here, would you?’

Dene stole a glance at the girl. But he could only see her back, straight and uncompromising. Unostentatiously he drew nearer.

‘I’m afraid I can’t tell you,’ she retorted haughtily.

‘Mike, they mostly call him,’ the stranger explained. ‘He runs one of these here gaming-joints in Noo York. I guess you never heard of him. Is that right?’

‘I don’t know the man,’ said the girl rather nervously. ‘He doesn’t live here, anyway. Where are you making for?’

Before answering, the stranger cast a long glance up and down the quiet path. ‘Wal,’ he remarked slowly, ‘I thought, mebbe, I might get me a bed over to Freshwater...’

‘Then you’re heading in the wrong direction,’ Nancy informed him promptly. ‘Freshwater is three miles or so inland...’

‘Is there an hotel there, can you tell me?’

‘I don’t think so. There are some rooming-houses, I believe...’

She turned away as though to put an end to the conversation. But now Dene stepped forward. Swiftly the girl swung round to stop him, her eyes flashing a warning. But the young man was undeterred.

‘Where’s this friend of yours supposed to be stopping?’ he asked.

‘If I knew that, I wouldn’t have to ask, I guess,’ was the dry retort.

‘I mean, he might be on a yacht, mightn’t he?’

‘He might at that. He knows a lot of rich guys, does Mike...’

But now Nancy intervened.

‘Come on,’ she said brusquely to Dene.

‘Half a minute,’ the stranger put in. ‘How do I get to Freshwater from here?’

‘Follow this path along,’ she replied rather impatiently, ‘and when you come to the road bear right. Take the left-hand fork and keep going left and you can’t go wrong.’ She turned away. ‘Well, are you coming?’ she said to Dene.

The detective had drawn a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. ‘Have a cigarette?’ he said to the stranger.

‘I don’t mind if I do,’ was the reply. The Englishman tossed a cigarette down.

The girl was plucking his sleeve, but he ignored her. His straw hat under his arm, the cigarette between his lips, the man in the lane had sprung a lighter. The little flame burned straight and quivering in the still air. It revealed a hard, bloodless face with deep-set eyes, full red lips with a curiously cleft chin, and a shock of light-brown hair.

The lighter clicked and once more darkness fell about them. The man clapped on his hat, airily touched his hand to the brim, and set off briskly up the lane. The girl had moved back to the summer-house; but the detective stood rooted to his place at the top of the wall, following the dim figure with his eyes.

‘Please come now!’ the girl called to him.

‘Why did you have to speak to him?’ she demanded, hotly, when Dene had joined her. ‘Do you want to ruin everything? The police have your description. Don’t you realize that this man’s a detective?’

Her companion shook his head. ‘I don’t think so...’

‘You might at least have thought of me,’ she went on tensely. ‘Even when I tried to get you away, you must stop and give him a cigarette...’

Dene laughed. ‘Don’t you understand? I wanted to see his face...’

‘Then you suspected him, too?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Not necessarily. But I always like to see the faces of people I meet, especially inquisitive people. It’s just a habit of mine...’

A footstep crunched the gravel close by. The tall footman loomed out of the dark. ‘Mrs. Brenzler is asking for you, Miss Nancy...’

‘Very good, Henry...’

The servant turned and retraced his steps. They followed at a more leisurely gait.

‘Who is this man, then,’ the girl asked Dene, ‘if he’s not a detective, and what does he want with Mike?’

‘Ah,’ said her companion, ‘I’m wondering about that, too...’

But he was thinking to himself that the eyes of the stranger in the lane, revealed in that little flame, reminded him of the eyes that had stared at him so despairingly from the dock, the eyes of the brown-haired boy who, three

thousand miles across the Atlantic, sat in a bare cell and listened to the clock ticking his life away.

## CHAPTER XX

It wasn't Gerry Cloan, of course, unless it were his wraith. Though eyes and colouring were the same, to the light eyebrows and silky brown hair, the face was that of an older man...

Ed Cloan, was it? The resemblance was near enough. Dene felt his scalp prickle. Lucky that from instinctive caution he had kept himself in the shadow. Once he and Gerry's brother came face to face in the daylight, his life would depend on how good a description Ed had of him. A killer Jennie had called him...

Dene's mouth was dry. He put his hand to his forehead and brought it away wringing wet. Here was an unforeseen *contretemps*! The first of his three days was almost over and here was a fresh danger threatening, another obstacle to hamper his progress.

Ed, of course, was in search of the man who had left his brother in the lurch. He was relying on Mike to lead him to his prey. This could only mean that Rocco was using Ed Cloan as the instrument of his vengeance against Mike and this Englishman who had double-crossed him. Probably under the gunman's armpit nestled the selfsame 'gat' that had sent Rontz to his last account. Well, one could guess where Mike was—on Pedder's boat or at the bungalow. But who, or where, was the Englishman? When he could answer that question, Dene reflected, he would be more than halfway towards saving Gerry Cloan from the gallows. But Sunday was almost here and on Tuesday at breakfast-time... By hook or by crook, that very night if it might be, he must penetrate the secrets of the Astarte and that lonely bungalow on the beach...

Ruth met them at the top of the path. 'Oh, Nance,' she cried, 'Aunt Clara wants the key of the safe. She's going to show Dr. Gastein her jewellery...'

Nancy stopped dead. She did not speak immediately. 'Oh, that's nonsense,' she said at last. 'You know how Aunt Clara hates taking out anything except just the pieces she's wearing. Besides, Dr. Gastein can't really expect us to drag those cases down at this time of night...'

'It's all right,' her sister explained. 'He's going to look at it in your room. They're all up there now...'



‘You might have made them wait for me, Ruthie, I do think. I hate to have a mob of people invading my bedroom...’ She hastened her pace. She did not look at Dene, but the light from the verandah was on her face and he saw that it was flushed and troubled. He guessed what had disturbed her—it was his presence in the house; hadn’t Stayton warned her against him?

The drawing-room was empty. He called to Nancy as they passed through—Ruth had gone ahead.

‘Perhaps you’d rather I didn’t go up with you?’ he said.

She looked at him gravely: he felt that the whole question of their future relations—friends or foes—was trembling in the balance.

‘You can come up if you like,’ she answered.

With a spontaneous gesture he took her arm—it seemed to him that she was not unresponsive to the pressure of his hand—and they went upstairs together.

She had drawn a thin gold chain from the front of her dress and detached from it a ring on which several keys were strung. Voices reached them as they mounted, and the Vince girl’s cackling laugh. As they emerged upon the landing, they saw her, along the broad, cream-panelled corridor, chatting with Ernest Robotham in an open doorway.

‘Ah, there you are at last, Nancy,’ said Ernest rather peevishly. ‘We couldn’t imagine what became of you...’

Without answering, the girl went in, Ernest and Miss Vince behind her. A chorus of greeting hailed Nancy’s appearance. Rather diffidently Dene crossed the threshold and remained standing just inside the door.

It gave him an added sense of intimacy with her to find himself in her bedroom, invaded though it was by this noisy, chattering throng. On a couch at the foot of the plain single four-poster, pale green pyjamas, a black-and-gold kimono, were laid out, a pair of dainty Japanese sandals ranged on the carpet below: there was her dressing-table, glass-covered, with its bowls and trays and tortoise-shell brushes: her tidy desk with its orange Moorish blotter and photographs in silver frames; the shelf with her books; an exercising machine in the corner. The room was well-proportioned without being large, the furniture plain and of a masculine severity. There were roses in bowls on dressing-table and desk. The bed, standing out from the wall where the door was by which they had entered, faced two French windows giving on a wide balcony—the balcony above the drawing-room verandah, Dene surmised, for he could see the lights of the Sound twinkling beyond it.

All the party was assembled there, Mrs. Brenzler at one window showing the Herr Doktor the view, Bill and Ruth at the other, the black-

haired Mrs. Cosborough perched on the bed with a cigarette. Dene looked for Pedder and did not immediately find him. It was only on having the sensation that someone was scrutinizing him intently that he discovered Pedder at his side, staring at him rather hard. His features relaxed into their customary expression of bonhomie as he caught the young man's eye.

'Ah, Mr. Bishop,' he remarked lightly, 'I fear we broke up a charming tête-à-tête...'

Dene smiled. 'Miss Ayleswood and I merely strolled as far as the tennis-court...'

'Your first visit to America, Mr. Robotham was telling me?'

'Yes.'

'Staying long?'

'Only for a week or so. I came out for the ocean voyage, really. I'm reading for an exam and felt myself getting stale...'

'Quite. The Bar exam, isn't it? Well, well, you couldn't find a more restful spot to study in than the shores of the Sound. Shall you be for any time at the Yacht Club? You're stopping there, I think Robotham said...'

'I haven't made any plans,' was Dene's airy rejoinder. 'I leave that to my friend Thornley...'

'I was going to say,' Pedder remarked diffidently, 'that I have a small yacht in the Cove. Should you be making any stay down here, it would give me great pleasure to take you out cruising, if you can tear yourself away from your books for an afternoon, that is...'

'If I do stay on, I should like nothing better,' the Scotland Yard man replied. With a genial nod the other moved away.

A rapid succession of thoughts had passed through Dene's mind. He did not have the impression that Pedder remembered him from their brief meeting in the bar at Mike's; but he was very certain that Mike had told Pedder of the scene which Rocco had made and, in particular, of the unsigned wireless despatched to Rontz from the Megantic. If Mike had really put the mysterious Englishman they were expecting under cover, as Rocco had alleged, he would have an equal interest with Rocco in discovering the author of that radiogram, since, obviously, the other man had not sent it. Of course, Dene told himself, Pedder's interest in him might be merely civility—Americans were invariably hospitable; on the other hand, he reflected, almost anybody at Mrs. Brenzler's dinner-party could have told Pedder that the English guest had arrived by the Megantic. For all Pedder's ostensibly frank and unsuspecting manner, the Scotland Yard man could not rid himself of the feeling that the other had tried to pump him, at the same

time providing a pretext for a repetition of the process. He made a mental resolution to keep a sharp eye on Mr. Hilary Pedder. At the same time he was conscious of a sense of grim satisfaction at the thought of the gaunt stranger roaming the darkness outside. As far as Ed Cloan was concerned, Dene reflected, he and Mike, and probably Pedder as well, were all in the same boat.

After a word with Mrs. Brenzler, Nancy had gone round the bed to where a Spanish leather screen cut off a corner of the room.

‘Frightful nerve crashing your bedroom like this, Nancy, m’dear,’ Mrs. Cosborough’s shrill voice spoke from the bed. ‘But I was just crazy to take a teeny-teeny peek at darling Mrs. Brenzler’s too-too lovely things...’

‘That’s all right, Irene,’ the girl replied quietly. ‘Come and give me a hand, will you?’ she told Ruth.

The two girls retired behind the screen. From where he stood, Dene saw the edge of a cupboard door swing out from the wall. A moment later Ruth emerged, her arms laden with leather cases which she bore to a table under the centre light. Everybody gathered round. The girl stood obediently by while Mrs. Brenzler opened the cases. In turn a diamond bangle, a sunburst in diamonds and rubies, more bangles, a huge yellow Brazilian diamond set in a ring, a diamond tiara, were displayed.

Mrs. Cosborough seized the tiara. ‘Oh, darling,’ she cried to her hostess, ‘might I... would you mind... just to try. I’ve never worn one...’

‘Go ahead, Irene,’ said Mrs. Brenzler good-naturedly. ‘I always said you’d make a good duchess...’

With a little ejaculation of delight Mrs. Cosborough picked up the tiara and, running across to the dressing-table, adjusted it upon her raven’s-wing coiffure. The guests stood about her in a circle and made admiring remarks. Meanwhile, Nancy had brought other cases from the safe and the party flocked back to the table.

With a little sigh of regret Mrs. Cosborough relinquished the tiara. ‘It’s too divine,’ she murmured. ‘It gives you such a glorious *grande dame* feeling. With this on my head I feel like snubbing people. It only wants a lorgnette to complete it...’ She put the circlet back in its odd-shaped case. ‘If I were you, though, darling,’ she went on to the hostess, ‘and had such lovely, lovely things, I’d be terrified of being... ouch, my ankle, Ruthie!’

Ruth was glowering at her. ‘Shut up, Irene, you mutt!’ the girl whispered hoarsely. But Mrs. Brenzler had not heard: she was opening the cases which Nancy had brought for the benefit of the Herr Doktor.

‘Aunt Clara’s nervous about thieves, you know,’ Ruth explained in an undertone to Dene. ‘That’s why she makes Nancy sleep here next to her. This used to be Mr. Brenzler’s room...’—she pointed to a door in the wall on the right-hand side of the bed—‘Aunt Clara’s room’s through there, in the other side of the bathroom...’

Irene Cosborough had joined the others at the table. Dene and Ruth went after her. Mrs. Brenzler held the Sultan’s emeralds in her hands. There was no mistaking them—large uncut gems, a double row of them, widely separated, in a heavy, old-fashioned gold setting—the electric light struck fire out of their cold green depths.

Mrs. Brenzler draped the necklace over the back of Dr. Gastein’s slender, curiously small hand. Pedder, at the German’s side, began to expatiate upon the beauty of the stones, pointing with his gold pencil and speaking of colour, weight, and water. The table blazed and winked with the jewels, in and out of their cases, that strewed it—diamond bracelets in a pile, a diamond chain that had caught on one of the points of the tiara and trailed across the table-cover, a string of lucent pearls, faintly pink, that seemed at last to have struck a spark of femininity out of the Vince girl who was trying them against her red and bony wrist.

There were tens of thousands of pounds’ worth of precious stones spread out there upon the table, the Scotland Yard man told himself, and this girl, bound by some unseen tie to this dead shyster, associate of racketeers and thieves, held the key to all these riches. What was the game? He ran his eye round the company. Whom could he eliminate from suspicion? Mrs. Brenzler, Ruth, the Vince girl—these were certain. Ernest Robotham, too most probably, if Thornley’s report of his situation were correct. Mrs. Cosborough—well, with that ultra-black hair of hers and close-fitting shiny black sheath frock, she looked the part of adventuress to the life; actually, in his experience, the type was seldom showy; besides, hadn’t there been talk at dinner about her being the widow of a highly placed Navy Department official at Washington? Mrs. Cosborough, he thought, he could rule out. That left Gastein and Pedder.

The Scotland Yard man glanced towards where the Herr Doktor stood, aloof and a little disconsolate, listening abstractedly to an argument Ernest Robotham had started with Pedder and Thornley about conditions in the South African diamond industry. Clearly, the savant’s artistic soul was less stirred by the jewellery, even the Abdul Hamid emeralds, than by the jade; and Chinese art seemed to be his only talking subject. At any rate, he was silent now, an awkward scarecrow figure, lost in thought, meditating, as Dene surmised, upon some aspect of his special hobby. Scarcely an

advertisement for German manly beauty, the Herr Doktor, with his eyes blank behind his thick lenses as they caught the light, his bony nose, his bulging cheeks and his rabbit mouth, the upper lip puckered up under the ragged toothbrush moustache by a line of irregular, projecting teeth. That face was sufficient alibi, the Scotland Yard man decided.

Only Pedder was left. The detective's eyes kept returning to Pedder, to Pedder alert, competent, plausible. With his trim grey head, his good clothes, his manner important yet so very debonair, he suggested a big banker or a prosperous lawyer: he inspired confidence. The sort of man, Dene told himself, who would serve an excellent dinner on board that boat of his and, admirable conversationalist that he was, prove himself the most entertaining of hosts. And yet...

That brief interchange of civilities between them, so normal, so unforced, was still uppermost in his mind. He had to remind himself that this suave and attractive individual was the habitu  and perhaps the real owner of a common gaming-house, the resort of professional bootleggers and racketeers and their hired braves, the associate of Hermann Rontz, shadowy power of the New York underworld; in the antique business, traditional cloak, as every man at the Yard knew, of the fence; owner of an abnormally powerful motor cruiser ideally suited for a quick getaway.

Nevertheless, one could not reject the evidence of the eyes. Pedder was quite obviously a welcome guest and trusted counsellor of the household and on the best of terms with their hostess and her nieces—Nancy was laughing with him now. If he had any evil designs upon the Brenzler jewels, he had unquestionably been in the position, ever since he had been coming to Rosemount, to carry them out, since he knew that the jewellery was kept in the house. What was the game?

Substitution? To slip a previously prepared paste imitation in place of one of the more valuable pieces of jewelry—it was an old trick. But Pedder, having said his say about the emeralds, had stepped back and let the others crowd and handle the gems.

Now their hostess, assisted by Nancy and Ruth, had begun to restore the jewels to their respective cases. One glance at Mrs. Brenzler disposed of possibility of the substitution trick being worked successfully on her. Mrs. Brenzler might be vague about some things, but her jewellery was clearly not in the category. With her keen black eyes she scrutinized each article before, with her own hands, she put it away. And when the Herr Doktor sprang forward to offer his assistance, she brushed him aside, politely and firmly, as she had brushed aside similar offers from the rest.

‘Thank you, Professor,’ she said, ‘but we don’t want to get the cases mixed up. The girls and I can manage very well.’

However, Dr. Gastein was permitted to help Nancy and Ruth carry the cases over to the safe. Dene held back: if there were any funny business going on, in view of the girl’s suspicions of him, he had no mind to be involved. But he shifted his position nearer the door so as to command a view of the safe behind the screen. It was a small, deep affair, built into the wall, with a short, heavy door. Nancy stood before it, putting away on the shelves the cases which she took from Ruth and the Professor just behind her. The last case disposed of, Nancy slammed the safe door, locked it and closed the panel in the wainscot which concealed it. As she emerged from behind the screen in the wake of her sister and the Herr Doktor, she caught Dene looking at her. Her glance was grave and earnest and, as it seemed to him, trustful. It gave him heart.

Mrs. Cosborough and the Vince girl—Mrs. Cosborough was stopping with the Vinces at Oyster Bay—had departed in search of their wraps. Pedder was consulting his watch. Dr. Gastein, it appeared, was catching an early train in the morning: he was motoring back to New York that night. The whole party trooped downstairs and went out on the drive in front of the house amid the croak of the frogs and the glitter of the fireflies. The Vince girl was there at the wheel of a shining roadster. On getting in, Mrs. Cosborough dropped her handkerchief. Dene and Gastein made a simultaneous dive to retrieve it and their heads came into collision. There was a general laugh in the midst of which the roadster drove away.

A black limousine with a coloured chauffeur drew up at the door. Pedder came out of the house with the Herr Doktor’s wideawake hat and one of those caped black ulsters which Germans call ‘Havelock.’ He helped Gastein into his overcoat, held the car door for him. Amid farewells the big black limousine departed into the night.

Dene and his friend had no excuse for lingering. Mrs. Brenzler wished them good-night in her vague way. ‘If you’re going to be here,’ she told Dene as she gave him her hand, ‘come over for some tennis. The girls will always give you a game. Ring up; and we’ll have another talk about that too adorable rococo period. And let’s see something of you, too,’ she said to Bill, ‘before you go out killing animals again...’

In the cloakroom as the two men were collecting their hats, Bill, with a laugh, pointed at his companion’s sleeve. ‘You didn’t waste your time in the garden tonight, oh, boy, oh, boy,’ he remarked drily. Dene glanced at his dinner-jacket. There was a broad smear of powder on shoulder and sleeve.

He began to brush it off with his hand, then stopped and rubbed a little of the powder on his fingers, and held them under the light.

‘Bill,’ he said excitedly, ‘do you know where this comes from?’

‘Sure I know,’ his friend retorted, chuckling.

‘It’s grey, you idiot. Women don’t use grey powder. It came off Gastein’s hair. He stumbled against me just now when that woman dropped her handkerchief. It’s sticky, too...’ He sniffed at his fingers. ‘Cocoa butter, by Jove! Bill, do you know what this means? That bird was made up...’

Thornley stared at him. ‘Gastein? That old gazebo? You’re goofy!’

‘Not made up like a woman, you goat. Disguised!’

He darted out into the hall. Hat in hand, Bill dashed after him. The hall was empty, but there were voices in the drawing-room. Trevor was there with Ernest Robotham.

‘An admirable practice,’ the latter was saying. ‘It’s one I invariably follow myself. People nowadays are so heedless about introductions. When I meet an interesting man like Dr. Gastein, I must confess I like to get the name correct. Would you care for me to write it down for you?’

‘Thanks, I’ll remember it all right,’ Dene replied. ‘A fascinating talker, the Herr Doktor. A private collector, is he?’

‘Yes. He has a small but exceedingly choice collection, Pedder says. They’re old friends, you know: he has visited him in Germany, I believe...’

‘I run over to Germany sometimes: I’d like to look him up and see his things. I wonder where he lives...’

‘Pedder did tell me. Hamburg, is it, or Bremen? I don’t just recall the city. I could find out from Pedder...’

‘That’s all right,’ the Scotland Yard man put in hastily. ‘Is Dr. Gastein staying long in America?’

‘He spoke of returning to Germany immediately. He has only been here for a few weeks. I didn’t ask him what he’s doing here, but I suspect that, like so many collectors, he’s a bit of a dealer as well and, as times are pretty hard in Germany...’

Dene nodded. ‘I see. I suppose he wanted to sell things to Mrs. Brenzler, did he?’

‘No, I can’t say he did. But then on a first visit...’

‘Quite. You don’t happen to know where he’s staying in New York?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t. But Pedder could certainly tell you...’

‘It’s of no importance,’ Dene retorted quickly.

The two girls appearing at that moment from the verandah, a move was made to the car.

Dene lingered in the hall for a word with Nancy. 'I want you to promise me two things,' he said to her earnestly.

'What?' she questioned demurely.

'The first is, if there are any developments between this and tomorrow morning, to ring me up instantly at the club...'

'In the middle of the night? Can you see Ernest?' She laughed. 'Besides, what developments could there possibly be?'

'Well,' he told her evasively, 'there's that fellow we saw in the lane...'

She looked rather scared. 'He said he was going to Freshwater. You don't think he's still hanging around, do you?'

'You never know. You've got the telephone by your bedside, haven't you?'

'Yes.'

'It's agreed, then?'

'All right. What's the other thing?'

'I want you to make a special point of not letting the key of that safe out of your possession...'

She laughed, but rather uneasily. 'I don't, anyway. But why do you tell me this?'

'It's just an idea of mine. When do I see you tomorrow?'

'I don't know. I have to keep the week-ends for Ernest. I'll ring you...'  
She smiled at him. 'And this afternoon I was determined never to see you again. Can you always make people do what you want?'

He grinned at her cheerfully. 'Not nearly as often as I'd like. There's my bank manager, for instance...'

Three imperative blasts of a klaxon rang out of the night.

'Come on,' cried the girl, 'or Ernest will be getting stuffy with me again...'

In comradely fashion she slipped her hand in his: once more he thrilled to its soft, warm touch. Hand-in-hand like children, they raced through the hall. The big car, streamlined and long of body, throbbed at the porch. Thornley was already at the wheel.

'Sorry,' Dene explained breathlessly, 'but I put down my blinking hat somewhere and couldn't find it!' He noticed that Ruth eyed him rather slyly as he bade her good-night.



‘There’s something cooking up in that house, or I’m a Dutchman!’ Trevor told his friend as they skimmed down the avenue. ‘I’d half a mind to ask you to go after those two birds...’

‘This car’ll catch anything that runs on four wheels,’ said Bill calmly.

‘I don’t doubt it. But how do you know what route they’ve taken? Besides, I’ve other things for you to do. Who’s this Gastein? You heard what Robotham said—none of them know anything about him. He’s got to be investigated. That’s where your pal, the Assistant Commissioner, can be of service. And I’m going to give you a cable to send off to London about him. Then Pedder—I want to know all about him, too. And you’re going to look up Jennie for me, aren’t you? Apart from everything else, I’d like to find out from her where Mike is just now. I tell you, Bill, you’re going to be busy...’ The Scotland Yard man was alert, business-like.

‘It’s okay with me, old boy,’ his friend drawled. ‘But I still think you’d do best to bring in the police...’

‘Listen, Bill,’ said Dene, ‘Rontz was afraid of a leak among the higher-ups. I’ve got forty-eight hours left and I’ve made up my mind to give it another twenty-four hours before I risk letting the fellow I’m after slip through my fingers. Here, on the one hand, is this priceless collection of jewels and here, on the other, is this mystery man lurking somewhere in the background. If I don’t connect them within the next twenty-four hours, I’ll admit defeat and you can call in all the flatfeet you want. Until then, I’ll dree my own weird!’

‘Said he, going all Scotch and Rabbie Burnsy,’ his friend remarked flippantly. ‘All right, old bean, you know your own business best, I guess. But remember a dead cop’s of no use to anybody. These noble-minded fellow-citizens of mine, the American gunmen, are as deadly as rattlesnakes. When they shoot, they shoot to kill...’

Dene was reflecting whether he should tell his companion about the stranger in the lane. But on second thoughts he decided against it. After all, he had no certainty that it was Ed Cloan, and to put into his friend’s mind the idea that the killer was abroad, gunning for the man from London, would, he knew, strain Bill’s loyalty to the breaking point—he would insist on going to the police.

At Dene’s suggestion they did not drive up to the club. They stopped outside the entrance gates while the detective went in to write his cables and see if there were any messages. The lobby was deserted when Dene entered,

but he saw a girl seated in the lounge at the far end. At the sound of the front door opening, she raised her head and he recognized Jennie.

## CHAPTER XXI

THE hands of the lobby clock marked five minutes before midnight. The clubhouse was very quiet: they seemed to have the place to themselves.

One look at her face and he was at her side. This was not his sprightly, amusing companion of the previous night. It was a frightened, wide-eyed Jennie on the verge of hysteria, with twitching mouth and hands aflutter.

At the sight of him she had sprung to her feet. 'Ed Cloan!' she gasped hoarsely.

He drew down his eyebrows, his features stern. 'What about him?'

'He's down here—he means to kill you. I dursn't ring you, and when I did you were out and nobody could tell me where you were gone. So I came down by the train—to warn you, Trev. I've been here ever since ten o'clock. He's a killer—you've got to watch out. The steward didn't know where you were and the taxi that brought me from the station wouldn't wait—I didn't know what to do. When you didn't come back, I thought he'd got you, as they got Hermie—you heard about Hermie?' He nodded gravely. 'Oh, Trev, I've been just scared to death!' Her small hands, cold and trembling, clung to his.

'Why, Jennie,' he said soothingly, 'you're all upset. Sit down there and let's get this straight. But first you must have a cigarette!' He made her sit down again on the big couch, placed himself beside her and gave her a cigarette.

'You haven't seen him, then?' she questioned tremulously as he held the match.

'Of course I haven't,' he reassured her gently. 'Now calm down and tell me about this from the start!'

'Ed—Ed Cloan—was at my place when I got back last night. He'd been drinking, I guess. He knew you and I had been seen together and he wanted to know where you were—Rontz's limey, he calls you...'

'Limey?'

'It's just another word for an Englishman. When I told him I didn't know, he let fly at me with his fist, the dirty dog—you should see the bruise on my side. He'd have killed me, I believe, if it hadn't been for the gun I keep in the bureau drawer. Not that Ed's scared of a gun, only he was afraid of a shot rousing the neighbours, him being on the lam, see? I don't know

how I got rid of him, but he went away at last. And what he didn't tell me he'd do when he meets up with you!'

Dene shook his head, his eyes compassionate. 'You poor kid! I didn't mean to let you in for this, Jennie...'

She patted his hand. 'Don't worry about me, Trev. I can take care of myself. It's you I'm thinking of. This guy's as dangerous as a mad dog. Human life doesn't mean a thing to him. He'd as lief bump a fellow off as take a drink...'

The Scotland Yard man nodded. Behind their large glasses his eyes glistened with the light of battle. 'What does this bird look like?'

'Tall and kinda tough, with brown hair, the same as Gerry. As a matter of fact, he's a dead ringer for Gerry, only older. Wears a dark suit and a straw hat...'

'How did he know that you and I had met?'

'Rocco. He sicked him on to you, I guess. Ed used to work for Rocco running booze, see? until he got in a gunfight with the cops and killed one: gees, Ed would always shoot his way out of a scrap. Rocco kept him on the pay-roll after he made his getaway and had the boys fix him a hide-away over at Peekskill or some place up-State: that wop likes to have his fellas where he can lay his hands on them when they're wanted—besides, if there's any squealing, he can say his piece first. I guess Rocco knew Ed would jump at this job: Ed was always kinda fond of that kid brother of his...'

'Gerry, you mean?'

'Uh-huh.' She broke off. 'Listen, Trev, I don't give a damn if they do hang Gerry. I shouldn't wonder if he's not as bad as his brother, though he was a decent enough kid when he first came to New York...'

Dene glanced at her in surprise. 'You knew Gerry, then?'

Her expression was suddenly secretive. 'I used to, before they sent him to the big house. Ed could have saved him, but it would have meant the chair for Ed, so Gerry had to take the rap...' Her tone changed. 'I'm telling you, Trev,' she went on with sudden violence, 'those Cloans are no good. And when she says no good, Mrs. Lindsay's little girl knows what she's talking about!'

Dene looked at her reflectively: her meaning was plain enough. 'I didn't realize this,' he said quietly. 'Which of the two was it, Jennie? Ed or Gerry?'

'Ed...'

'He's been a friend of yours, is that it?'

A slow flush crept into her wan cheeks. 'If it were only that. He's my husband, Trev!'

The Scotland Yard man stared at her blankly. 'Oh, my dear!' he murmured.

She gave a hard laugh. 'That's how I come to be in with the crowd, see? Not that I stood for Ed long. Six months of married life saw me through. When he'd been drinking, he'd talk about the guys he'd bumped off. I'm nobody's gun-moll not me! I walked out on him. That was last fall. But the boys saw how it was with me and Ed and they were always kinda friendly with me, so I kept playing right along with the mob. When a girl's on her own in New York, any sort of friends are better than none. Until last night I hadn't seen Ed since before he got into that jam with the police. First thing this morning I switched my rooms. Then this evening Mrs. Svensen brought your message to my new place. Ed was watching the house, I guess, and followed her. Anyway, before I had time to ring you, he walked in on me...'

'And found my telephone number here, is that it?'

'Not on your life. He asked me again where you were. I swore I'd no idea. He'd have beaten me up again, but this time I was ready for him. Then he called some number on my 'phone and when he was through, he laughed and said he guessed he could locate you without any help from me, that Mike had you hidden away down at Freshwater and that he was going off to get the pair of you, same as they got Hermie...'

'Then it wasn't Ed that killed Rontz?'

'Not by the way he said it. That was Rocco's crowd, I guess...'

'It wasn't Rocco...' Dene looked thoughtful. 'Did Ed say where Mike was at Freshwater? I mean, did he seem to have any line as to where he might find him?'

'No. I guess he didn't know. But he said the whole United States wouldn't be big enough to hide you from him if they hang Gerry, and I was to tell you that. Then he went off. That was around eight. I slipped out and called you from the druggist's, but you weren't in. I didn't leave my name—I was too scared. The best thing seemed to be to come down and warn you, so I rang information and found out what this number was. I've come to fetch you back to New York. I've a friend up in the Bronx who rents out rooms. We can stay there quietly until Monday when the Megantic sails for England...'

He shook his head. 'You're a sweet girl, Jennie, to have taken this risk for me. But I've got to stay here...'

Panic seized her. 'You're crazy! You don't know this bird as I know him. Besides, he has Rocco behind him. Rocco needs only to whistle on his fingers and he'll have ten, twenty gunmen combing this dump for you. For God's sake, Trev, have some sense...'

He had taken out notebook and pencil. 'Stick down this new address of yours,' he said, handing them over to her, 'while I write a couple of cables. Then we'll send you back to New York. In a marvellous car, Jennie, driven by a most attractive man!' He gave her his bright smile and went to the writing-desk.

When, presently, he came back to her, it was to see her sitting disconsolate, staring in front of her, the notebook in her lap.

'Wait till you see who's going to be your chauffeur,' he remarked, to rally her. 'The grandest fellow, Jennie. All the girls are crazy about him...'

'I don't care anything about men,' she told him, and stood up. 'You're all alike: you will go your own way. I wonder that any woman should ever try to help you...' She gave him back his notebook. 'There's your old book. I've written down the address and telephone number. Call me soon—you know I'll be worrying about you...'

'You're a wonderful friend, Jennie,' he said. 'I don't know why you should have done this for me...'

'I don't know, either, I guess,' she answered, her fingers straying over the lapels of his dinner-jacket. 'I only know that if anything happened to you, well, it would kinda hurt...'

She raised her blue eyes to his. Putting his arms about her, on the impulse of the moment, he kissed her. Sweetly and frankly, like a child, she returned his kiss, clinging to him for an instant in a sort of abandon. 'And now, Jennie, dear,' he said gently, 'you're going home.' He slipped an envelope into her hand: the edge of a twenty-dollar bill protruded. 'For expenses,' he explained.

'I don't want you to keep on giving me money,' she cried forlornly, holding out the envelope.

Firmly he closed her fingers over it. 'Nobody works for nothing,' he retorted; 'besides, I bet that taxi soaked you good and plenty for bringing you over from the station!'

She put the envelope in her bag. 'It was like you to think of it,' she said simply. 'Thanks a lot!' She gazed at him fixedly. 'Then you're determined to stay?'

He smiled at her. 'Absolutely...'

She shrugged her shoulders. ‘You win, I guess. But don’t say I didn’t warn you...’

‘I can look after myself. It’s you I’m concerned about, Jennie. If Ed finds out that we’ve been seeing one another again...’

She laughed. ‘Don’t worry. I’ve got Ed where I want him. And he knows it...’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well,’ she said slowly, ‘Ed’s never been pinched, see? so they didn’t have the chance to mug him...’

‘You mean, the police haven’t got his picture?’

She nodded, her eyes bright. ‘That’s it. But I have. Ed sent it to me from Europe last summer...’

‘Was Ed in Europe last summer?’

‘Sure...’

‘Where?’

‘All over the place, I guess. This picture was taken at a place called Aix...’

A small red light seemed to spring up in the detective’s brain. Hablard’s letter flashed across his mind. Hablard had spoken of a frustrated attempt by the mysterious Valda on a safe at Aix last summer.

‘I’d forgotten all about it,’ Jennie was saying, ‘until Ed reminded me of it this evening. He wanted me to give it back to him. I told him if I gave it to anybody, I’d give it to the police, and that’d be the very next time he came round making trouble for me...’

‘It wasn’t very wise to say that, was it?’

She sniffed. ‘I’m not afraid of that big cheese. I wouldn’t give him away really, you know, but it don’t hurt any letting him think I would...’

‘You haven’t got that picture with you, have you?’ Dene asked.

She shook her head. ‘It’s in my trunk over at Mrs. Svensen’s. I can get it for you. You want to know what this prune looks like, I guess?’

‘That was roughly the idea...’ He paused. ‘Ed never spoke to you about a friend of his at Aix, did he?’

‘Larry, is it?’

‘That might be the name...’

‘If it’s Larry, he’s with Ed in the photo. Say, he’s the swellest-looking guy, tall and handsome, just a reg’lar fella...’

‘What’s his other name?’

‘Ed never called him nothing but Larry in his letters...’

‘Where did he meet him, do you know?’ His manner was so eager that the girl became confused. ‘Gosh, Trev,’ she said, ‘I don’t know anything about it except just that Ed met this chap travelling somewhere and they had their picture taken together. If you ask me what he is, I’ll tell you—I guess he’s a crook like all Ed’s friends. But...’ She broke off, for suddenly Dene’s hand was clamped about her wrist.

There was a curtained window behind the couch at which they stood. With frightened eyes she saw her companion step silently to the curtains and part them. A French window, reaching to the floor, was behind with one side open on the dark verandah. Dene stepped out. Jennie ran to the window and peered after him. He stood at the verandah balustrade gazing across the deserted lawn.

He came back into the room. ‘I thought I heard someone outside,’ he explained. ‘But there doesn’t seem to be anybody about. Did you hear anything?’

She shook her head. ‘I was mistaken, I expect...’ He smiled at her grave face. ‘We mustn’t get jumpy, must we, Jennie?’

‘I wish to God you’d come back to New York with me,’ she declared heartily.

He shook his head, laughing, and took her arm. ‘I shall be all right. What you can do for me is to get that photo as soon as you can and give it to Bill—that’s the bloke who’s going to drive you. And, by the way,’ he added confidentially as they traversed the lobby, ‘You needn’t say anything to Bill about Ed Cloan. Bill’s a bit temperamental, you know: it might make him nervous. He likes to speed, and you don’t want to crash into anything...’

The memory of the temperamental Mr. Thornley’s face at finding himself unexpectedly called upon to squire a charming and slightly flustered blonde on the journey back to town lingered pleasantly in Dene’s mind as he returned to the clubhouse. The steward was in the lobby, locking up. Everybody was in, he explained to the Englishman. Dene bade the man good-night and went upstairs.

His bedroom faced the sea with a balcony above the verandah. From the window he saw the light that streamed from the lounge go out and presently heard a distant door slam. It was the steward going to bed. Rapidly Dene peeled off his evening clothes and donned his flannel suit, replacing his evening shoes by a pair of rubber-soled deck shoes. From his suitcase he



produced a cloth cap which he pulled on, an electric torch whose beam he verified, and, rolled up in an undervest, a small automatic, which, after a rapid glance at the charger, he slipped into the inside pocket of his coat. This done, he paused, his face thoughtful. Then once more his hands explored the case and retrieved from its hiding-place in a shoe an object, round and elongated like a pencil, heavy and about a foot long, enclosed in a cloth cover to which long tapes were attached. These tapes the Scotland Yard man fastened about him under his waistcoat so that the object they supported hung down inside his trousers. Then he switched off the light and noiselessly descended to the lounge.

The long curtains made it a simple matter to leave one of the French windows ajar, safe from accidental discovery, against his return. Outside, the night was warm and windless and lit only by the stars: the moon had yet to rise. No light from the club windows at his back menaced betrayal as, keeping in the shadow of the hedge, he slipped through the garden and down to the beach.

The strand was deserted, the tide rustling gently in the dimness. The jangling of a radio floated faintly from a yacht where figures moved against pink-shaded lamps on the deck. At her distant mooring the *Astarte*, save for her riding-lights, was dark. Now the long mass of Rosemount loomed up on the detective's right hand as he picked his way swiftly over the sand. No window gleamed: the house and gardens were wrapped in sleep. Beyond it, too, where the bungalows lay, no shimmer of radiance fell upon the lonely beach. Each bungalow in turn, as he came to it, was shuttered and silent, and when at length he stood looking up at the glass-enclosed sun-parlour of *Oceana*, it, too was in darkness.

All was in order, then. Pedder would scarcely return from New York that night, Dene surmised: if he came straight back, he could not appear before two hours at the earliest. What about servants? The bungalow was small, and the Scotland Yard man had not forgotten the newspaper he had seen projecting from the letter-box when he and Bill had briefly inspected the bungalow in the afternoon. In his experience bungalow dwellers usually had a daily woman to look after them. He would have to risk it, anyway.

He had withdrawn, out of sight of the sun-parlour, behind the tamarisk hedge enclosing the lane that ran back to the road in rear of *Oceana*. Now, as he stood there, it seemed to him that he heard, above the murmur of the sea, the sound of a car and a brilliant beam of radiance cleft the darkness of the road.

Crouching down out of sight and peering through the hedge, Dene saw a big black car bouncing along over the ruts. It was Pedder's limousine. It

stopped in front of the house. Dene heard the door slam and the gate squeak. Then a tall figure appeared on the tile path and walked rapidly to the front door.

It was Dr. Gastein.

## CHAPTER XXII

THE HERR DOKTOR let himself in with a key, the front door closed behind him and silence fell once more. But not for long. A moment or two later, the door opened again. A white shirt-front glistened in the light from the house and Pedder's solid bulk was framed in the doorway. With him was a burly figure in a brown camel's-hair overcoat. The Scotland Yard man caught his breath: it was Mike!

'I'm telling you, Chief,' the detective heard him say, 'Rocco's making trouble. Whatever is done has got to be done quickly! Once Rocco gets a sniff of this hang-out down here...'

'You attend to your business, my friend, and I'll attend to mine,' Pedder retorted crisply. 'What you've got to do is to keep your mouth shut. I'll see to the rest...'

'Okay, Boss, no offence,' said Mike, and shuffled with his feet. 'Well, I'll be seeing you...'

'Good-night, Mike!'

The front door closed. The brown overcoat disappeared through the garden gate, there was the sound of the car door opening and shutting, and, with humming engine, the limousine whirled off by the way it had come in a cloud of dust.

Tense and watchful, Dene waited. It seemed to him, on looking back afterwards over the experiences of the night, that that half-hour he spent pressed up against the hedge in the lee of Hilary Pedder's bungalow was the most agonizing vigil of his whole career. His mind grappled vainly with this baffling development. Pedder, he now recalled, had not expressly said that he was accompanying his friend back to New York. Obviously, the car had dropped him at the bungalow and then departed with the Herr Doktor, no doubt taking the road to New York to allay suspicion in the event of being followed—Pedder, of course, knew that Bill was returning to town by road. The ruse, at least, seemed to confirm the Scotland Yard man's suspicions of the *bona fides* of Pedder's German friend. But what did the ruse portend? And what was being plotted behind that grass-green front door?

The luminous dial of his wrist watch showed the hour to be ten minutes to one and he had been at his post for a good thirty minutes when, suddenly, the light above the door was extinguished. Dene's spirits sank. The day's work was done: they were going to bed. His chance of a peep at the interior

of the bungalow had vanished: he would return to his lonely room at the Yacht Club, knowing that the clock was racing towards Tuesday morning and he no nearer the solution he had come to seek. But suddenly his ear caught a rasping noise on the sea-side of the house: it seemed to be the sound of bolts being withdrawn. With beating heart he crept swiftly back along the lane to the beach.

Pedder and a tall individual in an overcoat, the collar turned up to his ears, were emerging from a door under the sun-porch. Pedder's companion was not the Herr Doktor: in the darkness of the beach Dene could not distinguish his face, but, by his gait and the way he carried himself, he seemed to be a much younger man. Pedder locked the door and, followed by his companion, went quickly down the beach where the obscurity promptly swallowed them up.

Dene did not venture from his hiding-place: a figure moving against the lightness of the sand would, he knew, be clearly visible to anyone looking back; besides, he knew where they were bound for. And sure enough, in a few moments, he heard the whirr of an engine starting and the soft put-put-put of the outboard motor that was conveying them on board the Astarte.

Who was Pedder's companion? Dene stood there in the dark and pondered the problem. Of course, a smudge of grey powder was a mighty slender foundation on which to build a case of impersonations: from the fleeting glimpse he had had of the second man, all he could say was that the latter and Gastein were much of a height, if one allowed for a simulated stoop. If it were Gastein, then he must have got rid of his disguise in the house; if it were not Gastein, then Gastein was still ashore, there in the dark bungalow, Gastein who had seen the Brenzler jewels and knew the exact location and, for aught Dene knew, the precise pattern and make of the safe.

Well, there was only one way of solving the riddle! Dene drew a deep breath. The sound of the motor-boat had died away. The bungalow was plunged in silence now: before and behind, no light showed. The young man's glance travelled upward to the windows of the sun-parlour, with curtains close-drawn, above him. He shook his head dubiously and retraced his steps along the path to the rear of the bungalow. In his mind he carried, from his fleeting examination of his place earlier in the evening, a picture of a kitchen window on the garden side conveniently near the ground.

With a glance over his shoulder at the dark, quiet road, he softly tried the window. It was locked. Then his hand went under his waistcoat and hauled forth the cloth case that dangled there. Undoing a press fastener he extracted a short, round steel bar folded in two with a spring joint. Straightened out, it revealed itself as a serviceable jemmy. It represented young Mr. Dene's

personal and strictly irregular loot at a raid on the residence of a Lambeth gentlemen of burglarious proclivities and inventive turn of mind—Inspector Manderton's protégé had found himself unable to resist the neatness and finish of Fatzy Abe's pet implement.

A few deft applications of the crowbar and Dene slid the window up. The next moment he was through it and opening the door of a small, neat kitchen.

More than once he had had a nightmare in which he found himself in a strange house at dead of night waiting, with that terrifying certainty found only in dreams, for the shrill yelping of a dog that should bring the whole place about his ears. There was always this dog in his dream lurking round some corner or springing out from behind a door to rend the stealthy quiet with furious barks.

He thought of that dog now as, with his heart pounding in his ears, he crept along a narrow passage towards the hall, his ears strained for any sound from above. But the hush was unbroken. The expectant stillness was tense with the close and secretive atmosphere of all houses at night after their inmates have retired. The air was stuffy and faintly fragrant with the aroma of Havanas.

In the sitting-room the cold beam of the detective's torch glanced on a tandalus of whisky, a siphon and glasses, an ash-tray where the butt end of a cigar had been crushed out, disposed on the centre table. An oak desk was unlocked and empty. There were some newspapers and magazines in the sun-parlour, which led off the sitting-room, but no letters or papers anywhere. Switching off his flash-lamp, Dene returned to the hall. There was nothing down here: he would have to go upstairs.

Because to have waited would have weakened his resolve, he mounted forthwith, treading softly. There were three doors on the landing. He tried one gingerly at hazard and, finding it unlocked, opened it an inch or two and listened for any sound of breathing. Hearing nothing, he turned on his torch. The room was clearly unoccupied: the bed was not made up.

It was not until he reached the third door that he came upon any signs of occupation. Though he was virtually certain by this that he was alone in the bungalow, he relaxed none of his precautions. In the third room his light revealed clothes strewn upon the bed, a hat upon the bedpost, a collar trailing on the floor.

It was the sight of the hat, a black, broad-brimmed wideawake, that brought him swiftly into the room. He closed the door and, after turning his torch on the window to make sure that blind and curtains were drawn, boldly

switched on the light. The first object that met his eye, draped across the foot of the brass bedstead, was the Herr Doktor's black 'Havelock.'

Further discoveries awaited him on the dressing-table. Here, on a porcelain tray, between a great bowl of grey powder and an open book, were set out an array of objects which brought a sharp exclamation to the Scotland Yard man's lips and an angry flush to his cheeks. As, for instance, a row of false teeth, projecting and irregular, cunningly inserted in a gutta-percha sheath, pink to simulate the gum and made so as to slip over existing teeth; item, two curved pieces of hard rubber, the purpose of which was immediately clear to the Scotland Yard man—actors wear them on the inside of their cheeks to change the contour of the face; item, a lump of wax, the sight of which recalled to Dene the Herr Doktor's high-bridged nose; item, a twist of grey crêpe hair, a stick of cocoa butter, a pair of gold spectacles. Muttering under his breath, the young man glanced at the book which lay open on the table. It was a treatise in German on Chinese art with passages marked in blue pencil.

There on the dressing-table the whole story was unfolded. Dene's heart was cold within him. Whoever he was, this was a redoubtable adversary. Here was preparation, here was organization, which went the length of laying in a German standard work to ensure the accurate background and lingo of the impersonation.

But who was the man? A phrase in Hablard's letter, his friend in the Paris Sûreté, was suddenly vivid in his mind, a phrase about Valda, the 'ace' of the Cannes and Biarritz jewel robberies—'an expert at disguise,' Hablard had called this man. And Nancy, asleep in her quiet, dim bedroom, and the safe beside her bed with its precious contents, were at the mercy of this master mind!

It was as he stood glowering down at the dressing-table, his mind tortured by these apprehensions, that he heard a stealthy movement outside the door.

## CHAPTER XXIII

IT was no more than the sighing creak of a bare board on the landing. But his ear, unconsciously listening against the oppressive hush of the place, instantly picked up the sound. He did not deceive himself. This was no spontaneous yielding of the woodwork: it was the crepitation of a footfall, deliberately muted, on the uncarpeted floor of the landing. There was someone in the house, someone who had halted on the other side of the door.

Realisation came to him in a flash. He was trapped, with the breadth of the room between him and the light switch, if indeed the light had not already betrayed him. Almost before he had time, however, to grasp his plight, noiselessly and swiftly the door was flung wide—he thought he had never seen a door so quickly and so quietly open. He tried to get at his pistol. But it was too late. He found himself in the path of a levelled automatic.

The automatic registered on his mind quicker than the man behind it, for in the split seconds of time in which the brain works in such circumstances, the detective's first thought was of the bearing which this apparition might have upon his mission. A savage, husky voice snarled 'Put 'em up!' Slowly Dene raised his arms.

Irrelevantly enough, it was the straw hat, carelessly jammed back upon a touse of light-brown hair, and the dark suit, sooner than the deep-set eyes and the dimple in the chin, by which he identified Ed Cloan. Seen in the light as he stood in the doorway, the killer looked younger, but for that the more forbidding, than he had appeared in that brief glimpse the lighter flame had vouchsafed in the gardens of Rosemount. His resemblance to his brother—his junior, Dene judged, by several years—was apparent. The elder Cloan had good looks of a sort and his figure was well-developed and almost elegant. But the face was ill-balanced, with an insignificant chin, a mouth that was too small and girlish and lips that were too full and pouting, and light eyes, restless and shifty under the arched brows, set too close together. The eyes were incredibly hard. They had a stony, basilisk glitter. But more sinister than any individual feature of the face was the youth's preposterous swagger. He carried himself with an air of overweening arrogance that argued an almost unfathomable vanity. Except for his shoes, which were covered with the dust of the roads, he was very presentably dressed, although his suit was of the reach-me-down order, pinched in at the waist and sporting extravagantly padded shoulders.

This, then, was death, was Dene's first brain reflex. Of a sudden his mind was a jostling mass of figures as the events of the day flickered by. He saw again Bill's Japanese colonel bringing in the ham and eggs, Bill himself at the wheel of the car, his alert black eyes on the road, Nancy with her sweet grave face coming up the path at Rosemount, swinging her béret, Pedder, self-assured and rather unctuous, the Herr Doktor holding forth, a tear-vase in his hand, Jennie, in her black-and-white frock, waiting in the club lounge. His arms raised stiffly above his head, impassively he confronted the intruder. A ray of hope danced through his brain. A pistol shot at dead of night would reverberate through that quiet bay like a cannon firing, as Cloan, who was on the run, must know...

'Who in hell are you?' The asp eyes flashed a rapid glance about the room, taking in the clothing strewn about, the curious array of articles ranged upon the dressing-table. The eyes came back to Dene: they seemed to drill him through and through. 'Half a minute,' drawled the man with the gun. 'Ain't I seen you before tonight, givin' that jane the run around in the park?' He pronounced it 'poik': his accent was the Irish-American which is the speech of almost the largest section of the New York masses.

Dene breathed again. Despite his precautions, he had been recognized. But what matter? It was obvious that Cloan did not identify him as 'Rontz's limey.'

'Who lives here?' the man at the door demanded.

The detective moistened dry lips. 'A man called Pedder, I believe...'

'What does he do?'

'He's an antique dealer, I think...'

The gunman twisted his scarlet lips into a sarcastic smile. 'Oh, yeah?' He scowled at Dene. 'You talk kinda funny. You're English, ain't yer?'

'Yes,' said Dene rather tensely.

'Well, well, well,' ejaculated the other, 'if that ain't the strangest coincidence. Where's your buddy, fella?'

'I don't know whom you mean,' the detective answered huskily.

'Quit stallin'!' the gunman barked. 'You know the guy I want. Where is he? He's been here: that's his stuff on the table, ain't it? Are you goin' to come clean or ain't yer?'

'I tell you again,' said Dene, 'I don't know whom you're talking about...'

'Is zat so?' Cloan drawled. Then, with a heavy frown, 'I'm askin' you, where's Larry?'



Larry? The name seemed to set some wire in the detective's memory vibrating. Larry? The name had a reminiscent ring. He had heard it quite recently. But where?

'Larry?' he repeated vaguely.

'You heard me,' rasped Cloan:—he was looking at Dene intently. 'Why have you got your cap on? You live here?'

'No,' said Dene.

'Then what?'

With the renewal of hope his self-possession was coming back. 'Well,' he observed quietly, returning the gunman's glance, 'I'm kind of interested in this man myself. Larry, did you say his name was? It was Valda, the last time I saw him...'

Cloan's face was deeply suspicious. 'Was it *you* left that window open below?'

The Scotland Yard man nodded. 'The house was empty. So I thought I'd have a look round. Nice chap, Larry, but he doesn't treat his friends right...'

The stony eyes never left his face. 'Where's the guy that owns this dump?'

'Pedder? He went out to his yacht about a quarter of an hour ago...'

'Got a yacht, has he? What's it called?'

Dene was becoming flustered under that basilisk regard. He was playing for time: if he could deflect this savage's attention to the sea...

'The Astarte, I think. It's moored offshore: looks like a converted rum-runner...'

'Was anyone with him?'

'Yes. A tall chap...'

The hard eye flamed. There was a moment's silence. Then Cloan spoke again. 'Turn about,' he told Dene, 'and face the wall!'

Dene wavered. A shot in the back of the head: that was the way they did it...

'This rod's loaded,' the gunman snarled warningly, 'and the trigger's kinda easy. If my finger happened to slip, it'd be jes' too bad...'

The detective swung round. He found himself facing the curtained window. In two bounds, noiseless and powerful as a tiger's pounce, the killer was on him. With a jolt that jarred his spine Dene felt the barrel of the automatic driven into the small of his back and a hand dived unerringly into the inside pocket where his gun reposed. At the same moment, with a

sinking sensation, he remembered that Rontz's letter to the Yard was in the selfsame pocket.

With Rontz dead, he had meant to burn it and for this purpose had removed it from the wallet. But a vague feeling that he might want it as supporting evidence if he had to go to the New York police had stayed his hand. In the upshot he had forgotten to return it to the wallet which was locked up in his suitcase and it had remained in his pocket.

Cloan pulled the automatic out and flung it on the bed. With it he brought the letter. 'Stay as you are,' the rasping voice commanded. Dene heard the rustle of the letter in the other's hands...

This man was an outlaw, a fugitive from the electric chair, while he, Dene, was of the police, gangdom's natural enemy. Jennie had said that Ed was fond of his brother; but would this ruthless slayer put his own safety in the hands of authority in order that Gerry might live? That was the question, and, oh, God, how long it seemed to wait for the answer!

The jeering, nasal voice spoke behind. 'Turn about, you rat!' Dene obeyed, hands on high—his arms ached intolerably. The killer was glowering at him, his rosy, bow-shaped mouth awry in a cruel smile. 'So Hermie squealed, eh?' he mocked. 'Listen, mug, Hermie's through with two-timing his pals, see? And you're going after him!' He made a forward gesture with the hand that held the gun. 'Step outside, Mister Scotland Yard, an' make it snappy. Me an' you's going to take a nice little walk in the woods!'

'If you kill me,' said Dene evenly, 'you realize that your brother will die?'

The pale eyes flamed spitefully. 'Well, well, well,' the gunman answered softly, 'so you know me, eh? Workin' in with Mulrooney's bright boys, is that it?' He chuckled unpleasantly. 'You bulls sure hand me a good laugh. Like to have it comin' an' goin', don't yer? You'd hang Gerry an' fry me an' everythin's swell!' His voice rose to a roar. 'Get out o' that door before I kick the lights out of ya!'

'You've got to listen to me,' the detective told him. 'I know your brother didn't pull that job over in England. But if I can't prove that he didn't, they'll hang him just as sure as God made little apples. You find me this Larry or whatever his name is and we'll save your brother...'

'I'll find Larry all right, all right,' the killer promised dourly, 'but I'll find him alone. An' when I find him, he'll come clean, you bet. An' I'll tell you somethin' else, big boy—there won't be any goddam limeys from Scotland Yard snoopin' around, either, when me an' Larry chews the rag

together. You won't be the first cop I've knocked off. Gwan, git over to that door!'

His gesture was so peremptory that Dene moved forward. As Cloan circled away from him and backed towards the window, keeping him covered, the detective saw the killer shift his grip on the gun, saw his forefinger curl about the trigger, saw murder, stark and bestial, blaze up in that merciless eye. And he realized that Cloan meant to risk the sound of the shot: he was going to shoot him, then and there, in the room.

'Have it your own way,' the Englishman said, trying to steady his voice. 'But if you pull that trigger, two days from now Gerry hangs!' Out of the corner of his eye he saw his pistol, side by side with Rontz's letter, lying on the bed. But it was out of practical reach: that squat ugly barrel in the gunman's hand followed his slightest movement.

He had turned to confront the killer: if this were death, it were better to look it in the face. Vaguely, he noted that Cloan appeared to be visibly disconcerted. 'That's a goddam lie,' he cried shrilly. 'The execution's postponed—it said so in the paper...'

'It's fixed for Tuesday,' Dene answered sternly, his eye on Cloan's pallid countenance, 'this coming Tuesday. They cabled me from the Yard. If you're going to save me the trouble of clearing your brother, you've no time to lose. You can take it from me there'll be no further postponement, so you'd better be sure of yourself. It'd be a pity if there were any mistake about Gerry—he's a...—he fumbled for some colloquial phrase that this moron would understand—'he's a swell kid!'

Cloan was staring at him fixedly. The savagery had melted out of his eyes: he looked like a sullen boy. It seemed to Dene that a change of mood was going forward behind that narrow brow, that trivial, self-indulgent face. He was quick to exploit his advantage.

'Tuesday at nine is the hour,' he said with deliberate smoothness. 'That's four o'clock in the morning, New York time. You'll be in bed and asleep, Cloan, but Gerry will be up and dressed, all but his coat and vest, that is, and he won't need a collar, either. Shortly before the hour he'll have a caller, a quiet, very pleasant fellow, with a couple of straps across his arm. He was pointed out to me once, quite a nice-looking chap—you'd never think he was the hangman...' He broke off to steal a glance at Cloan. He stood there immobile, scowling at the detective, his mouth pursed up.

'When the hangman's finished strapping him,' Dene continued with the same nonchalant air, 'the Prison Governor—what you call the Warden, I think—and the Sheriff will arrive to take Gerry to the gallows. It isn't far to

walk, but they have to carry them, sometimes; Gerry will be all right, though—he's plucky. Oh, and I mustn't forget the chaplain in his stole and surplice reciting the Burial Service in a shaky voice...'

'Pipe down, damn ya!' said the killer hoarsely.

But Dene affected not to overhear the interruption. 'I was at a hanging in England once,' he pursued serenely, 'and the chaplain was sick after it was all over...'

'Cut it out, I tell ya!' the gunman vociferated fiercely.

His face glistened in the light, and Dene was suddenly aware that the perspiration was gathered in beads on that low forehead. Cloan was contemplating him sombrely as though pondering over the situation when, suddenly, the roaring stutter of a motor-engine split the brooding stillness all about. The sound was unmistakable: it was the noise of a power-boat engine, somewhere out in the bay, warming up.

On the instant Dene grasped the significance of the commotion. 'It's the Astarte—Pedder—they're off!' he gasped.

Gun in hand, Cloan whirled about to the window. Oblivious of his prisoner, he flung the curtain aside, threw the window up. The thunderous clamour of the Astarte's motor filled the room.

With an inarticulate exclamation and without a second's hesitation, the gunman vaulted over the window-sill and disappeared. The leap, so swiftly done and so reckless, staggered the Englishman: moreover, his relief was so intense that, for a moment, he felt banned to the spot where he stood. But rapidly he threw off his inertia and, snatching up his pistol, dashed to the window.

Cloan, however, was already out of range. The window set at an angle, overlooked the beach, white and mysterious with intensely black shadows under a moon that rode low over the sea. Immediately below, the tamarisk hedge bordering the little lane was swaying gently.

The killer's feet already pattered on the planking of the little pier. Gun in hand, he was darting along. From where he stood looking out, Dene perceived that there was no boat tethered at the end of the landing-stage. The reverberant explosions to seaward had abruptly died: to them had succeeded a rhythmic throbbing on a rising note. A hull, long and high of bow, white and ghostly under the moon, was moving on the breast of the wine-dark waters. A port-light gleamed like a drop of blood—the Astarte was putting to sea.

Rapidly the detective closed the window and drew the curtain across. Then, gathering up Rontz's letter from the bed, he turned out the light and,

running lightly downstairs, let himself out by the front door. But, although he sprinted at full speed down the lane, he arrived too late. By the time he reached the beach, Cloan had disappeared. The landing-stage was deserted, the shore silent and abandoned.

The young man knew—as he realized that Cloan, too, must reckon—that no craft to be made quickly available at that hour of the night could catch up with the speedy Astarte. Nevertheless, in the vague expectation that Cloan would try and commandeer one or other of the power-boats at the Yacht Club dock, Dene started running across the sand towards the club, pistol in hand. But there was no trace of the killer: the night seemed to have swallowed him up. Clubhouse and the shore before it were as Dene had left them an hour previous, quiet and solitary.

Well, that problem had solved itself, he reflected philosophically, as he sought out his friendly French window. He was suddenly aware that he was at the end of his strength. He was drenched through with perspiration: his shirt was sticking to his back: it was the physical reaction of the ordeal from which he had just emerged. He was almost too tired to think; but a name stuck in his mind as he dragged himself wearily to his room.

Larry! At last he had a line on the mystery man. Cloan knew him by sight, but Cloan—the detective swore to himself softly as he flung off his clothes—was out of the picture, for the present, at any rate. Larry had been on the boat: was it the sight of him that had sent Nancy Ayleswood off posthaste in search of Rontz? If that were so, Nancy, too, must know this man. Then all hope was not lost...

Larry ... the Megantic! Somehow the one name suggested the other. But what their association in his mind he felt too utterly exhausted to enquire. Tomorrow, he promised himself as he tumbled into bed.

## CHAPTER XXIV

WORN out as he was, he fell asleep at once. But his rest was troubled by a strange and terrifying dream. He fancied he was back in the library at Oldholme Priory, that dreadful exemplar of the Byronic age, with its sham Gothic groining and ugly stained glass, its musty, calfbound tomes, row upon row, its frigid, lifeless busts. There was the safe, open as the thief had left it, with its litter of empty jewel-cases and tissue paper, and there at its foot the dead butler spread-eagled on his face. This Hassock was an old man and his bald pate shone dully white like wax, his fringe of snowy hair all dabbled with blood from the dark pool that had welled out beneath him.

Manderton was in the dream, Manderton with his heavy, masklike countenance and spry air, mooning about the room in his invariable fashion, and that mild-mannered police Superintendent from the local town. Suddenly Dene noticed that the pool of blood was spreading: its edges were creeping forward like the tide on the beach; and he drew Manderton's attention to it. But Manderton gave him a queer look and said very significantly, 'Suppose you tell that to the New York police, young Dene!' and went on with his aimless prowling.

But the mirky patch under the dead man continued to ooze in an ever-widening circle on the parquet. Now the fringe of the rug was crimson with it and still it grew and grew. In a paroxysm of fear, Dene now tugged at Manderton's sleeve. But the Inspector only cackled with laughter and shook him off. In despair Dene turned to the Superintendent. 'This is horrible!' he cried. 'We've got to do something about it!' But the Superintendent did not answer: he only stared fixedly at him and, as Dene looked, he saw the ruddy features, the flaxen moustache, melt and resolve themselves into the ashen, pitiless face of Ed Cloan. He recoiled and found that the blood on the floor was rising in an opaque cloud and draping itself like a veil about a tall figure that suddenly stood there.

With the instinct of one in a dream, he knew that this was the murderer. With foreboding clutching at his heart, he leaned forward to catch a glimpse of the face. But the cloud had wrapped the figure all about: like a scarlet veil it enveloped the man, hanging from head to knee. It glowed redly, like a hand held up against the sun: the whole room was bathed in its strange, lurid radiance. Then a livid, waxen hand was thrust out, parting the veil, and Dene divined that the murderer was about to disclose his features. Horror overcame him and he shrieked aloud...

With his own scream ringing in his ears, he awoke. His bedroom was flooded with a warm, red light. It was the glow of the sunrise. Outside the bird chorus ran riot in tree and bush. It was a perfect June morning and he lay still for a while to exult in it, rejoicing that the night and its terrors were past, thankful to be rid of his dream. But even as he basked in the glory of the flaming heaven he viewed from his bed, he was dully sensible of a name that went clattering through the corridors of his mind like footsteps on the flags of a great cathedral.

Larry! His waking senses had grasped it now. Where had he heard that name before? Dimly it seemed to him that a girl was associated with it. His hand groped on the bedside table for a cigarette. Lighting it, he propped himself up on his elbow among his pillows and, cigarette in mouth, sought to concentrate.

Presently, a picture, blurred at first, came slowly into focus, a pretty girl in a white fur jacket standing, rather flustered, at the smoke-room door of the Megantic and with a charming American intonation calling out a name...

Reardon! All recollection of his elegant fellow-passenger had slipped his memory. The cute little blonde with the backgammon board who had fetched Reardon away from the smoke-room circle had called him 'Larry.' So that was it! Dene heaved a sigh of relief: he hated his memory getting the better of him.

His thoughts switched to Ed Cloan. Bad luck, the killer getting away like that: now, the Scotland Yard man mused, if only in self-preservation, he supposed he would have to report Cloan's reappearance to the New York police. Ed knew 'Larry'; that was established. Was 'Larry' Valda? The gunman had not denied it. Unquestionably this 'Larry' was the real author of the Priory murder, this Larry who had masqueraded as Dr. Gastein with the Chinese collection. And to think that he, Dene, who flattered himself on being the best and brightest of Chief Inspector Manderton's young men, had spent the evening without knowing it in the company of the criminal he had come three thousand miles to detect! It was the old, old story—in crime you were always apt to miss the obvious thing right under your nose: Poe wrote 'The Purloined Letter' in illustration. Dene sighed: he had much to learn yet. At the Rosemount dinner-party he had been so taken up with watching Pedder that he had hardly given Pedder's companion a glance.

Lazily, between sleeping and waking, he cast his mind back to Gastein. He could see him very clearly in the big drawing-room, fondling Mrs. Brenzler's jade in his curiously small artistic hands. Well, we all made mistakes. Languidly he closed his eyes against the growing glare from the window, letting his thoughts range at their free will. Jade... the mottled

greenness of the most valuable sort and how much less attractive it was than the vivid emerald kind... a comic vignette of Mrs. Brenzler as a Watteau shepherdess with a recalcitrant lamb... the luster of Nancy's eyes... what Manderton would make of the Rosemount household... Manderton... criminology... Sir Alfred on the boat and his detective aspirations...

Dene sat up abruptly. Another picture was vivid in his memory. Once again the Megantic's smoke-room was the setting. As in a close-up on the screen he found himself contemplating a pair of hands, oddly small and beautifully shaped, with slender, sensitive fingers, weaving to and fro above a patience game...

Reardon! It couldn't be possible. Yet why not? His name was Larry and he was an Englishman—Ed Cloan had implied as much. And, wait, like Pedder, Reardon was in the antique business: *there* was one link between the two men! Suddenly Dene remembered the negro chauffeur he had seen helping Reardon with his luggage on the dock. Pedder had a coloured chauffeur. Probably it was Pedder's man who had met Reardon at the boat! After all, Reardon was in America on business—at least, so he had said: what more natural than that Pedder, who was in the same line, should offer him hospitality? That would explain Reardon's presence in the bungalow and aboard the Astarte.

Reardon! He was suave, irresistible to women, always impeccably turned-out, the very man to play his part as to the manner born in the fashionable world of Cannes and Biarritz and Aix. And he had the hands, the Danny McClintock hands...

Dene took a flying leap out of bed. But a sudden thought arrested him. Reardon must be the man Nancy had seen coming off the Megantic, at sight of whom she had fled in search of Rontz. Odd how the trail kept on coming back to her! She had met him at Biarritz, as like as not. What was the mystery between these two? Once more, despite himself, Dene felt suspicion stir within him.

Cigarette in mouth, in bare feet and pyjamas, he lounged out on the balcony. For a long time he remained there, gazing seaward to where, aloof from other craft, a small white buoy bobbing in the swell marked the spot where the Astarte had lain.

The morning was radiant, the scene smiling and peaceful. But the detective's air was gloomy. Reardon, he ruminated, had, of course, recognized him at Mrs. Brenzler's dinner-party as his fellow-passenger. From the incident of the wireless, Reardon and Pedder must have known that Rontz was in communication with someone on board the Megantic. Had



they penetrated the secret of his mission? Dene recalling Pedder's careful probing, asked himself anxiously. And was this flight? It looked like it.

Morosely the Scotland Yard man's eye rested on the glittering sea. He glanced at his watch and mentally added five hours. It was ten o'clock of a Sunday morning in England now. Church bells were ringing in the streets of Maidstone vainly trying to out-tone the din and stir of early motorists from London streaming through the town on the way to the sea. It was Sunday morning in the jail, too, with the prisoners tramp-tramping along the galleries to chapel, and in the condemned cell one who, at the sound of those thunderous feet and the tinkle of the chapel bell, must be remembering that his last Sabbath had dawned. Dene's face contracted as though with a spasm of sudden pain and with a hunted air he returned to the room and began hastily to dress.

It was past six by the time, after a walk of two miles or so along the road to Oyster Bay, he came to the filling-station. At the door a policeman, straddling a motor-cycle with side-car attachment, was talking to a gesticulating individual in trousers and shirt, whose rumpled hair suggested that he had recently got out of bed. Dene slackened his pace at the sight of the officer, but the policeman, after a casual glance at him, went on with his conversation.

The talk was of a stolen car. The garage proprietor was lamenting his hard fate. He possessed two cars for hiring purposes and, naturally, the thief had helped himself to the better. It *would* happen on a Sunday, when he was sure of a hire, the garagist declared bitterly. He escorted the policeman across to the lock-up and showed him where the lock of the sliding-door had been expertly removed. The Scotland Yard man, secretly noting the heads of the screws neatly ripped off, recognized the professional touch and thought of Ed Cloan.

The garagist had heard no noise in the night. But then he slept over the garage proper, at the back, and Saturday being a heavy day, he had gone to bed tired. Round midnight, it was, he informed the policeman in answer to a question; at five or thereabouts he had come down to start on an urgent repair and found the lock-up door open and the car gone. It must, therefore, have been taken out between midnight and five. Observing that it was 'sure a tough break' and that he would report the matter, the policeman kicked his engine into action and roared away.

Dene explained that he wanted a car to drive himself. On this, the proprietor's face brightened and he produced a serviceable flivver. The

detective enquired as to the road to New York and promised, on his way up, to keep an eye open for any sign of the stolen car—this was to obtain the license number which he wrote down in his notebook. The fact that he had no driving license troubled him not at all as he rolled along in the sunshine: his thoughts were otherwise engaged. He was wondering, among other things, what Ed Cloan's departure signified and where he had gone. To New York, he surmised: to tip off Rocco that they had all been on a false trail, that the man they had followed from the Megantic was not 'Larry,' but a Scotland Yard emissary and that 'Larry' was with Pedder, somewhere at sea. Rocco, Dene judged, must have been able to give Ed Cloan a rough description of this Englishman and he wondered that Cloan, who had seen 'Larry' in the flesh, should not have immediately recognized the confusion of identities. But then he recalled the scene in the bungalow bedroom and the gunman's 'That's his stuff, isn't it?' as he perceived the make-up articles on the dressing-table. Ed had assumed, of course, that 'Larry' was disguised—it was only when he met Dene face to face under the light that he could have perceived the total dissimilarity, which no disguise could conceal, between Dene and Reardon.

At that early hour the road was clear. But Dene was not sure of the route and had to stop several times to enquire, with the result that it was eight-thirty before he found himself in Bill's bedroom. His friend was in bed, dividing his attention between a cup of tea, a cigarette, and the Sunday newspapers—there seemed to be quires of them—spread out all over the quilt.

Bill evinced no surprise at this early intrusion. 'So you came back to Poppa, after all?' he remarked languidly. 'Let us mark the day with a white stone, oh, my friend—the dawn of intelligence at Scotland Yard! Breakfast?'

'Presently...'

'There's a cable. It's only just come...' He fished out an envelope from among the papers and flicked it across the eiderdown to Dene who was perched at the end of the bed.

It was from Manderton. 'Replying my enquiry,' Dene read, 'New York advises nothing discovered connecting deceased Priory. If no progress better return.' The Inspector wasted no money superfluously on cable tolls. The deceased, of course, was Rontz: Priory, the Oldholme Priory robbery, Dene wagged his head sagely: Uncle George did not let the grass grow under his feet. There was no reply to his appeal for time, he noted: that was Manderton's form of rebuff. The execution, then, still stood for Tuesday.

He sighed and showed Bill the cable. 'I've no intention of going back yet,' he declared indignantly. 'I'm on leave.'

'At least you've had the sense to return to New York where one can keep an eye on you,' his friend observed.

'Don't fool yourself. I'm going back to Freshwater just as soon as ever I can. Where's Jennie?'

Bill moved his head an inch to one side. 'In the next room...'

'Here?'

The American's nod was resigned. 'She hadn't fixed on any place to go to, so I said she'd better stay...'

'That was damned decent of you, Bill...'

The other wriggled his shoulders. 'Sheer indolence, old boy, nothing but. She looked as though she could do with a drink; and by the time she'd had it, this dump in the Bronx she wanted to go to seemed like the end of the world to me. At three in the morning, I ask you...' He yawned. 'I hope she doesn't think I've fallen madly in love with her or anything...'

Dene laughed, 'You might do worse: she's a sweet kid. Would you mind if she stayed on here for a day or two?'

His friend goggled at him. 'I most certainly do. What do you think this is, a love nest or something?'

'Ed Cloan, Gerry's brother, is on the rampage,' said Trevor. 'He's Jennie's husband, Bill...'

His friend looked at him sharply. 'Tell me about this...'

Then Trevor poured out the whole story, beginning with the encounter with Ed Cloan in the lane and going on to the happenings at the bungalow, the Astarte's departure and Ed's disappearance in the stolen car, and winding up with his (Dene's) growing suspicion of Reardon, his fellow-passenger.

'Ten to one,' the detective concluded, 'Ed's back in New York and, since he knows that Jennie had been seen around with me, it's likely to go hard with her if he finds her again. It won't be for more than a day or so, old boy, for I hope very shortly to have the gentleman behind the bars...'

'Jennie can stay as long as she likes, of course,' said Bill in his bored way; 'that is, provided I'm not expected to entertain her. Somehow, I don't feel that my conversational resources are up to—er—Broadway standards. However, that's a mere detail. How do you propose to get your hooks on the engaging Mr. Cloan, since, on your own showing, he's vanished into thin air?'

‘That’s what brought me back to New York,’ said Trevor. ‘I didn’t want to talk about it on the telephone. Obviously, situated as I am, I’ve very little chance of rounding up Ed Cloan on my own. Yet he’s got to be pulled in, if only for the simple reason that Reardon dead is no good to me: I want him alive. Do you follow?’

‘Sure...’

‘So I’ve decided to put the police on to Cloan. After all, if they haven’t got his picture, they’ve got his description: it shouldn’t be too hard to pick him up, especially if he’s in New York. I suggest you tell your friend, the Assistant Commissioner, that an individual answering to Ed Cloan’s description was seen prowling round Rosemount last night and is believed to have stolen a car and made his way to New York. Here’s the license number...’ He consulted his notebook, jotted the number down on a clean sheet, ripped it off and passed it across.

‘Okay. But why not go with me to Brent and tell him yourself?’

‘Because I’m not ready to come into the picture yet...’

‘Have it your own way. The only thing,’ Bill remarked with a doubtful air, ‘is that I don’t exactly see how I’m supposed to know all this...’

Trevor gave him a withering look. ‘Dash it all,’ he exclaimed, ‘you were down at Rosemount, too, weren’t you? It could have been you, just as well as I, who was with Nancy when Ed appeared in the lane. Use your imagination, man; it oughtn’t to come too hard—you’re an explorer, aren’t you?’

Bill laughed. ‘Okay,’ he said resignedly. ‘But what about Pedder and the boy friend? Do I sick the police on to them, too?’

The Scotland Yard man shook his head emphatically. ‘I don’t see how we can do that: I mean we’ve got no evidence against them, have we? But we must try and locate the Astarte. When can you see your friend?’

‘He said he’d be at the office at nine...’

Trevor frowned. ‘You’ll have to ring me, Bill. I must get back to Freshwater...’

‘What’s the hurry now that the Astarte’s gone?’

The detective was silent for a moment. ‘Bill, old boy,’ he said presently, ‘Reardon—if it is Reardon—took a big risk when he went to that dinner-party in disguise. He didn’t take that risk for nothing. Sooner or later he’ll be back...’ He glanced at his wrist. ‘I’d like to ring up Rosemount, do you mind?—and then I want a word with Jennie before I start back again...’

His friend pointed to the telephone at the bedside. ‘Help yourself. In the mean time’—he swung his long legs out of bed—‘I’d better be getting up...’ He pulled on a wrapper and rang a bell. ‘Tell that rascal of mine to fix us some breakfast. And you’d better ask him to see if Jennie’s awake yet. Stop, I haven’t broken Kami to her yet: he’ll probably frighten the life out of her. She has the room you had—knock on her door yourself!’ He vanished into the bathroom.

A slightly pompous English accent was not ‘shore’ whether Miss Ayleswood was awake. Nevertheless, almost immediately, Nancy herself came on the line.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she remarked, recognizing Trevor’s voice. ‘Do you always ring people in the middle of the night?’

‘I just wanted to ask you whether everything was all right...’

‘I think so, except for the shattering circumstance that Ernest thinks he caught cold yesterday. I might explain,’ she added humorously, ‘that this isn’t firsthand information—it comes from Staples via Célestine, Aunt Clara’s maid...’

He found it impossible to match her flippant tone to his.

‘When am I going to see you?’ he asked soberly.

‘I’m going out early to play golf,’ she answered rather quickly. ‘I shall probably lunch at the club. Why not come over for tea about five?’

‘All right. No developments since last night, then?’

‘All quiet along the Potomac. See you later!’

With a thoughtful air the detective replaced the receiver. Kami was there with his gentle, wrinkled smile. ‘You like breakfast—I getting um!’ he announced and vanished in his silent way. Dene went quickly out into the passage and softly tapped on the door of the bedroom he had occupied.

There was no reply. He knocked again and when still there was no answer, cautiously opened the door and glanced into the room.

It was empty. The bed had been slept in. Dene turned and hurried to the bathroom. Bill was there, lathering his face.

‘Jennie...’ said Trevor and broke off short. There was a note of alarm in his voice that led the other to turn sharply and look at him.

‘She’s gone!’

‘Gone?’

‘I can guess where,’ the detective rejoined rather bitterly. ‘She’s gone to her old rooms to fetch a photo she told me about, a picture of Ed Cloan and this man Larry taken together at Aix. I asked her to let me have it. She went

off early, of course, so as to dodge Ed Cloan in case he returned to New York. And now he's back in town and God knows...' He checked himself. 'Could we find out at what time she left the house?' he asked, making an effort to be calm.

'Sure,' said Bill. With his face all soapy, he went into the sitting-room and Dene heard his voice on the telephone. Presently, he was back. 'She went out at about a quarter after six, the janitor says,' he announced.

The detective consulted his watch. 'She's been gone nearly three hours: she ought to have been back long before this—if she meant to come back, that is...' He pulled out his notebook. 'She gave me the address.' He found the page. 'I have a car below. I'm going to run over there and see that she's all right. If anything has happened to her, I should feel it was all my fault. If she's still there, I'll bring her right back—that's to say, if it's all the same to you...'

'Go ahead,' said Bill. 'If you'll wait about five minutes, I'll come with you.'

'I think I'd better get along,' Trevor answered. He tried to persuade himself that his fears were exaggerated; but his mind was so uneasy, as he drove across town, that it required an effort on his part to concentrate on the traffic lights.

'Over on Eighth Avenue' Jennie had said she lived. But he had crossed this avenue before the house numbers told him he was approaching the block he was looking for. He slowed down, glancing up at the numbers on the dingy brown mansions. It was a dreary section of the street, given over to boarding-houses, furnished rooms, and small trades. A siren screamed sibilantly out of the Sunday morning peace and a white car—he recognized the ambulance at a glance—shot past him, coming from behind, and pulled up at a house near the end of the block where a knot of loafers was gathered on the pavement.

The presentiment of evil was so strong upon him that he had a sensation of physical nausea. He drew in to the curb and, with fingers blindly groping, opened the car door and stepped out. The house where the ambulance had stopped was a dozen paces away. Two policemen were driving a path through the whispering, staring idlers for the pair of white-clad ambulance men, one with a stretcher over his shoulder, who ran swiftly up the steps and vanished inside the house.

Dene asked a lad who was bobbing up and down on the fringes of the crowd what had happened. The boy turned a frightened Jewish face with staring, excited eyes to his. 'Seems like a goil wuz strengled,' he announced

impressively. There was a breathless wait and then the crowd was swept back in a scrimmage as the two policemen forced a passage for the stretcher that had appeared at the top of the steps.

With shoulder and elbow the Englishman pushed his way to the open back of the ambulance. The stretcher was just being lifted in. He saw a large, clean pocket-handkerchief that someone had mercifully spread over the face. But a wisp of hair, brightly golden, strayed from beneath it and below Dene caught a glimpse of a black-and-white frock.

One of the policemen was just beside him. The Scotland Yard man touched his sleeve. 'Is she dead?' he asked.

The policeman nodded without looking at him. 'I'll say she's dead,' he answered in a voice bitter with resentment. 'And we know the guy what done it!'

Dene turned away. Behind him and all about the crowd murmured, pointing and gaping. He strode through the people blindly, and went back to his car. The scream of the siren, as the long white ambulance went rushing down the street, was like the echo of the cry for vengeance that went up from his heart.

## CHAPTER XXV

IN his six years with the police he had supped his fill of horrors. Violent death in all its forms was a commonplace of his waking hours. But this tragedy left him dazed and broken.

She had danced for an instant through his life like a butterfly that hovers in a room: her parting kiss was warm on his lips. She had liked him because he was kind to her, perhaps because so few men, in her short stay on earth, had been kind to her except for value received; and because she liked him, she had thrown herself into his defence with all the warm eagerness of her nature. And it had brought her to... this!

That chance remark of his had sent her to her death. Obeying her heart alone, she had asked of him no questions, but only tried to help him; he, on the other hand, had not scrupled to exploit her trusting faith—his relentless absorption in his mission had cost her her life. Confronted with these two pictures, he compared his conduct with that of this waif of the New York underworld: the contrast left him with a feeling of self-abasement, of humiliation.

Jennie was dead. But life went on. The feet of the dispersing crowd were already rustling on the pavement. Slowly he made his way back to the car. The policeman's remark had made it clear to him that Ed Cloan had got away, no doubt with the photograph he had come to retrieve: so far as the Scotland Yard man was concerned, events since his parting with Jennie on the previous evening had robbed it of any essential usefulness. He had to face the facts; for all his vain regrets, his bitter self-reproaches, Jennie's death was but an incident in his mission. Time was treading hard on his heels: already, in Maidstone Jail, they would be getting the execution shed in readiness; and the man who could save Gerry was still at large.

Dene swore savagely to himself. He could not afford, he realized, to turn aside now, even to look on her dead face or, more urgently, to join in the hunt after the ferocious assassin who had crushed the life out of that pretty white throat. Reardon, not Ed Cloan, was his quarry: and he would have to put Jennie from his thoughts, except as an added spur to his determination. It seemed like retribution for his unheeding selfishness.

He broke the news to Bill, whom he found fully dressed, at breakfast. He had never seen his friend angry before. For a moment Bill said nothing, but the dark eyes seemed to flame and his face went very white. Then he dashed down his napkin. 'I'll get that yellow dog if it costs me the last cent I have,'



he ground out between his teeth. 'And, believe me, before I'm through with him, he'll be howling to go to the chair!' With that he sprang up from the table and went over to the window.

The Scotland Yard man had crossed to the telephone beside the couch and lifted the receiver. He asked for the trans-Atlantic service, and when the operator came through, explained that he wished Chief Inspector Manderton, of Scotland Yard, located and fetched to the telephone in London or wherever in Great Britain he happened to be.

As he replaced the instrument Bill, at the window, swung about. 'At least, you'll come with me to Headquarters now?' he said. 'I'm just off!'

The other shook his head, his face set. 'Time's getting so short,' he said in a strained voice, 'that I'm going to make a last appeal to Manderton to get the execution postponed: I also want to ask him if he has anything on record against Reardon. Then I'm going back to Freshwater...'

'But Cloan's in New York...'

'Cloan's not the man I'm after... Oh, Bill,' he continued passionately, 'believe me, I'm broken-hearted about Jennie. But there's nothing I can do to help her now...'

'We can get her murderer, at least,' his friend rejoined sombrely.

'You don't think I'm not every bit as determined as you are to exterminate this rat, do you? Don't you realize that I blame myself for her death?'

Bill's face softened and he came across to where Trevor stood. 'It's tough on you, I know,' he said, putting his arm about him. 'But she was asking for trouble: she threatened him with that photograph, didn't she?'

'I should never have put into her head this idea of going back to her old rooms,' Trevor rejoined miserably. 'We'll get Ed Cloan, Bill, never fear; but for the moment it's Reardon I'm thinking of. I can't afford to be sentimental: I'm a policeman—the law, if you like. Even if it weren't a question of saving an innocent man from the gallows, I'd put everything else aside and go after Reardon just the same. He has killed and he has got to face his judges and I'm going to get him. That's one thing they do teach us at the Yard—to get our man. Down there at Rosemount the stage is all set for a *coup*. There's some link between Nancy Ayleswood and this cracksman; and I have the absolute conviction that, guilty or innocent, she's the pivot of the whole business. I'm going to ask you to continue to handle the police end for me. You're quite at liberty to tell your friend Brent of my suspicions of Reardon: you can say, if you like, that I'm a private enquiry agent investigating those jewel robberies at Cannes and Biarritz for the insurance.

If Brent wants to see me, I'll call on him tomorrow, for by that time I shall have chucked my hand in, anyway, or nailed my man. But now, just as soon as I've had a word with Manderton, it's back to Freshwater for me...'

'Notwithstanding the fact that Pedder and the boy friend have ducked?'

Trevor's nod was grimly resolute. 'Notwithstanding that. I tell you again, the girl's the pivot. They'll be back...'

'And what about Nancy? Do I tell Brent your suspicions of her?'

The Scotland Yard man regarded him with troubled eyes. 'Supposing I were wrong about her, Bill...'

'You do think she's innocent, then?'

He sighed dejectedly. 'I don't know what to think. She seems such a splendid character, high-spirited and ... and plucky and all that: she rings so genuine. I can't think it possible that she should be in what's nothing more than a damnable conspiracy to plunder that kind-hearted, good-natured old woman. And yet, in this cursed job of mine, you never know...' He sighed again and doffed his spectacles. 'Leave her out of it, for the time being,' he went on. 'I'll give her till tonight to come across with the truth. After that...' He broke off to look at his watch. 'It's just on ten, Bill. Run along to Headquarters now and be back as soon as you can—I'd like to hear what Brent has to say about Pedder and everything before I leave for Freshwater. Give me a ring when you're through with Brent and, if I'm still here, I'll wait. Otherwise, you'll have to 'phone me at the Yacht Club. Damnation,' he cried, glancing at his watch again, 'I wonder how long London's going to be!'

Bill left him, pipe in mouth, measuring the floor in long, restless strides. The Japanese servant, trotting in to clear away, asked him if he had breakfasted and received a moody, impatient stare for his pains. Dene went on with his pacing. He was trying to make up his mind what to say to Manderton: the pending telephone conversation, he felt, would be crucial.

Uncle George was not the one to shirk responsibility: he was never afraid to answer 'Yes' or 'No' off his own bat. The question was how to induce him to convey to the Home Secretary the fact that the Yard's unofficial emissary in New York was in the act of gleaning information which was likely to throw an entirely fresh light upon the Priory murder. Where Inspector Manderton never flinched in his belief in his own opinion, a Minister, with public opinion to face, would be much more prone to waver. But how to bring Manderton to take the grave decision of reopening the case with the Home Office?

Nothing but facts would suffice his Chief, Dene knew. If he were to say that he was on the point of arresting the real murderer, that would do the trick; but dare he risk it? Something he had overheard Mike say to Pedder at the bungalow on the previous night reverted to his mind. ‘Whatever is done has got to be done quickly,’ were Mike’s words. It certainly looked as though they were going to strike at once. And yet...

It was desperately hard to decide how to tackle Manderton. In an agony of indecision, Trevor dropped into a chair and picked up a newspaper. It was the *New York Times*. It was folded back at the Social Page. Half-tones of *débutantes*: the report of a wedding; lists of people at garden-parties and polo games—absently his eye dropped down the page. Suddenly, he found himself gazing at a name. It was tucked away among the Social Notes at the foot of the page.

‘Captain Lawrence Reardon, of London,’ he read, ‘is at the Hotel Longford.’

At the same moment the telephone bell rang.

Inspector Manderton was at his home in that delectable London suburb, Herne Hill. His manner, placid and quite genial, suggested the soothing effects of the Sunday roast beef—Dene remembered that 10.30 A.M. New York time was 3.30 P.M. in London.

‘Hullo, young Dene,’ was his greeting, ‘the Yard’s not paying for this call, you know...’

‘I know,’ said his subordinate drily, ‘but it will...’

The inspector’s laugh came rumbling three thousand miles across the ether, ‘Oh, will it? That sounds promising. On to anything, are you?’

‘Chief,’ Dene asked tensely, ‘have you ever heard of a swell mobsman called Reardon, Larry or Lawrence Reardon?’

Uncle George’s card-index mind was celebrated at the Yard: he was reputed never to forget a name once heard. Trevor waited anxiously.

‘No,’ was the unhesitating reply. ‘What’s the description?’

‘Six foot, smartly dressed, handsome, Irish type, with dark eyes and small, very well-kept hands. Says he’s in the antique business. He’s a friend of a dealer here called Hilary Pedder. He’s in with Rontz and the crowd, and a friend of Ed Cloan’s: they were at Aix together last summer. He crossed with me in the Megantic. I suspect he’s identical with Valda—you know, the guy that pulled that Biarritz job...’

‘Valda, eh?’ said Manderton. ‘Well, I pass Reardon up. But I’ll have enquiries made about him at once and cable on. You’re going to tell me he

was on the Priory job, I suppose?' The miracle-worker Marconi reproduced the strong shade of sarcasm in his voice.

Dene's frayed nerves resented the jeering note. 'Yes, I am,' he retorted hotly.

'Any evidence?' the Inspector asked drily.

'I'm getting it...'

'When?'

The young man hesitated, then took his courage in both hands. 'Tonight,' he replied.

'Let me understand you correctly,' said Manderton sternly. 'You say that by tonight you'll have evidence implicating this chap Reardon in the Priory job and clearing Gerry Cloan. Is that what you mean?'

'Yes,' Dene answered rather faintly.

'This alters things,' Manderton went on. 'I'll see the Home Secretary at once...'

'And get the execution postponed?' The young man was shaking with excitement.

'I didn't say that. But I'll advise him that a postponement may be necessary at the last minute. You're sure of your facts, I suppose?'

'Yes,' Dene responded boldly: he could afford to be bold—he had burnt his boats.

'You'd better be,' said the other bluntly. 'When shall I be hearing from you?'

'Tonight or first thing tomorrow...'

Then the operator interposed to say that the three minutes were up and with a hasty good-bye the young man hung up.

Action now! Having committed himself, he wanted to put that rash promise out of his mind. He snatched up the telephone book and looked up the address of the Hotel Longford then ripped the paragraph from the paper and going to the desk wrote a line for Bill: '10.40 A.M.' he wrote. 'Am going off here at once. Will ring you.' He thrust clipping and note in an envelope which he addressed and left in a conspicuous position on the mantelpiece. Then he picked up his hat and hastened to the elevator.

The Hotel Longford was a few doors from Fifth Avenue. Trevor parked the flivver and went inside. It was small and elegant and, quite obviously, exclusive. There were fresh flowers in the lobby and a great deal of plate

glass and dull-finished silver-work about. At the reception desk the room clerk had the air of a benign family retainer and the head-waiter hovering at the entrance to the restaurant on the far side of the long and narrow vestibule was rotund and spruce and urbane. As, thus appraising his surroundings, the detective crossed the vestibule, his respect for Reardon's intelligence rose a point. He had a good eye for background, had Larry—no roaring, vulgar caravanserais of a thousand beds for him, but a quiet, respectable hotel with a tiptop *clientèle*.

There is a certain technique about hotel enquiries, as the Scotland Yard man well knew. No need to go to the desk and disclose one's hand by a direct enquiry. Modern hotels are full of eyes and ears. At the news-stand, the florist's, the cigar-stand, there are eyes that observe and ears that overhear as all day people come and go. And, if these fail, there is the barber's shop, sounding-board for all the gossip of the house.

The news-stand was in charge of a bustling, black-eyed wench who looked promising and Dene drifted towards her. Above all, he wanted to know whether Reardon had returned to the hotel, and, if not, where he had gone. To reach the news-stand the Scotland Yard man had to pass the open doors of the restaurant. At the sight of a handful of people at breakfast, he paused and let his glance run over the tables on the chance that Reardon might be of the number.

And in effect there Reardon was sitting at a table in the window, his elbows propped on the cloth, talking with great earnestness to a girl in a small white hat.

The girl was Nancy Ayleswood.

## CHAPTER XXVI

HER face was slanted to the door in quarter profile: the June sunshine pouring through the window at her side touched copper tones in the knot of hair that rested on her slender, shapely neck. The Scotland Yard man could not see her expression; but the tilt of her head, the way she clasped her hands, in the same attitude as her companion's, bespoke her interest in what Reardon was saying. The watcher had a sudden stab of jealousy. He had thought, as he looked from one to the other on the boat, what a well-matched couple they would make; and now his own words to her, in the garden last night, came back to him—she was the sort of girl to sweep a fellow off his feet, he had told her.

She had lied to him. To be installed at breakfast here in New York at that hour—it was not yet eleven o'clock—she must have left Freshwater not much after nine. No wonder she was awake when he had telephoned her: of course, she was up and dressed and on the verge of setting forth to keep her rendezvous with Reardon. She had tricked him. Golf, eh?

A gust of anger swept over him. The murdered girl still lay like a weight on his mind. He found himself contrasting poor little Jennie, disfigured and abandoned in some cold and sordid mortuary, with this delicate, disdainful creature hobnobbing with the associate of the slayer of this hapless child. Best of all, Dene told himself, he would have liked to burst in upon the pair of them, there and then, at the breakfast table.

But swiftly his anger passed, leaving him alert and watchful. Thus did the discipline of the Yard come to his aid. Rapidly he surveyed the scene. In a detective story, he reflected, there would have undoubtedly been a convenient palm adjacent to their table, posted behind which he would have overheard their conversation. But the restaurant at the Longford, with its tables disposed in three rows, was, like everything else in the hotel, small and intimate, with scarce enough cover for a mouse.

The chubby head-waiter, his pink face wreathed in a welcoming smile, was bustling towards the newcomer. Dene veered about, moving on to the news-stand. He had nothing stronger than conjecture against Reardon as yet, he reminded himself; infinite patience, infinite caution, would be necessary to catch him red-handed. Nancy Ayleswood was still his best, as she was his only, bet: to have surprised them together like that showed, at least, that one was on the right lines. But time—there was the enemy!

As he stood at the news-stand, pondering what course he should best pursue, a conversation he once had with a burglar came into his head. 'It ain't the gittin' in as is the difficulty,' the man had said; 'it's the gittin' aht. When we're on the job, the fust thing we thinks abaht, afore we lays 'ands on the stuff, is the way aht wiv it!'

The Scotland Yard man smiled to himself at the recollection. Ginger Dick's advice was sound. He intended to remain master of the situation: these two were not going to tumble upon him unawares. He must pick a spot from which he could conveniently keep an eye on them as long as they were at breakfast and at the same time plot out a line of retreat by which he might retire, yet not lose sight of them when, presently, they left the table.

He bought a paper from the black-eyed damsel and in leisurely fashion, like one with time on his hands, retraced his steps through the vestibule. Among the armchairs that stood about, he picked one that commanded a view of the restaurant and, in particular, of the table at which the girl and Reardon sat, then passed on towards the rotating door giving on the street.

A telephone cabin stood beside it. He went in and called up Bill. Kami answered: Mr. Thornley had not yet returned. Dene would have liked to leave word for Bill to ring him; but that would have meant disclosing his name at the desk and he was running no risks. As he switched off the light to leave the box, he noticed that the box was quite dark inside: standing within, with the light off, one would scarcely be visible from the outside. He made a mental note of the fact, then strolled to the chair he had selected and sat down.

How wrapped up in their conversation these two seemed to be! Over the top of his newspaper, spread out before his face, the observer had a good view of Reardon. Reardon seemed to be doing most of the talking. How suave and easy the fellow was, damn him, and how attractive with his dark, laughing eyes and sparkling white teeth: He was explaining something volubly: Dene could see his shapely hands moving in gesticulation, his face mobile, alert, turned to the girl's.

At last she looked at her watch: Reardon called the waiter over—they were making a move. Without haste, Dene stood up, collected his hat, glanced about—no one was paying the slightest attention to him. The waiter had brought Reardon his bill. With unhurried gait the Scotland Yard man made his way to the telephone box.

His observation post was well chosen. The glass-panelled door looked along the lobby in its entire length to the restaurant entrance at the end.

Dene wedged the hook of the instrument with a match and lifted the receiver. Receiver to his ear, as though he were telephoning, he waited.

It seemed an interminable time before the man and girl appeared. When at last they came into view, Dene had fain to admit to himself again that they were a striking pair, the girl, elegant and *soignée* in her biscuit-coloured sports suit and gay scarf, and her companion, immaculate in pale grey and a powder-blue shirt, a virile, loose-limbed figure with a lean, well-bred look that suggested a race-horse. Nancy went hurriedly in front, nervously swinging her leather driving-gloves, and it seemed to Dene that she held her head rather high. As she drew nearer and he could distinguish her face, he saw that it was flushed and that her eyes had the haunted look he had detected in them before.

At the street door, not six yards from where Dene stood motionless within the cabin, she paused for her companion to draw level with her. Dene realized that she was speaking and that the door of the telephone cabinet deadened the sound of her voice. Noiselessly his hand stole to the handle and with his foot he stemmed the door ajar. Now her voice—that faintly husky voice that always seemed to touch a string buried deep down in his heart—came to him.

‘It’s not necessary,’ she said—her manner was cool and formal. ‘I know where I left the car...’

‘I’ll come and see you off, at least,’ Reardon answered.

But, ‘I’d sooner you didn’t,’ she rejoined with an air of command.

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Just as you like...’ He took her hand and held it in his, while his eyes, half-veiled by the long lashes, smiled significantly into hers. ‘You always were an independent devil, Nancy. Until tonight, then...’

Until tonight? Dene, rigid in the darkness of the telephone box, thrilled.  
*Until tonight!*

With a deliberation that had something disdainful about it, she drew her hand away. ‘Until tonight,’ she echoed. Her voice was toneless and she kept her eyes averted. Then she swung quickly about and, pushing the door before her, disappeared.

Reardon, one hand pawing the back of his sleek head in a gesture of vague discomfiture, watched her go, then turned and strode off to the elevators. An elevator was about to go up and he stepped in.

The Scotland Yard man emerged from the cabinet. A slender leather gauntlet lay on the carpet at his feet. With a slightly sardonic smile he picked it up and thrust it in his pocket. But only just in time, for the next



moment he caught sight of a white hat on the other side of the door. Darting back into his shelter, he watched her swiftly traverse the lobby and enter the restaurant. When in an instant she reappeared, the jovial head-waiter led the way, head down and scrutinizing the carpet as he went. She left him at the door, shrugging and gesticulating, and went out into the street again.

When the coast was once more clear, the detective sallied forth from his hiding-place. His usefulness at the hotel was at an end, he decided, as he passed out into the sunlit street. It was obvious that the girl was hurrying back to Freshwater, where the exigent Ernest no doubt was expecting her back to lunch and where, sometime, somehow, Reardon intended to join her.

*‘Until tonight!’* The detective’s face was stern as he stood under the porch. There was no sign of the girl: no matter, he would see her soon enough. He found himself looking forward with a certain grim expectancy to their meeting at tea-time. Would she still maintain that she had spent the morning at the golf course?

While he thus revolved the situation in his mind, whom should he perceive but Bill hastening along the pavement towards him?

Trevor ran forward. ‘Nancy... I’ve just seen her,’ were his friend’s first words. ‘She came out of this hotel. I was on the corner in the car, blocked by the lights, when she went streaking across the road to where her machine was parked on the other side of the avenue...’

‘She didn’t see you, did she?’ the detective interrupted quickly.

‘No...’

‘She was breakfasting with Reardon,’ Dene went on to explain.

‘With Reardon, eh?’

‘Yes. And they’ve got another rendezvous for tonight...’

‘For tonight? Where?’

‘At Rosemount, I suspect; but I don’t know yet. I’m pretty sure, however, that she’s gone back to Freshwater and I’m going to follow her down there. She asked me over to the house for tea this afternoon...’

‘Where’s Reardon?’

‘Inside. He went up in the elevator—to his room, I suppose.’

‘What did she want with him?’

‘I don’t know yet. But don’t waste time asking questions. Look here, Bill, can I leave Reardon to you? Will you camp yourself down solidly here at the Longford and not let him out of your sight? And the moment you’ve any reason to believe that he’s left for Freshwater, call me at the Yacht Club

and let me know. You'll want to be damned spry about it, though—he's seen you, remember, when he was posing as Gastein...'

'That gives him the jump over me, then,' Thornley remarked composedly, 'for I don't know the fellow from the King of Siam. I'll do anything you say, old top, but how the hell am I to recognize him?'

'He's a typical Englishman, a sahib, if you know what I mean, tall and smart-looking and very well-turned-out—you can't mistake him. Bill, money talks in this town—you can swing the manager or something, can't you? The only thing is that Reardon must not guess that he's being followed. I'd stay and shadow him myself, only I can't spare the time—I *must* get down to Long Island again. The Lord knows what may not have happened since I came up from there this morning! Bill, you've got to help me!'

The other grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. 'You bet you I'm going to help you, boy. I'll freeze on to this bozo for you, even if it means taking a room next to his in the hotel. Trust your Uncle Dudley. And now, before you go, I want to talk to you about Pedder...'

The Scotland Yard man glanced rather apprehensively at the hotel entrance. 'Let's shift along as far as the corner,' he suggested. 'This 'bus of mine is parked there. I don't want Reardon coming out suddenly and bumping into us...'

'About Pedder,' said Bill when they had reached the somewhat battered flivver, 'I put it pretty straight to Brent about him—I can talk to him in confidence, you know—and—well, he simply laughed at me. He says Hilary Pedder's one of the best-known antique dealers and interior decorators in New York and a most reputable citizen...'

'Like hell he is,' the detective muttered. 'What about his pals, Rocco, a booze racketeer, and Mike who runs a rouli-bouli game?'

'Nothing about them. You've got to remember that New York isn't London, old Trevor. The so-called political clubs in this town are nothing but gambling-hells—and wide open at that. Pedder is in with the politicians—Tammany Hall and the whole gang; I guess he has to be in his job, what with fire regulations and building ordinances and all that stuff. So you simply can't hold against him the mere fact that he's friendly with birds like Rocco and Mike. That's what Brent says; and he's right. The Assistant District Attorney, who's handling the Rontz case, came in when we were talking and Brent sounded him about Pedder. It appears that Pedder's quite a friend of his—they were playing golf together last week...'

'Pedder's well protected, I know that,' the other put in sullenly. 'What about Reardon?'

‘Brent had him looked up in the Rogues’ Gallery—there’s nothing against him, not under that name, at any rate...’ Bill paused. ‘You know, I don’t want you to go wrong, Trevor. Isn’t it possible that Pedder is on the level and that this guy Reardon has put one over on him?’

‘What about those make-up things in the bedroom at the bungalow?’ The Scotland Yard man shook his head solemnly. ‘It won’t wash, Bill. You can’t get past the evidence of the Herr Doktor’s stuff strewn all over the shop in Pedder’s own house. Pedder’s in this and I’m going after him. But what you’ve told me only goes to show that I’ve still to play a lone hand...’ He paused. ‘Brent had heard about... about Jennie, I suppose?’

Bill nodded. ‘Yes. The news had just come through...’

‘What happened, Bill?’

The other cleared his throat. ‘He had no details except that she was found strangled and the whole place ransacked—oh, I guess Cloan recovered that photo all right. The Homicide Squad were at the house looking for finger-prints. Headquarters have no doubt that Ed Cloan did it—they knew they were married. Brent says the police don’t work up much excitement as a rule over what he calls these gang slayings. But they’re out to get Ed, as he killed a policeman. As for Rontz, I guess they think he’s better out of the way, anyhow...’

‘Have they been over his papers yet?’

‘I was going to tell you about that. Someone had gone through his desk at the office before they got there...’

The detective nodded sombrely. ‘I thought as much. What about his apartment?’

‘Nothing there either...’

‘Then they found no evidence that he was blackmailing anyone?’

Bill’s glance was charged with meaning. ‘The same idea occurred to me—I put the question to Brent point-blank...’ He shook his head. ‘Nothing. By the way, Rontz’s typist, a woman called Esther Goldblatt, or Goldmark, some such name, has disappeared. They’re looking for her...’

Trevor nodded forlornly and, getting into the car, started the engine. ‘None of these things matter now. By the way, did Brent say anything about me?’

‘About you?’

‘Surely you haven’t forgotten the fascinating red-haired stranger who arrived by the Megantic?’

The other laughed. ‘No. But Brent had nothing fresh. Anyway, as I told you, they’re not losing any sleep at Headquarters over Rontz. He was bound to be knocked off sooner or later, Brent says...’

With an unrevealing nod Dene stooped to the handbrake, eased it. ‘Well, I’ll be toddling. So long, Bill! And the moment our friend makes a move...’

‘Leave him to me!’ Bill’s face was very determined. ‘Take care of yourself, old boy. I’ll probably come down to Freshwater myself tonight if Reardon goes down there...’

‘You keep out of this, Bill, do you hear?’ said the detective quickly. ‘Once you’ve tipped me off about Reardon, you’re through!’

‘We won’t fight about it,’ his friend rejoined serenely. ‘About Nancy Ayleswood, Trevor...’

But the Scotland Yard man cut him short. ‘That’s an angle of the case I’ll have to think out for myself...’ The car moved away from the kerb.

Every motorist in New York—there were 600,000 private cars in New York alone, weren’t there?—seemed to the Englishman to be on the road that fine Sunday noonday. It was after half-past two before he ran his shabby roadster on to the gravelled space behind the Yacht Club, where an impressive array of expensive-looking automobiles was already parked. The clubhouse, so peaceful when he had left it, was full of bustle, with people in the hall and in the lounge and noisy luncheon-parties under the awnings on the terrace. Voices and the splutter of motor-boats floated up from the bay as Dene, standing at the open windows of the lounge, gazed out over the scintillating waters of the Sound.

There, riding at her old mooring, the *Astarte* lay.

## CHAPTER XXVII

SO PEDDER had returned and, back in New York, Reardon was making ready to rejoin him. Why, then, the Astarte's nocturnal departure? To bring Reardon to New York, presumably. With what object? The Scotland Yard man found no answer to the question.

He was suddenly conscious that he had eaten nothing all day. But the prospect of lunch on the crowded terrace did not appeal to him. The fashionable throng was out of tune with his mood. These care-free, well-groomed, ultra-sophisticated New-Yorkers, with their expensive cars, and yachts, and power-boats, depressed him. They seemed to stress the utter unreality of the dark events which the Scotland Yard man was convinced were in preparation out there beneath the Astarte's fluttering burgee. The contrast shook his belief in himself. Boys and girls in laughing, chattering troops straggled across the lawns on their way to landing-stage or tennis-courts. It was hard to credit that crime was lurking in the background of the brilliant, colourful scene. Dene remembered his rash undertaking to Manderton and felt low and dispirited. Then, as he fingered his chin, it dawned on him that, in the hurry of his departure that morning, he had omitted to shave. He decided upon a sandwich in his bedroom.

As he came out of the lounge, he encountered the steward with a note.

'A man left it this morning, Mr. Dene,' he said. 'He's coming for the answer at four o'clock.'

The detective's first thought was of the girl—she had written to put him off. But when he turned the letter over, he perceived with a thrill the little burgee stamped on the flap above the legend 'M. Y. Astarte.' Pedder!

Under the engraved heading 'M. Y. Astarte,' 'Dear Mr. Dene,' he read. 'Miss Ayleswood and her sister and Robotham, if he is well enough, are dining with me on board tonight. It would give me great pleasure if you would join us. I will call for you at the Yacht Club at 7.30. Black tie. Yours sincerely, Hilary Pedder. Sunday.'

Dene went back into the lounge and dropped into a chair at the desk. He would go, of course—the chance was not to be missed. Was this the explanation of Reardon's rendezvous with the girl? What more natural than that Captain Reardon should come down to dine, and perhaps sleep, on board his friend's boat? It sounded normal, too damned normal: Bill's information about Pedder came into the detective's mind. Supposing his

entire case against these two were a mare's nest and even the Gastein masquerade merely a joke played by Reardon on Nancy? The idea did not bear thinking about. Dene dashed off a note accepting the invitation, gave it to the steward, and asked for coffee and a sandwich to be served in his room. Then he went upstairs to shave and clean up generally after his dusty ride.

It was while he plied his razor before the mirror that he realized that he was in love with Nancy. The thought came to him suddenly that almost from the moment of meeting her he had been swayed, not by his reason, but his heart. Her desperate appeal to him to save her from the turbulent publicity of the yellow press had influenced him more than he knew. He liked to be honest with himself. With any other woman, as deeply implicated as she appeared to be in the ramifications of the death of Rontz, he would not have held his hand. He would have browbeaten her, threatened her with merciless exposure, not necessarily because he believed her guilty, but to arrive at the truth. Even now, when she had lied to him, he found himself still seeking excuses for her in his heart, hoping against hope that his forbearance had not been misplaced.

He believed in her still. That is to say, he would not credit her with being Reardon's conscious accomplice. But he dare not spare her further: time was pressing. And he could not risk questioning her about her relations with Reardon without the danger of putting the latter on his guard, if he were not on his guard already. Dene felt profoundly glad that he had consistently refrained from giving the girl any inkling as to his real mission; but he realized that by this Reardon must be quite interested in his late fellow-passenger and it was highly probable that he had plied Nancy with questions about him. There was no guarantee that she had not told Reardon the whole story of the finding of Rontz's body. Did Pedder's invitation signify that he and Reardon had been putting two and two together and wanted to look him over again?

The Scotland Yard man laughed to himself as he wiped the soap off his face. They were welcome to all the information they could extract from *him*! Besides, by dinner-time the news of poor little Jennie's murder would have made it clear that Ed Cloan was out and would give Reardon something to scratch his head about. As for Nancy, she had gone over to the enemy and must abide by the consequences. A man's life was at stake. Already, Dene told himself, it might well be that he had held his hand too long. Was he, like many a better man before him, to spend the rest of his life regretting that he had let a pretty face and winsome ways becloud his judgment?

No, by Gad! He had given her every chance. The first thing next morning, if the night brought no success, he was going to Brent with the

whole story. But even as he seized this resolution, he was conscious of a pang at the thought that, were she innocent or guilty, presently his leave would be up, he would return to England, and most likely never set eyes on her again.

Bah! No more sentimentality, he promised himself, as he savagely brushed his hair. He must not even indulge in the satisfaction of giving her a piece of his mind; above all things, she must not suspect that he knew about her meeting with Reardon. Patience and caution were still his watchwords...

He walked along the beach to Rosemount. The afternoon was hot. At Rosemount the terraces, heavy with the scent of the flowers and swimming in the haze, were deserted, but there was quite a gathering on the verandah. People sat about limply fanning themselves and drinking iced orangeade.

Tea was being served at a buffet in the big drawing-room. He saw Nancy taking a group round to see the pictures. She caught his eye and smiled with a flutter of the hand. He hunted up Mrs. Brenzler and discovered her dividing her attention between a plate of ice cream and an immensely stout woman in beige. She greeted Dene very warmly.

‘Well, well, well,’ she cried, ‘isn’t that nice of you? Make Henry give you a cup of tea or, if you’d prefer a highball, you’ll get one in the library. Laura,’ she went on, turning to her companion, ‘I want to present a great friend of mine, a very delightful and clever Englishman who knows all there is to know about Louis Quinze. Mrs. Winthrop Nash, Mr...’ She broke off. ‘Well, I declare, and your name’s on the tip of my tongue...’

‘Dene,’ the Scotland Yard man proffered resignedly.

‘Of course! Such an easy name to remember, too. Mrs. Nash,’ she added impressively, ‘will interest you very much. She knows so much about Browning...’ With which somewhat irrelevant remark, her face wreathed in smiles, Mrs. Brenzler waddled away.

It was quite obvious that Mrs. Winthrop Nash, whoever she might be, had recently taken an intensive course in the English poet. Dene, who liked Kipling and Masfield and found ‘Pippa Passes’ pretentious and turgid, but was too polite to say so, failed miserably under a close cross-examination as to the influence of Browning on modern English verse. So Mrs. Nash turned him over out of hand to a pretty girl just back from school in Paris, who presently introduced him to a young man who had been a Rhodes scholar at Oxford. As people came and went, he met others of the guests, polite and affable Americans who wanted to know how long he was staying, how he liked America and whether he was having a good time. More than once, as

he stood chatting desultorily, the thought flashed across his mind that, with every tick of the ornate timepiece on the gilded bracket on the wall, Tuesday morning was drawing inexorably nearer. It seemed grotesquely improper in such circumstances to be wasting time at a tea-party. But there was no help for it. Patience!

He made no attempt to approach Nancy. More than once, when she was momentarily alone, he surprised her glance, but he did not respond. He had to steel himself not to look at her—it was more than he could bear to contemplate her serene, flower-like face, those limpid eyes, and remain aloof.

The light was changing in the gardens; people were going home. Left to himself at last, Dene sauntered out on the verandah. A voice hailed him from the path. It was Ruth, with crimson cheeks, at the head of a procession consisting of an equally crimson damsel and two extremely moist youths in flannels.

‘Trevor,’ Ruth cried, running forward, ‘for the love of Mike, is there any liquor about? I’ve two hard-drinking Army men with me and they’re crazy for a small snifter...’ She pushed the two youths forward. ‘Paul and Andy. They’re at West Point. Their tennis is terrible.’

Grinning cheerfully, the two youths shook hands.

‘Your aunt told me there were highballs in the library,’ Dene explained.

‘Fine!’ Ruth exclaimed. ‘Be a good scout, Trevor, and keep Nancy busy while we sneak in and mix a short one. She’s kind of stuffy about my drinking cocktails. Come on, chaps!’ She beckoned to the others. ‘I’ll send her out to you,’ she told Dene.

‘Half a minute, Ruth...’ he began; but she and her companions had darted into the house.

He shrugged his shoulders. He had nothing to say to Nancy, didn’t want to meet her. As he turned to pick up his hat from the chair, where he had put it down, he was aware of her standing in the open window.

‘Hullo,’ she said.

‘Hullo, there...’ His effort to be cordial was noticeable.

She raised her eyebrows. ‘What are you sulking about?’

‘I’m not sulking, that I know of...’

‘It was I who asked you to tea, wasn’t it? And you haven’t been near me the whole afternoon...’

‘I didn’t have the chance,’ he told her rather lamely. ‘I kept on being introduced to people. I didn’t know it was to be a party...’



She broke into a laugh. ‘I didn’t, either. Aunt Clara invited a raft of people over without telling me and then got the dates mixed. She thought it was for next Sunday—can you beat it? She’s always doing things like that. Would you care to take me as far as the tennis-court? I left my scarf there...’

‘Of course...’ Side by side they walked along the path.

‘You’re dining on the Astarte tonight, aren’t you?’ she remarked. ‘Pedder said he was going to ask you...’

‘You’ve seen him today?’

‘No.’ Her air was frank. ‘He rang up and spoke to Ruthie when I was out. Did you say you’d go?’

‘Yes. You and your sister are invited, too, aren’t you?’

She nodded. ‘Ernest is going as well...’

‘I thought he had a chill...’

‘He’s supposed to have. He didn’t want us to go. But Ruthie accepted without consulting him. So he’s getting up...’

‘Is Mrs. Brenzler going, too?’

She laughed. ‘Wild horses wouldn’t drag Aunt Clara on a boat. She’s having dinner quietly in her room.’ She paused. ‘Ernest makes it a condition that we don’t stay late. He’s making a martyr of himself rather. He’s only going because he considers we need a chaperone...’ She sighed resignedly.

The young man made no comment. She cast him a sidelong glance. ‘Good gracious, you *are* in the dumps. Whatever’s the matter?’

‘Nothing. Too much sun, perhaps’—he laughed drily. ‘We don’t have too much of it where I come from. How did you enjoy your golf?’

‘All right.’ Her tone was deliberately casual. ‘I wanted to ask you—why were you so strange on the telephone this morning?’

‘Was I strange?’

‘Well, by your manner you seemed to expect we’d all been murdered in our beds or something...’

He laughed. ‘I was thinking of that tough we saw in the lane, I suppose. You were up bright and early, weren’t you?’

‘Yes. The course is apt to be crowded on Sundays, you know, unless one starts in good time...’

‘Quite. How many holes did you play?’

‘Eighteen, I think...’

‘With your sister, I suppose?’

She coloured slightly. 'No. As a matter of fact, I went round alone. There are times when I like to shake the family, you know...'

They had reached the tennis-court. The bright scarf she had worn that morning was hanging over the back of a chair. She picked it up and absently began to stroke it.

'Tell me what to do about Ernest,' she said suddenly.

'About Ernest?'

'I can't go on with it. He won't let me call my soul my own. There was a scene because I went out this morning and another scene because I was late getting back. Then this row about dinner. I don't blame him. He knows I'm not in love with him, I guess, and it gets on his nerves...'

'Perhaps he thinks you're in love with someone else?'

She shook her head.

'Are you?' Dene persisted.

She shook her head again. 'I'm so worried,' she said. 'Tell me what I should do...' She looked at him beseechingly.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'When I give you advice, you don't take it...'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean about Rontz,' he said doggedly.

A wave of colour stained her face, and she sighed. 'Some day I may tell you about that, but not now...' She raised her eyes to his. 'We agreed to let bygones be bygones, didn't we? Don't let's go into all that again. You know,' she went on, her glance considering his face, 'you're different, somehow—in your manner to me, that is. Have I done anything to offend you—anything just lately, I mean? Of course, I said some terrible things to you, but that was before I knew you, wasn't it? and because I was mad at you, scared, too, I guess. I fly off the handle like that sometimes—it's because I'm spoilt, I suppose. You see, I always had my own way as long as we were well off...'

'Please don't say anything more about it,' her companion rejoined stolidly. 'I know you didn't mean what you said...'

'You're not very gracious about it,' she observed with an air of reproach. 'You told me you liked me. Well, I like you, too. I like you most awfully, and all day I've been looking forward to seeing you this afternoon. And when you do arrive, that blessed aunt of mine had filled the house with guests and you're like a bear with a sore head. Well, I don't care: I always say what I think and I'm going to say it now even if you are sulking...'

‘I’m perfectly normal,’ he put in stiffly. ‘What is there for me to sulk about, anyway?’

‘I don’t know, I’m sure, and I’m not going to ask you again. But I want to tell you this: you’re the only person who has ever made me think about myself... I mean in relation to other people. Until I met you I’d never stopped to reflect about Ernest and me, about what a wretched little coward I was and what a mean little crook to give poor old Ernest such a rotten deal. We didn’t have to discuss it. You knew at once. That’s why I like you. You’re genuine and you’ve got ideals and you’re not afraid of owning up to them. Have you ever been in love?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Everybody is at one time or another, aren’t they?’

‘No, but really in love, I mean?’

He was silent, staring out through the branches at the placid ocean.

‘The trouble with you is that you’re too modest,’ she said. ‘And yet, I don’t know, it’s such a relief to meet a man sometimes who’s not dead sure of himself, who doesn’t positively know he’s irresistible...’

He caught the veiled allusion in her words and for the first time lifted his glance to her face. She in turn raised her eyes, limpid and troubled, from the scarf.

‘I’m so lonely,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Don’t be sore with me. I want to be friends...’

‘I don’t believe that you and I have the same ideas about friendship,’ he answered curtly. ‘And now, if you’ll excuse me,’ he added, ‘I must go back to the club and dress.’

With that he lifted his hat and, turning on his heel, went down the path towards the sea. She remained there, gazing after him, her eyes perplexed, her fingers twisting and untwisting the gaudy scarf about her hand.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

A DISTURBING thought took possession of him as he walked back along the beach. Supposing this invitation were a trap? The dinner hour, when bedrooms were unoccupied and the servants were busy in the dining-room, was the jewel thief's favoured moment. If Pedder suspected him, what more adroit than to call him off temporarily (not to mention Robotham and the two girls) and leave Reardon a clear field on shore? It was already twenty minutes to seven; if this were Reardon's plan, he would have left New York by this; and the same was true if he were going to be at the dinner. If that were the case and Bill were up to scratch, there should be word at the club. The detective hurried his pace.

But, on reaching the clubhouse, he found that no one had telephoned. Had Bill let him down? In rather a worried mood he went upstairs. But a reflection came to console him as he tubbed and changed. Nancy had said that Mrs. Brenzler was going to dine in her room. But Mrs. Brenzler's room was next to Nancy's, where the safe was located. Dinner upstairs would mean lights, bustle, the coming and going of trays—if the *coup* were planned for the dinner hour, this arrangement would certainly upset it. Besides, Nancy was in it somewhere—there was that rendezvous. Maybe, Reardon had eluded Bill's vigilance and would turn up on board the *Astarte* after all.

But Reardon, as it proved, was still at the Longford. At seven-fifteen the telephone rang. Bill was on the wire. He was elated. He had got solid with one of the house detectives at the Longford—the man had a brother who at one time worked for Thornley's—and here was his report. Reardon had remained in his room all the morning, had lunched late in the restaurant and, after smoking a cigar over a magazine in the lobby, had gone out walking about five o'clock. Adams—that was the house detective's name—had the afternoon off and had followed him through Central Park and round the reservoir. Reardon had returned about ten minutes before and gone to his room. There was no indication of his leaving again at present, for he had ordered dinner to be served in his room at eight-thirty—he was in his dressing-gown when he gave the order, the waiter said. Reardon had received no telephone messages all day nor had he telephoned or held communication with anybody during his afternoon stroll, the house detective declared. His only visitor had been a young lady who had arrived about ten

in the morning and sent him up a note, upon receiving which Reardon had joined her in the dining-room. This, of course, was Nancy.

‘You’ve done magnificently, old man,’ said Dene. ‘Where are you speaking from? The hotel?’

‘No. I thought it better not. I’m at the speakeasy across the street. Adams is on the job. He has mobilized the whole staff, from the floor-waiter to the bell-hops. Reardon can’t get out without his knowing it. I’m going to have a bite to eat, then I’m going back to the hotel so as to be on the spot if anything happens. What are you doing with yourself?’

Trevor told him about the dinner. ‘Robotham wants to go to bed early, so we shan’t be late. I should be back here by ten. If there are any developments between this and then, give me a buzz, will you?’

‘Okay. And, listen, Adams and I have arranged, if Reardon really starts out, to trail along after him...’

‘I was counting on Reardon being at this dinner, but, as things are turning out, I believe I shall be able to use you...’

A chuckle rippled over the wire. ‘You’re talking sense at last. If you come in and find we’re on the way and you have to go out again, leave word at the club where you are...’

‘Right-o. And, Bill...’—he lowered his voice—‘you’d better bring a gun...’

‘You bet. Any sign of Cloan down there?’

‘No. He’s gone to cover again, I expect. Any cables for me at the apartment?’

‘No. I was talking to Kami just now. So long, old boy—we’ll be seeing you!’

‘Good-bye, Bill...’

It was within ten minutes of the appointed hour of dinner. Rapidly, the detective finished dressing. On the dressing-table lay the articles he had taken from his day suit—his automatic, his wallet, his keys, his money. He glanced through the wallet. It contained Rontz’s letter (which he had restored to it), his C.I.D. card, Manderton’s introduction to the New York Police Commissioner. For an instant he weighed the wallet in his hand, then went to his suitcase, which he unlocked. His jemmy in its neat cloth case was there concealed under a shirt. Once again he had a moment of hesitation which ended by his fastening the contraption about his waist as before. Then he locked the wallet away, pouched keys and money, verified his gun to make sure that it was ready for instant use with a cartridge in the chamber.

As he slipped the gun in his inside pocket, his eye encountered Nancy's glove lying on the bed. Thrusting it in his pocket, he went downstairs. His nerves were braced up: the sense of adventure was strong upon him: he felt prepared for anything.

A red-faced man in a yachting-cap stopped him in the hall. It was Bill's friend with whom they had had a drink on the previous evening. Nothing would suffice him but that Dene should join him and his friends in what he called 'a slight snifter.' The Englishman had no desire to be drawn into a drinking party, but the red-faced man would not be denied. Clutching his unwilling victim firmly by the arm, he dragged Dene towards the half-open door of a room off the lobby. Here, amid a hubbub of voices, men sat at small tables drinking.

The visitor found himself propelled towards one of these tables, where a group was assembled about a tray with a shaker and glasses. The martini was dry and cold and mixed by a master hand. Dene found it bracing. It was the final touch he required, he decided, to set him off aright on this momentous evening.

As he put down his glass, a voice spoke from the door. 'Hey, Mr. Dene...' Hilary Pedder, in yachting-cap and dinner-jacket, stood there.

The detective bade a hasty farewell to the company and ran out to join him.

'Hope I'm not taking you away,' said Pedder suavely. 'I'm afraid I'm a bit late, but the outboard motor doesn't hold more than three comfortably, so I've had to take you folks out in separate trips. All set? Then let's go!'

He was amiable and debonair as they fussed across the still water, expatiating on the cheapness and convenience of outboard motors. He handled the little craft expertly—he was evidently as competent in this comparatively simple matter as he was in everything else. If he nourished any suspicion of his companion, he contrived to efface it wholly from his manner. An able fellow, but for that the more dangerous! What if Bill were right about him, though? Once more doubt gnawed at the detective's heart.

Ruth, a man's camel's-hair topcoat buttoned over her white satin frock, was at the rail as they came alongside.

'Here he is,' Pedder announced as they scrambled on board.

'Gosh, I'm certainly glad to see you!' Ruth exclaimed in a stage whisper to Dene as their host busied himself with tying up the launch. 'I was beginning to think you weren't coming. This party's on the blink for fair. You'd think Ernest was dying of T.B., or something, the way he's acting,

and Nancy's in one of her moods. Can't you shake them out of it? Tell them a funny story or something...'

But now Pedder was beside them. He led the way aft to where, under an awning, Robotham, muffled up in a heavy coat, and Nancy sat in basket chairs. Nancy had a perfunctory smile for the Englishman.

Ernest extended a limp hand. 'I'm afraid I shan't be able to do my share of entertaining you, Mr. Dene,' he remarked weakly. 'But the fact is, I'm suffering from a heavy cold. Properly speaking, I should be in bed...' He gazed rather severely at Nancy.

'Oh, snap out of it, Ernest!' Ruth cried. 'What you want is a drink...'

'I hope you weren't expecting a big party, Mr. Dene,' said Pedder. 'There are only just ourselves. I had to tear him away,' he explained to Nancy, 'from a very convivial session in the locker-room at the Yacht Club...' He turned to a side-table where cocktails were set out.

'I'm afraid you'll take back to England the most deplorable impression of the lawlessness of our country, Mr. Dene,' Robotham remarked sententiously. 'The fact is that Prohibition is a bad law and it therefore produces bad results. I don't happen to be a drinking man for the simple reason that my stomach won't stand liquor. But, like ninety-nine out of a hundred of the citizens of this country, I connive at the breaking of a law which the State is quite unable to enforce...'

'Attaboy!' was Ruth's ribald ejaculation. She swung about to their host. 'When might a body start in breaking the law on this here hooker, Skipper?' she demanded in a nasal New England falsetto.

'Right now,' Pedder replied, laughing, as he came forward with two glasses for her and her sister. 'I don't know whether you're acquainted with the genuine bacardi, Mr. Dene,' he observed, handing the latter a cocktail glass in his turn, 'but my man Manuel is supposed to be something of an adept at it. At any rate, I think I can promise you a more palatable concoction than the—ah—well-intentioned improvisations of the Yacht Club...'

'By which he means,' Robotham explained, turning to the Scotland Yard man, 'that the people of this country today will drink anything from bathtub gin to embalming fluid. And he's right!'

'I can't promise you anything very elaborate in the way of dinner,' Pedder said to the company at large. 'This is a strictly bachelor establishment and I have only Manuel to look after me. He takes care of my clothes, runs the engine, keeps the ship clean, and, in addition to all these things, manages to be a pretty fair cook, as I shall hope to demonstrate to

you. He's giving us tonight caviar; sea bass p<sup>o</sup>ch<sup>e</sup>; Long Island duckling with orange salad and, in your especial honour, Ruth, my dear, a Nesselrode pudding...'

'Marvellous!' Ruth exclaimed ecstatically.

'I've also been able to secure some reasonably genuine champagne,' Pedder added. 'You know,' he went on, looking whimsically at Ernest, 'a pint of Pol Roger wouldn't do your cold any harm...'

'My dear fellow,' said the latter fretfully, 'you know my habits...'

'Your bad habits,' Pedder corrected with a surreptitious smile at the others. He raised his glass. 'Glad to see you all!'

Ruth sipped her cocktail and emitted a little squeak. 'My!' she sighed fervently, 'that man of yours certainly shakes a mean cocktail!'

Her sister and the Englishman drank in turn.

Nancy had not spoken a word. At Dene she had scarcely glanced. She sat, a slender, graceful figure in black, a dark fur about her shoulders, one slim foot dangling, her charming face lifted towards the distant shore, where the dying sun flooded the whole smiling landscape in purplish light. The Scotland Yard man watched her covertly. She had herself well in hand, but it struck him that her calm was artificial. She smoked continuously, lighting one cigarette at the stub of the last, and her satin slipper, almost imperceptibly, beat an impatient rhythm. After one sip she left her cocktail untasted. Why was she staring at the land so intently? Was she expecting Reardon to arrive?

There was no word of any other guest nor was any cocktail glass provided for him. Robotham was shivering and complaining of the damp, drawing his big coat about him.

'As Robotham has a cold,' Pedder explained to Dene, 'I said we'd dine below. We'll just finish up the cocktails and go down...'

But Nancy declined and Ruth, after a questioning glance at her sister, did likewise. Dene, who meant to keep his head clear, had no hesitation in following their example. So the party descended the companion to the long, low saloon, elaborately panelled in satinwood, where Manuel, a guinea-yellow Filipino in a white coat, was already in attendance. Dene's eye silently mustered the places at the table. There were only five. That settled it: Reardon was not coming to dinner.

Pedder was an admirable host. As though divining the slight chill that overlay the proceedings, he immediately took the lead. In turn he drew each of them out. He made Nancy tell the story of the bogus Lancret which Mrs. Brenzler had been induced to buy in Paris and of the comic interview that



lady had had with the curator of the Louvre on the subject, and, before Nancy had finished, deftly contrived to enmesh Robotham in the conversation. He talked to Dene about Cambridge and to Ruth about America's prospects in the Davis Cup. And when the conversation flagged, as it did at first, he was ready, with his rather malicious smile, to break in with an anecdote or story which he narrated with the finish of the accomplished *raconteur*. By the time Manuel served the fish, the ice was broken, and Nancy had thawed sufficiently towards Dene, who sat beside her, to speak of her impressions of England.

The dinner was perfectly cooked and perfectly served, the champagne beyond reproach. It was very pleasant in the little saloon with its shaded candles and its portholes open on the blue-black night and the soft rippling murmur of the waves against the *Astarte's* sides. But Dene was conscious of being deathly tired. He remembered that, almost from the moment of landing in America, he had been on the go and that he had had very little sleep. It was as though, under the soothing influence of his surroundings, the steel spring of his resolution had snapped. He felt drowsy, relaxed: he could scarcely keep his eyes open.

The cabin seemed airless: his face was dank with perspiration. The voices at the table droned like a lullaby. He asked the steward for a glass of water and was unexpectedly aware of a pause in the conversation. He discovered that Nancy had asked him a question and was waiting for his answer—Great Scott, this was awful: he must have dropped off, there at the table. Someone put a glass of water in his hand...

From a long way off, as it seemed to him, he heard Pedder's smooth laugh and Pedder's pleasant baritone, rather condescending: 'They're a hard-drinking lot at the Yacht Club. Besides, Englishmen aren't used to the strength of the stuff they serve over here...' Then Ruth's clear voice: 'There was a boy passed out at a party I was on once...' and Nancy's quick reproof: 'Be quiet, Ruth...'

He opened his eyes and stared stupidly about him. The whole saloon seemed to spin. His head drooped, his eyes closed again. Pedder's was the last voice he heard: 'He'd better sleep it off. He can lie down on my bed...'

## CHAPTER XXIX

HE came to his senses with the sudden shock characteristic of the waking of one who has overslept. It was like emerging into consciousness from the effects of an anæsthetic. He had lost all sense of time or place. He did not seem to know who he was, where he was, or where he had been, whether he were alive or still sunk in that dreamless, all-effacing slumber which is civilized man's closest analogy to death.

The stealthy lapping of water was in his ears. In terror he gazed about him. The room in which he found himself was tiny and dimly lit and plunged in a profound silence threaded only by that faint, susurrant gurgle. A clinging blanket of sheer oblivion muffled his mind: he could not imagine what he was doing in that utterly unfamiliar setting.

He sat up, and instantly a violent blow on the head shook him into fuller consciousness. He was lying on the lower of two bunks: his head had come into contact with the upper berth. He stooped and, rubbing his head, stood on his feet. He felt dizzy and sat down again on the edge of the bunk. Then with a rush memory came back. The dinner-party—he had got drunk, disgraced himself. He looked at his watch. The hands pointed at a quarter past twelve. He stared stupidly at the dial. Was it night or morning? It was night, of course—a disc of blue-black darkness was framed in the uncurtained glass of the porthole.

Suddenly he was on his feet again, frantic. It was a quarter past midnight. For three—or was it four?—hours he had lain there stupefied. The party must have long since broken up—the solemn stillness surrounding him told him as much. Then Nancy and the others had gone ashore! And Reardon—merciful Heaven, where was Reardon?

God! He saw it all so clearly now. One, no, two cocktails, a single glass of champagne—he had drunk next to nothing at dinner—could never have reduced him to such a state of stupor. He had been drugged, hocused. Swiftly he put his mind back to the scene on deck before dinner. He had a vision of Pedder, so glib, so warmly hospitable, handing him a cocktail—‘I don't know whether you're acquainted with the genuine bacardi, Mr. Dene—my man is supposed to be rather an expert at it...’ How plausible the fellow had made it sound, with his flow of easy talk, as he passed the glasses round, and he, Dene, the trained sleuth, the Scotland Yard man, had fallen for it!

It was clever, diabolically clever. As things were in America, to get drunk at a party was a commonplace of life. Fortune, as it happened, had played into Pedder's hands—he had seen Dene drinking in the locker-room at the club and the chance encounter had provided a perfectly reasonable explanation of the guest's subsequent collapse. Nothing could be brought against the owner of the *Astarte* if it should eventually appear that his English guest had 'passed out' at his dinner-party and had had to be put to bed on board to sleep it off. The blood rose to Dene's face at the thought of Pedder. He could almost hear the latter telling Reardon, in that suave, self-assured way of his, 'Dene, eh? You can leave him to me!' How ably he had bided his time, the scoundrel! He had set the hour for the *coup*, and then, quietly but with deadly efficiency, disposed of the one man who could have frustrated it.

These reflections passed through Dene's mind in a second as his hand felt for his gun. He did not expect to find it: naturally, it was gone. The only thing left in his pockets was a glove—Nancy's glove. He replaced it and went to the door. He tried it gingerly—locked, of course. His ear to the panel, he listened. Silence, Manuel, probably, had retired to his bunk, and Pedder, no doubt, had gone ashore to meet Reardon.

It was horribly close and airless in the cabin. He was conscious that his head was splitting, his mouth dry and furred. He glanced at the door, then clapped his hand to his waist. The strings were still there—they had not discovered Fatzy Abe's little helpmate, then. He drew forth the jemmy, straightened it out, considering the door. It was teak, solid-looking. The lock was on the inside. The quicker way would be to burst it, the safer, because the quieter, but the lengthier operation, to dismount the lock. One end of the jemmy was fashioned as a screw-driver. Dropping to his knees, the Scotland Yard man set to work.

He had to take the lock to pieces, but in five minutes, without a sound, the door was open. He saw a short, narrow corridor, a door at the end with a stairway beside it. In two silent strides he gained the door, bent his ear to it, listening. It seemed to him that a very faint movement was audible on the other side.

The stair led to the deck. The night was quite airless and not a breath struck his cheek. But he could see the stars glimmering above his head. Noiselessly, his footsteps muted by the rubber treads, he stole aloft. At the top he crouched suddenly in the shadow of the hatchway.

He was in the bows of the *Astarte*, looking aft. There, not two yards from him, was the oblong, box-like skylight of the saloon. A dim light shone

through the frosted glass and was spilled from its two sides propped open upon the deck.

Night had fallen early on the little bay. The group of yachts were dark and lifeless. A wan radiance gleamed under the glass of the Yacht Club verandah; but away to the left, where Rosemount lay, there was not a vestige of a light. Somewhere in the night the beat of a propeller sent its vibrations rippling over the still, warm air. Out of the rays of the masthead light, it was pitch-black on the Astarte's deck. A silvery edging to a ragged mass of madder cloud, piled high in the sky, showed where the moon was hiding its face.

On hands and knees, keeping himself in the shadow, Dene drew himself forward towards the skylight. The tinkle of ice in a glass below sent a tingle chasing along his spine. He realized now that, had he opened that door beside the stair, he would have walked in upon the saloon and its unknown occupant. Raising his eyes to the level of the skylight base, he glanced down.

Pedder was there alone. He was sitting at the table where they had dined. The table had been cleared and was now covered with a green baize cloth. A bottle of whisky, a siphon, glasses, and an ice bucket were on a tray and Pedder was in the act of helping himself to a drink. The aroma of his cigar mounted to the watcher above.

The Astarte's owner was playing patience. A reading-lamp, the only light, gleamed on the cards spread out. The man at the table sipped his drink, put the glass down, moved a card thoughtfully, then glanced at his watch. For an instant he reclined in his chair, drawing on his cigar. Suddenly with a vigilant air he flung his head back, and Dene had only just time to duck down out of sight. The detective's heart hammered in his ears as he cowered flat on his face on the deck. He was certain that he had been discovered.

But his brain was working swiftly. Pedder was on board, waiting impatiently, as it would seem, for Reardon. There was no sign of the outboard motor at the ship's side—no doubt, it was somewhere there, off that dark beach—at the Rosemount landing-stage, most likely—in Manuel's charge. There was nothing for it but to swim ashore, Dene decided—the water must be quite warm and it was no great distance. He was just gathering himself up to rise to his feet and put this project into execution when, with a roar, a power-boat flanked by two tremendous sheets of spray came hurtling out of the night. This was the sound, of course, that had attracted Pedder's attention in the saloon below, Dene told himself: he must have heard it, too, had he not been so wholly taken up by the imminent danger of his own position.

The fact that, almost as soon as he was aware of the speed-boat's approach, the engine was shut off told him that the cruiser was making for the Astarte. He was on the starboard side, the side nearest the shore, and she came from port. He crouched as flat as he could in the shadow of the skylight and watched her slither, wake hissing, towards the yacht. Farther along the deck, he saw a burly shape emerge from the main companion.

With fussing screw and in a glow of light the speed-boat ran alongside. A man in a blue jersey grappled the rail and a figure scrambled on board. Reardon, was Dene's thought. A deep voice cried, softly authoritatively, from the deck, 'Who's that? Stay where you are!' 'It's me, Chief,' was the answer, anxious and breathless. 'Mike?' Pedder's voice was sharp with annoyance. 'What the devil do you want?' 'I gotta talk to you—it's urgent...' Pedder made a motion with his head and the two men descended the main companion together.

Dene raised himself up cautiously. The speed-boat, smelling of warm oil, rocked quietly below the Astarte's rail. The man in the blue jersey was out of sight, probably settled down to a quiet snooze in the driving-seat. Voices through the open skylight now diverted the detective's attention. 'Gees, I could do with a drink...'—it was Mike speaking. The clink of a bottle and Pedder's sonorous baritone, edged with impatience, 'Here you are! Drink that down and tell me what you want! I've no time to waste...'

His straw hat on the back of his head, dusty shoes spread out in front of him, Mike sprawled in a chair, a glass to his lips. A dank lock of hair straggled out from under his hat, and his face gleamed with perspiration. He put down the glass with a gasp and his cold eyes ferreted anxiously in the stern and forbidding countenance of the man across the table. 'Rocco!' he said huskily.

Hands in jacket pockets, cigar in mouth, legs straddled, Pedder, hectoring and dominant, glared at the speaker. 'What about Rocco?' he demanded in tones full of contempt.

'He's wise to you, boss...'

'Ah!' Pedder shifted his cigar with his tongue from one side of his mouth to the other while his stony gaze centred on the other's frightened face. 'And who put him wise, my friend?'

'Ed Cloan...'

The hard eyes snapped. 'Ed Cloan, eh? And I thought I was the only one who knew that Ed was on that Aix job with Larry. Pretty smart of Rocco! So he fetched Ed out of his hide-out, did he? But not in time to meet the

Megantic, eh, Mike?’ He chuckled. Then, stern again, ‘How long has Ed been running loose in New York?’

‘Since Friday night or Saturday morning. Didn’t you hear about Jennie Lindsay?’

‘Only what you told me about her going around with this fellow Dene...’

‘She was found strangled in her apartment this morning...’

‘Ah!’ Pedder’s tone was quite unemotional. ‘Ed, was it?’

‘I guess so. On account of she was tagging along with this limey. Rocco and the boys thought all along as he was Larry...’

The other chuckled. ‘Quite...’

Mike leaned forward truculently. ‘See will this take the grin off your pan? Rocco and his crowd know better now...’ He paused, then added impressively, ‘Ed was down here last night...’

Pedder frowned quickly. ‘Is that so?’

‘I’ll say it is. And get this, too. Ed’s found out that Larry’s here, hiding up with you...’ He poured himself out another drink—neat whisky—and tossed it off.

‘Where does this come from?’ Pedder asked quickly.

‘From Charlie Klaub...’

The other nodded morosely. ‘Charlie’s reliable as a rule...’

‘You bet he’s reliable. But he’s through now, the same as me. They’re watching Charlie—he only got round to me late tonight. He told me to tip you off to get out and stay out. He says you’re damned lucky that Rocco and the boys haven’t been down here before this. They would of been only Ed had trouble connecting with Rocco—Rocco scrambled over this Rontz enquiry and Ed only got on to him late this evening...’ He reached for the whisky bottle again.

‘Lay off that, will you?’ Pedder commanded sternly. He whisked the bottle out of Mike’s hand and put it aside.

‘Can’t a guy take a drink?’ the other whined. ‘I’ve been hours getting here. I thought, what with the Sunday traffic on the roads and all, the train would be quicker. But two of Rocco’s gorillas were hanging around the Penn station, so I nipped over to Hoboken and made Jack Hennessy bring me round in his boat. But now I’ve said my piece, I’m going to beat it, and my advice to you is to do the same...’ He scrambled to his feet.

With slow deliberation Pedder removed the cigar from his mouth. ‘What you’ll do, my friend, is to keep your shirt on and go quietly back to New York...’

‘Like hell I will...’ Mike retorted hotly, and made a move for the door.

Quickly the other placed himself before it. ‘Listen to me, Mike. A word to Police Headquarters will fix Ed Cloan, and as for Rocco... well, he’s had it coming to him for a long time...’

‘To blazes with that stuff! Rocco’ll be here any minute...’

But Pedder refused to be shaken out of his adamant calm. ‘And we’ll be out of this any minute,’ he replied, with a glance at his watch. ‘Manuel’s ashore with the launch now waiting for Larry...’ He smiled expansively. ‘And what Larry’s gone to fetch is worth waiting for, my friend...’

‘I’m waiting for no man,’ the other cried shrilly. ‘Stand away from that door!’ From his post of vantage on the deck above, Dene saw the light strike on the darkly gleaming barrel of an automatic.

‘So help me God, I’ll drill you, Pedder, if you don’t let me out of this!’ Mike ejaculated hoarsely.

‘Get this, Mike,’ the other declared impressively. ‘If any—any accident happens to me, my lawyer will send to the police an exact account of how our late lamented friend, Hermie Rontz, met his death—it’s all written out, in a sealed envelope addressed to Commissioner Mulrooney. And I may as well tell you I’ve left it open as to who fired the fatal shot, whether it was you or Toni...’

‘You two-timing——! ‘—he ground out a vile expression between clenched teeth. ‘Wasn’t it you yourself told me Hermie was getting ready to squeal about that job over in England, that it was his neck or ours?’

Pedder laughed easily. ‘I’ve no recollection of it...’

The other’s smirk was unpleasant. ‘You haven’t, eh? Then perhaps it’d surprise you to know that Hermie got his squeal in before you had him bumped off? Whadda yer know about that, big boy?’

The hard eyes were suddenly alert. ‘He did, did he?’

‘I’ll tell the world!’ He gave him a bloody glance. ‘You said you’d take care of this guy Dene. Where is he?’

Again that mocking laugh. ‘I’ve taken care of him all right. Why?’

‘Because he’s a dick from Scotland Yard!’

From his perch overhead, Dene saw that, for the first time in the interview, Pedder was shaken. With a savage movement of the jaws he switched his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. The raillery died out in the frigid blue eyes and a sombre, menacing stare took its place. With a brisk gesture he pushed the whisky bottle towards his visitor. ‘Put

your gun up and have a bracer!’ he said in a curiously strangulated voice. ‘I want to hear about this...’

With a surly air Mike transferred his pistol from his right hand to the left and splashed a tumbler half-full with whisky. He swallowed the portion at a gulp, wiped his mouth, and asked sullenly, ‘Where is he?’

Pedder jerked his head backwards. ‘In my cabin, sleeping off one of Manuel’s special cocktails! You can see him if you like. But first tell me’—his voice was deep with eagerness—‘all you know about him!’

With discovery thus threatened, Dene decided he had heard enough. Already, it seemed to him, he had lingered too long. Turning his back on the lighted skylight, he began to crawl on all fours towards the bows. There was no sound from the boat alongside. When he reached the bowsprit, for a brief instant, he straightened up and swung his legs over the rail. Steadying himself on the slender spar, he found a precarious footing on the taut anchor chain, stooped and grabbed it with his hands, swung round and slid almost without a sound, into the sea.



## CHAPTER XXX

THE water was almost tepid. His thin evening clothes folded themselves dank about his body. Heedless of their encumbering embrace, however, he struck out in an easy trudgeon for the shore. He tried to keep the bulk of the *Astarte* between him and the speed-boat tethered on the far side; but the tide caught him and he promptly recognized that he would have no chance of making the Rosemount beach against it—the most he could hope to do, by swimming sideways to the current, was to land in front of the Yacht Club or, maybe, farther down.

He was a strong swimmer and he had no fear of the water. He let the tide carry him while steadily he edged towards the shore. He kept his ears open for any sound on board the *Astarte* behind him—he had to reckon that the moment his flight was discovered, Pedder and Mike would lose no time in coming in pursuit—but all remained silent. Nevertheless, the thought plagued him that somewhere behind the cloak of the night to which his face was turned, Reardon was keeping his mysterious rendezvous. He redoubled his efforts, struggling towards the only light visible on that swarthy shore, that feeble effulgence under the clubhouse verandah.

At last, his feet struck ground and, slithering over the rocks, he waded ashore at the extreme end of the club beach. The moon shone wetly through its frieze of cloud and in its sickly ray the sands, purplish black at the water's edge and white as salt above, stretched, desolate and bare, into the dim distance. Without stopping even to wring out his sopping jacket, the Scotland Yard man started to run in the direction of Rosemount, keeping to the fringe of the tide where the going was firmer. And so it befell that, as he passed the last of the cabañas and the Rosemount beach spread itself, barren and deserted, before his eyes, he found himself commanding a view of the end of the little landing-stage thrust out at an angle from the strand and perceived the outboard motor gently rocking there. The boat was clearly visible in the moonlight. It was empty.

He raced towards the landing-stage. There was no sign of Manuel on the beach. Above it the Rosemount gardens were wrapped in silence, the terraces making blurred lines that blended with the surrounding belt of woods. Fearing that a loose plank on the landing-stage might betray him, the detective waded out to the end and, with the water about his waist, detached the leathern thong from the engine's circular starting disc and thrust it in his

pocket. He smiled grimly to himself as he set his face to the land once more. At least Reardon's retreat by sea was cut off.

Manuel was a problem. He must be lurking somewhere in the grounds. Bitterly Dene regretted the loss of his pistol. His faithful jemmy was his only weapon. He could not risk an encounter with an armed man until Reardon stood before him. Rosemount was still his objective; but he had no intention of blundering his way through the gardens in the dark. Then he remembered the lane that separated the Brenzler estate from the Yacht Club domain: he would follow it along until the house appeared above the wall—the wall was high; but it could be climbed...

The lane was steep and stony. The water made sucking noises in his thin evening shoes as he stumbled along: he shivered in his wet clothes. Now the round thatched roof of the summer-house loomed up atop the wall. Courage, he told himself: he was halfway there.

He halted abruptly. The smell of burning was in his nostrils. He lifted his head and sniffed. The odour was unmistakable—a cigarette!

There was someone in the summer-house. Manuel? Reardon? He would have to find out. He retraced a few soft steps down the lane scrutinizing the wall, as he went, for any foothold.

At one place the jagged point of a large stone built into the wall projected. He managed to get a grip of it and, fitting one foot into a crevice in the mortar below, contrived to grapple the wall's coping with his hands. He drew himself up, straddled the top for an instant, then let himself down quietly on the other side. The summer-house was a dozen paces away, but already, through its open sides, he saw the scarlet glow of a cigarette in the darkness within.

It was Nancy. She saw him first. He only recognized her in the gloom as she sprang quickly up—the snapping of a twig betrayed him as he stole across the moonlit grass. She was bareheaded with a long dark coat over her evening frock.

'You!' she whispered in alarm. Now he was at the balustrade of the summer-house, close enough to see the bewilderment that dawned in her eyes. 'Why!'—her hand timidly touched his sleeve—'you're soaking wet! What's happened?'

'Where's Reardon?' he demanded sternly.

'Reardon?' she echoed in a faint voice.

'You heard what I said. Where is he?'

She faltered. 'I don't know what you're talking about...'

‘Don’t lie to me. You had breakfast with him in New York this morning...’

‘It’s not true. I...’

‘It’s true. I saw you with him myself. And there’s the glove you dropped at the Hotel Longford...’ His hand went to his pocket and he flung the little glove, all dripping, on the table by which she stood.

She bridled. ‘And what if I did meet him? Is it any business of yours?’

‘This man’s a murderer, a notorious jewel thief...’

She stared at him haughtily. ‘You’re still drunk, I suppose...’

‘Drunk?’

‘Perhaps you’ve forgotten the exhibition you made of yourself at dinner tonight?’

‘Your friend Pedder drugged me to get me out of the way. You’ve got to understand that this is serious!’ Anger suddenly overmastered him and he seized her wrist. ‘Damn it, will you answer me? Where’s Reardon? And where were you to meet him tonight?’

‘Here,’ she answered faintly.

‘Here in the summer-house, do you mean?’

‘Yes...’

‘At what time?’

‘Between twelve and one...’

‘Why? For what purpose?’

Her pale face set. ‘I won’t tell you...’

‘He’s your lover, I suppose?’

She stamped her foot. ‘I’ve said all I intend to say. Now will you please go away?’

But Dene was holding out his wrist to the moonlight, craning his eyes to see the time by his watch. But the watch had not survived his swim. ‘Damnation, it’s stopped,’ he rasped savagely. He turned to her. ‘What’s the time?’ he snapped.

Unwillingly she peered at her watch. ‘Ten minutes past one...’

‘God!’ he ejaculated. Turning from her, he ran madly up the path in the direction of the house.

‘Trevor, stop!’ Her low cry was a frightened whimper: he disregarded it.

He had thrown all caution to the winds now. He did not halt until he emerged upon the lawn in front of the solemn, dark mansion and then only for an instant while his eyes sought the balcony above the verandah where

her bedroom was situated. There was a very faint glimmer of light on the balcony, as from a shaded lamp within the room, and this sparse radiance showed one side of the French window folded back. He gave one glance at the verandah pillar, entwined its whole height to the balustrade above with Rambler roses, then sprang forward...

Later on that night he was to measure the distance with his eye and wonder, incredulously, at the miracles that a fixed purpose will achieve. The rose-vines were stout at the roots and bore his weight, but as he swarmed aloft the briars tore his face and hands and again and again snapped and broke away from the pillar. But he held fast, worming himself up until his grasp encountered the heartening solidity of the railing and he clambered softly over on to the balcony.

Breathless from his exertions, his face scratched, his hands scraped and bleeding, he stood stock-still, listening. The open window was a few feet away. No sound. Silently he drew the jemmy from the inside pocket of his coat and tiptoed forward.

From the threshold he gazed into the dim bedchamber. On the far side of the room, over against the screen which had been set against the wall, a square flash-lamp in a leather case, planted on a chair, threw its circular beam upward upon the naked door of the safe, upon a dark head laid, listening, against it, and upon a pair of slim hands, below, that fingered, delicately, patiently, the twin combination bosses.

Perhaps it was the fact that Reardon was in his shirt-sleeves, the cuffs rolled up over his bare arms, that brought Dene's glance round to the bed and the jacket that lay there. On the jacket was a white silk handkerchief and on the handkerchief a black object reposed. The dull-gleaming, blunt-nouted automatic fascinated Dene. Reardon, he surmised, must have eased his pocket of it to give him greater freedom. He did not fail to note that it was within easy reach of Reardon's hand or that, for himself, a good dozen yards separated him from the weapon.

The man at the safe had his back to the window. He was absorbed in his task. His rigidity was statuesque, all but the hands: they were constantly in motion with little, finicking, fidgety movement of the fingers. For the rest, Reardon's whole attitude bespoke the most intense concentration.

The detective paused to collect himself. His life depended on whether he would be able to cross those dozen yards of hard, shining parquet without being heard. Thereafter, it would be a matter of split seconds whether he could snatch the gun before the man at the safe could reach it or whether he should stun Reardon with the crowbar. An instant sufficed to give him the

mastery over himself he required. Cool and with nerves braced for the ordeal, holding his breath and moving a foot at a time, he began to creep forward...

Two paces! The figure at the safe had not budged. Thank Heaven, the flooring was new and did not creak. Four! A little sigh went rustling through the silence. Dene halted on the instant, his grip instinctively tightening on the crowbar resting against his leg. At the safe the twirling fingers were for a moment still. Dene was taut with suspense. Would the man at the safe look up? But Reardon merely sighed again, altered his position and set to work anew.

Six paces! What exquisite hands the fellow had! Every vein, every hair, on the backs of them, was visible in the disc of bright light. Four yards more to go—Dene scarce dared breathe. Inch by inch, he was gaining ground: already his ear picked out the muffled click of the tumblers behind the steel plate. His hand shot out, grabbed the pistol...

Reardon whirled about, clawing at his hip. On recognizing Dene, he seemed to pale under his tan, but Dene, perceiving the fury that blazed in his eyes, knew that it was rage, not fear, that had made him go white.

Gun levelled, the Scotland Yard man had sprung back. 'Put up your hands and stand away from that safe!' he commanded curtly.

At the same moment, from the door on the other side of the bed, a soft and hurried tapping resounded.

With a shrug of the shoulders, Reardon obeyed the order: he was looking warily at the door. Now the two men heard Nancy's voice, low and fearful, 'It's me, Nancy! Open the door!'

Reardon, his small, white hands raised on high, smiled sarcastically. 'Tut, tut, man,' he remarked softly, 'you wouldn't keep a lady waiting, would you?'

Keeping him covered with the automatic, Dene backed away, round the bed towards the door. 'I warn you I'm a dead shot with a pistol,' he said tensely. 'One step towards that window and I'll shoot!'

He had reached the door now. Fumbling with his hand behind him he turned the key. Nancy came in hastily, closing the door softly behind her. On catching sight of Reardon, she stopped short. Then she saw Dene beside her with the gun. With a distraught air she looked from one man to the other.

But it was Reardon she addressed. 'What do you want here?' she asked crisply.

When he made no answer, but only glared at her, a sullen frown on his handsome features, she glanced enquiringly at Dene. Silently, the detective

pointed at the safe. At the sight of the disorder there, the screen laid aside, the cupboard door open, the flashlight on the chair, she recoiled, eyes wide with horror.

‘So it was true...’ She said in a low voice to Dene.

‘See if he opened it, will you?’ the Scotland Yard man requested bluntly.

Slowly she crossed the room, tested the handle: the door was fast. The silence was oppressive in the room as she produced her key. The safe door swung wide. She stooped to it. Presently, the door slammed to and she turned about.

‘Nothing has been taken,’ she said.

‘Try his coat on the bed, please,’ the detective ordered. ‘Wait,’ he added sharply, ‘I’ll do it myself!’

The girl had sprung forward, but he was too quick for her. With the pistol still levelled at Reardon, he snatched up the jacket. ‘Turn about and face the wall, Reardon,’ he ordered sternly.

Nancy caught his sleeve. ‘Please, please, don’t make a noise,’ she entreated. ‘My aunt is sleeping on the other side of the bathroom there. If you wake her up...’ Her manner was distracted.

With a faintly sarcastic smile, Reardon had swung round with his back to the room. Nancy put out her hand to Dene. ‘You’d better let me look through that coat,’ she suggested with an air of suppressed excitement. But Dene, dividing his attention between the coat and the man across the room had already shaken the pockets out. A pipe, a tobacco pouch, a folder of steamship sailings, one or two letters, dropped upon the bed: there was no sign of any jewellery.

The girl snatched up the letters, scrutinized them, then tearing the jacket from Dene’s grasp, hunted through the empty pockets.

With the coat still in her hand, she darted towards Reardon. ‘What have you done with them?’ she cried in an undertone vibrant with passion.

The man turned about. ‘What have I done with what, honey?’ he demanded with an air of roguish innocence.

But before the girl could answer, Dene stepped quickly forward and, thrusting his weapon into Reardon’s side, swiftly and dexterously searched him. But the search produced no more than a fold of bills, some change, a gold cigarette-case, and a bunch of keys.

Nancy’s eyes smouldered angrily. ‘So you lied to me?’ she exclaimed scornfully. ‘You never meant to bring them...’

Reardon's smile was indolent, triumphant. 'I thought them safer where they are. Never mind, honey, you'll get them back after the trial, though it may be a little awkward for you.' He laughed. 'Have you explained to the boy friend here just exactly the sort of stink my arrest is going to make?' With an arrogant look at Dene, 'Any objection to my putting on my coat?' he asked.

'Go ahead!' said the detective, gun in hand.

Nonchalantly Reardon slipped the jacket on.

At the same instant a deafening series of reports came rolling up from the sea.

## CHAPTER XXXI

THE SCOTLAND YARD man recognized the staccato bark of a machine-gun. It sent its harsh stutter rippling through the velvety dark—two bursts, three bursts. Then silence, as startling as the noise itself, and swelling out of it the rising hum of a power-boat that swiftly sank to a diminuendo.

The first move came from Reardon. For a brief instant Dene's attention was diverted and, profiting by that moment of distraction, the prisoner sprang for the balcony. The detective remained rooted to the spot, but like a flash, hand and gun went up and came down, swiftly and steadily as they had taught him at the range, taking aim at the fleeing legs. No shot rang out, however, for the girl threw herself between.

'For the love of God, don't shoot!' she implored him. 'You'll rouse the whole house and...' She broke off, wringing her hands in a frenzy. 'He's taken nothing: let him go...'

'Stand aside!' the detective cried furiously, for in that brief second of her interruption Reardon had disappeared. Dene sought to sweep her from his path, but she clung to his arm.

'You must listen to me,' she entreated despairingly. 'You'll ruin me, if you arrest him...'

Rudely he tried to shake her off. 'You don't know what you ask,' he told her sternly. 'I'm a Scotland Yard officer and I have my duty to perform...' At that, aghast, she fell back and he darted out by the window.

A ladder of shining silk now trailed over the balustrade—Reardon, of course, had drawn it up after him and concealed it under the creeper was Dene's passing reflection as, in mad haste, he swarmed down. But an isolated shot in the distance, crashing out of the darkness as his foot touched the ground, drove every other thought from his head. Pistol in hand, he raced across the grass and down the steps that led, terrace by terrace, to the beach. As he burst from the lowest tier of pergolas upon the belt of lawn that stretched to the sea-wall and the wooden ladder descending to the strand, he was aware of shouts and lights and drumming footsteps on the shore below. But he heeded them not. His whole attention was riveted on a figure that, propped on one hand, reclined on the turf, head hanging down, coughing... coughing...

It was Reardon. His face was chalky white, the bold eyes dim as an expiring flame, as the Scotland Yard man raised up the drooping head.



Reardon's breath came in short coughs and every time he coughed a bubble of vividest scarlet formed in a wisp of foam at the lips.

One glance into that livid countenance, darkened by no shadow that the moon, pure and bright in the heavens now, had cast, and Dene slipped the pistol into his pocket and gathered up the sinking form in his arms—it was not the first time he had seen a man die. Very gently he laid Reardon down, loosening his collar and opening his shirt. There was a round hole in shirt and undervest, red-rimmed in the vest.

He felt the dying man's eyes on his face. He looked up and encountered the glance of those dark orbs, lustreless and mournful. 'Some fellow in the bushes...' Reardon panted painfully. 'Wasn't you, was it?'

Dene shook his head. There was a lump in his throat—he was not old enough to be hardened yet. 'First mistake... I've made... never... part with... gun...' A rattling cough tore at the heaving chest and again the blood welled up at the mouth. 'Sort of mistake... chap... makes... only once,' he gasped painfully.

Feet thundered on the beach steps and Bill's voice, close at hand, said in an awed undertone, 'Trevor...' Dene turned his head. Bill was there with two massive individuals. Plain clothes, detective squad, the Scotland Yard eye read at a glance.

'Reardon,' said Trevor—that was all—and turned back to the man on the grass.

'The man I told you of,' Thornley explained to the bigger of his two companions, a strapping figure with a healthy Irish countenance. 'And this is Mr. Dene, of Scotland Yard...'

'Pleased to meetcha, Mr. Dene,' said the detective amicably.

Reardon had closed his eyes, but the blood continued to bubble at his lips.

'Reardon,' said Dene, 'Reardon, listen to me...' But the shaking figure took no heed—the dying man seemed to be sunk in a coma.

'Can either of you fellows take a shorthand note?' the Scotland Yard man asked, without taking his eye off Reardon's face.

'No,' said the detective who had spoken before—he was quick to seize Dene's meaning—'but Joe can. Oh, Joe,' he called, and an answering hail came from the beach. 'Gees,' he added, looking at Reardon, 'that fellow's hit bad. Lungs, isn't it?'

Dene nodded. 'What happened?' he asked.

‘We were afther trailin’ a yegg named Cloan down here,’ replied the detective in a rich brogue, ‘but we lost him in the dark. Thin we fell in wid Mr. Thornley on th’ beach, an’ while we wuz talkin’, we hears a chopper raisin’ merry hell beyant in th’ bay. Th’ Inspictor, he takes a coupla our chaps an’ goes off to find a boat, th’ way he’d be knowin’ what wuz up. Thin there’s a shot in th’ grounds—Frank here is afther seein’ th’ flash from th’ bushes—an’ wid that a guy comes harin’ down th’ ladder onto the shore. Frank an’ th’ hotel dick that wuz wid Mr. Thornley chases afther an’ catches him farther along th’ beach...’

‘It was Cloan,’ Bill put in.

‘He’s arrested, then?’ Dene demanded eagerly.

‘I’ll say he’s arrested,’ the Irishman interposed grimly. ‘It’s the chair for Ed an’ he knows it...’

‘He must have been prowling around looking for Reardon,’ Bill went on. ‘Reardon left the hotel at eleven—a Packard with a coloured chauffeur called for him...’

‘Pedder’s car,’ Dene explained.

‘Adams and I followed after in my car, but we blew a tire, and by the time we got going again, the Packard was out of sight. Then we lost the way in the dark—it was past one when we got here and the Yacht Club was closed. We were coming along the beach to see if you were anywhere about when we bumped into Donovan here and...’

But Dene motioned for silence. Reardon had opened his eyes. ‘Switch on the light, damn it,’ he mumbled thickly, ‘I can’t see a thing...’ Then he seemed to come to his senses again, for he said in a frightened voice, ‘Dene... where are you? It’s... dark... dark.’ He broke into a coughing fit. ‘I’m... finished... I guess,’ he muttered weakly.

‘You’re mighty bad, kid,’ the Irish detective interjected.

Dene stayed him with his hand. ‘Reardon,’ he said, bending over the dying man, ‘they’re hanging Gerry Cloan on Tuesday over that Oldholme Priory job. If you can clear him, now’s the time to speak...’

Reardon made no answer. Dene slipped off his sodden jacket and, making a pillow of it, propped the other’s head against it, supporting him against his knee. With one shapely hand Reardon fumbled towards his mouth. Dene read the gesture aright and with his handkerchief wiped a scarlet thread from the pallid lips.

The dying man lifted his head and gazed haggardly round the circle of grave, expectant faces. His glance lighted upon an open notebook which shone whitely in the ray of a flash-lamp held downward by one of the group.

The book rested on the thigh of a young policeman who was kneeling on the ground beside Dene.

A tapering forefinger dabbed feebly at the open page. 'Take this down,' came the rustling whisper.

The weak voice, wheezing and rattling, began, 'I was on... the Priory job... alone. Just finishing... when butler... you know. I had to croak him... he'd seen me before... early one morning... having look round...' He broke off, exhausted, casting frightened glances from side to side.

'And Gerry Cloan, Reardon?' Dene questioned.

The head moved slightly. 'Wouldn't touch it. Gerry... wanted... run straight. Saw him... London... week before he threatened... blow to... you know... employers. I told him... if he... squealed... his brother... go to... the chair. Chap called... Rocco... put... brother... under cover...'

'I know all about that,' the Scotland Yard man put in. 'Did Rocco plant Gerry in this job at the Priory for this particular job?'

Reardon inclined his head. 'But Gerry... didn't know... until... I told him...'

'Did you tell him when you meant to pull the job?'

The head scarce moved, but the mournful eyes said 'No.'

'Then he gave you no assistance that night?'

The answer was the same.

'Then who let you into the house?'

A faint smile broke out on the pale face. Feebly, his hand made a gesture.

'You mean, you broke in?'

A flicker of humour in the eyes answered the question.

'And Gerry didn't warn the Cartwrights on account of his brother, is that it?'

The 'Yes' was soft as a sigh. 'Damned fool... Ed not worth it... but good kid... Gerry... bad luck he had to... take the rap... couldn't help myself... Rocco had him... as Hermie had... me...'

His head dropped on his chest: his voice trailed away. 'He's goin', kid,' the Irish detective warned hoarsely in Dene's ear. 'You wanta get his monicker on this before he slips his cable...'

Gently Dene roused the dying man. 'Reardon... Reardon...' The long-lashed eyelids fluttered: the sunken eyes slowly opened. 'Your statement will be read over to you and I want you to try and find strength to sign it...'

He turned to the shorthand writer. 'Write,' he said. 'This is the true confession of the undersigned, Lawrence Reardon, made in the presence of Trevor Dene, of the Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard, and of...'—you can fill in the other names. Now read on'—he dropped his voice. 'And be quick...'

The shorthand writer scratched a note and, stooping to his notebook under the flash-lamp, began, in a droning voice, to read. It was a scene which, through the years to come, was destined to linger in Trevor Dene's memory, ever freshly evoked by the fragrance of a rose-garden on a summer night—the solemn group about that still figure prone on the dew-soaked turf, the shimmer of light from the electric torch falling on the face of the dying man, the monotonous recitative of the shorthand writer with the chant of the frogs and the occasional shriek of an owl as under-current. There were other sounds now—the flurry of propellers in the bay, distant shouts, and at the back of them, where Rosemount lay, lights and the barking of a dog; but these made no impression on the Scotland Yard man at the time.

The reading ended, Dene took the notebook and the fountain pen that was passed over with it. He put the pen into Reardon's hand. Reardon's eyes were fastened—implopingly, as it seemed to him—on his face.

'You've heard your confession,' Dene said gently. 'Is it all clear to you?' A faint nod.

'Is there anything you wish to add?' A negative movement of the head.

The hand that clutched the pen drummed feebly as though the dying man were impatient to be done with these formalities. While Dene held the book, at the foot of the pageful of pothooks, Reardon scrawled his name. Then Dene signed and the Irish detective wrote 'Jas. Donovan' in a sprawling hand and passed the book to his colleague.

Reardon's hand described a vague gesture. 'Send them away,' he murmured to Dene—his voice was very weak now.

The Scotland Yard man looked up. 'Leave me with him alone for a minute, would you mind?' he said.

The Irish detective looked dubious, but at that moment a voice called 'Donovan' from the beach below. 'Jasus, 'tis th' Inspictor,' exclaimed Donovan. With his colleague and the clerkly policeman he clattered off down the steps. Thornley turned and walked slowly after them.

The dying man was whispering something. His voice was almost inaudible. Dene bent his ear to the blood-flecked lips. He caught the name 'Nancy.'

'I know, old man,' he said soothingly. 'What about her?'

‘Tell her,’ Reardon articulated painfully, ‘there are... no photographs... just a dodge’—a smile hovered about his mouth—‘to draw her... away... from... her... room...’ His cough racked him again. Dene’s handkerchief was scarlet as he took it away from the twitching mouth. ‘Grand... girl,’ the dying man panted, ‘rough deal... sorry...’

Those were the last words he spoke.

## CHAPTER XXXII

A PORTLY figure in a dressing-gown came whirling from the steps under the pergola. It was Staples, the Rosemount butler, a revolver in his hand. Behind him, brandishing a driving iron, was the tall footman, who had donned a raincoat over his pyjamas.

When they appeared, Dene was on his feet, sunk in moody contemplation of the still form on the grass. His head pillowed on the coat, eyes closed, Reardon lay full length, face upturned to the brilliant moon, his lips trembling to a strange rattling sound that bubbled rhythmically from his throat.

‘What’s going on here?’ the butler demanded rather tremulously, while, with a frightened air, the footman peered at the man on the ground.

‘There’s been an attempted burglary,’ Dene said shortly.

‘Why, if it isn’t Mr. Dene!’ cried Staples aghast. ‘My gracious, Mr. Dene, sir, whatever have you been doing to yourself?’

He goggled at the young man. He saw him coatless, his tawny hair rumpled, his face bloody, his shirt-front a rag, his clothes a wreck.

‘Burglary?’ a suffocated voice struck in and Robotham stepped between. The punctilious Ernest had made some attempt at dressing, at least to the extent of pulling on his trousers, over which he wore his heavy overcoat. ‘What’s the meaning of all this shooting?’ he began, but broke off on catching sight of the motionless form on the grass. ‘Good God!’ he murmured.

Now there were voices and lights on the shore below and the thunder of feet on the wooden stair. A burly man with a red face topped by a straw hat came bustling up the steps. With him was Bill Thornley and the rear was brought up by a cluster of plain-clothes men and two uniform constables with a stretcher.

‘Trevor,’ said Bill, indicating his companion, ‘this is Assistant Inspector Bryce. Inspector, my friend, Dene, of Scotland Yard...’

‘Scotland Yard?’ echoed Robotham in fretful astonishment. ‘See here, just what is going on?’

‘This is Mr. Robotham, Inspector,’ Dene explained. ‘He’s stopping at Rosemount...’

‘The whole house has been roused by all this shooting,’ Robotham vociferated indignantly. ‘Mrs. Brenzler is greatly alarmed. Who is this wounded man and what is he doing here?’

‘Just a minute,’ said the Inspector curtly.

The circle about the figure on the ground parted as he went forward and dropped on one knee beside the dying man. Robotham turned to Dene, but the latter had drifted away. He was looking for Bill. He did not see him at first. Then he caught sight of him at the top of the steps under the pergola, crooking a finger at him. Trevor hurried across. Drawing him under cover of the pergola, Bill silently pointed under the flowering arch where the moon shot long pencils of silvery light through the roof of clambering roses and left him.

Nancy stood under the pergola, irresolute, her hands folded tightly on the bosom of her long evening frock. Dene glanced backward. Everybody—Robotham with the rest—was crowding about Bryce as the Inspector knelt beside the wounded man. Swiftly, Dene went in under the arch.

There was anguish in the look she gave him. ‘Why did you do it?’ she whispered in a dying voice.

‘I didn’t shoot him,’ he said simply. ‘They’ve got the murderer—a gunman. He was hiding in the bushes...’

Her small hand found his, clung to it. Her face was indistinct in the sweet-smelling half-light, but he knew that her eyes were kind. ‘I thought...’ she began and her voice choked. ‘Who... who was it?’ she asked falteringly.

‘A man called Ed Cloan, brother of Gerry Cloan, now under sentence of death in England for a crime that Reardon has confessed to...’

She gave a little gasping cry. ‘He’s confessed? I didn’t believe you before. Then... then he’s a murderer, too?’

‘And one of the smartest jewel thieves in Europe...’

‘Is he... is he badly wounded?’ she asked huskily.

Dene nodded. ‘Yes...’

The pressure of her hand tightened suddenly. ‘You don’t mean...?’

He bowed his head. ‘He’s unconscious. It’ll soon be over now...’

She fingered her lips and shuddered. ‘It’s terrible. He was so confident, so sure of himself...’ A pause. ‘Did you speak to him after he was hit?’

The Scotland Yard man nodded, then parted the bushes and glanced towards the circle on the lawn. He had a glimpse of Robotham’s troubled countenance in the frieze of attentive faces surrounding the Inspector.

Dene turned to the girl again. 'Reardon gave me a message for you,' he said in a rapid undertone.

'For me?' She was trembling violently.

'He said I was to tell you there are no photographs. It was just a ruse to get you away from your room so that he could work on the safe undisturbed...'

On that, abruptly, she withdrew her hand. Her head fell on her breast and she put her two hands over her face.

'Pay attention to me,' he whispered swiftly, after another glance to the rear. 'How much did you tell them up at the house?'

She took her hands away, looking at him enquiringly. 'Nothing.'

'Do they know that anybody was in your room?'

She shook her head. 'I hid the flash-lamp and tidied things up before Aunt Clara came in...'

His eyes snapped. 'She heard us, then?'

'No. There's a bathroom between her room and mine, you know. It was the shooting that woke her up. She knocked on the communicating door just after you rushed out...'

'Wait! What about the rope ladder on the verandah?'

'I hid it, too...'

'Good. Say nothing to anyone, do you hear? If you're asked any questions, you were in bed and asleep when the shooting roused you...' He patted her shoulder. 'Now go back to the house and leave the rest to me!'

'But what are you going to tell them?'

The same thought had already occurred to him. He had been composing in his mind the version of the essential events which, he realized, he would have to furnish to the Inspector, if not to Robotham.

'Oh, I don't know,' he said lightly. 'Probably that I found Reardon prowling round the house and that, when there was that shooting in the bay, he dashed down to the beach. I followed after, heard a shot, and discovered him lying on the lawn. That's near enough to the truth to ring plausible, I fancy...'

She stared at him incredulously. 'You mean you're not going to say anything about this man and me?'

He smiled at her earnestness. 'Not unless you do...'

'And you ask me no questions?'

He gave her his cheerful grin. 'No time now. Got my job to finish...'



With eyes luminous and tender, she looked at him, her mouth wistful. Then, with a little cry, she flung her arms about him. For a brief instant the warm softness of her mouth was on his, then, gathering her long skirt about her, she fled past him out of the arbour and up the grassy steps leading to the house.

Bewildered, he remained rooted to the spot. Dishevelled, bloody and dirty as he was, she had kissed him. Obeying a sudden impulse, he ran after her. But when he reached the steps, she was already out of sight. With a dazed air, he brushed his hand lightly across his lips, as though to assure himself that he was really waking or, perhaps, to resavour the fleeting sweetness of that moment. Then he hurried back to the group on the lawn.

The Inspector was on his feet, conferring in undertones with Donovan and the stenographer who had his notebook open as though he had just read over Reardon's confession. Bill, with his faintly quizzical expression, was smoking a cigarette and looking on. Ernest Robotham and the two menservants stood aloof, whispering. On catching sight of Dene, Robotham sprang forward.

But the Scotland Yard man waved him aside. 'Not now, Mr. Robotham...'

'But, Mr. Dene...'

'I'll explain everything later...' He walked across to the Inspector.

A breathless plain-clothesman had appeared from the beach. The doctor was on the way, he announced.

'We shan't need him,' Bryce retorted and barked an order across his shoulder. 'All right with that stretcher, boys. The ambulance will be at the Yacht Club by the time you're there...' The policemen with the stretcher advanced.

Someone handed Dene his wet and crumpled dinner-jacket. Pulling it on, he went forward. Reardon lay flat on his back. The noise in his throat had ceased. The face was infinitely peaceful in the glare of the moon, the regular features stamped with a certain stern majesty. Long-limbed and relaxed, his elegant grey suit and highly polished shoes contrasting with the workaday attire of the figures moving about him, he seemed to radiate an air of disdainful indifference to his surroundings, and the thought came to Dene, as he took his last look at his quarry, that in death, as in life, this man still kept himself arrogantly aloof from the common herd. A faint, secretive smile just parted the clean-cut lips, and the hands of the dead jewel thief, tapering and exquisite, trailed in the diamonds which the moonlight struck out of the wet grass.

They lifted him upon the stretcher and plodded down to the beach with their burden.

A voice spoke drily in the Scotland Yard man's ear. 'These guys save us a lot of trouble, Mr. Dene...'

Dene turned. It was Bryce. 'That makes three, with Mike and his buddy...' the speaker added.

The Englishman gasped. 'Pedder? You don't mean to say...'

The Inspector laughed grimly. 'Rubbed out, the pair of them...'

'Rubbed out?'

'Bumped off. Cold meat...'

'But how... I don't understand...'

'Chopper...'

'Chopper?'

Bryce chuckled. 'I forgot you were English. What we call a chopper is a sub-machine-gun...'

'Then it *was* a machine-gun we heard...'

'You wouldn't have any doubt about it if you'd been out with us to the Astart', Mr. Dene,' the Inspector observed crisply. 'They caught 'em as they bolted up from the main companion. The deck's like a butcher's shop...'

'And they're dead—both of them...'

'I'll say they're dead. The big fella in the tux...'

'That's Pedder...'

'Most cut in two, he was. Must have copped the best part of a drum. They meant to make sure, those guys. Brought themselves and their choppers round by sea from N' York or Brooklyn and gave the Astart' the works as they scud by. I didn't see their boat, but I heard her, and I bet she was doing forty as she roared down the Sound afterwards. To have cleaned up the way they did, there must have been at least a coupla ukes on the job...'

'Ukes? Are they machine-guns?'

'Sure. Ukuleles, that's what the boys call 'em. Thompsons, they mostly use. And do they knock 'em over?' He simmered gently. 'Just a friendly argument between gangs, I reckon. Though what a guy like Pedder wants, mixing himself up in this business, beats me. Mike I'm wise to, but Pedder's a big shot around this town.' He wagged his head dubiously. 'I tell you, there'll be plenty trouble about this...'

‘I don’t know who was on that boat,’ Dene put in. ‘But I believe I can tell you who sent her out. It was a man named Rocco...’ And he related the conversation between Mike and Pedder he had overheard on board the Astarte that evening.

‘Rocco, eh?’ Bryce observed thoughtfully when the Scotland Yard man had finished. ‘It’s about time we had something on him. I’ve been on to Headquarters about that boat already, but I’ll ring ’em again and tell them what you say. Before I do that, however, I’d like to hear from you just what happened...’ He ran his eyes humorously over his colleague’s dishevelled appearance. ‘It looks like you had a busy evening...’

The Scotland Yard man laughed and brushed the dank hair out of his eyes. ‘The evening’s just beginning as far as I’m concerned. Where can I get on the telephone to London?’

## CHAPTER XXXIII

BILL THORNLEY stood at the top of the Megantic's gangway, looking at his watch. Above him towered the liner's mighty smokestacks, gently steaming into the bright blue sky of the June afternoon: at his feet the dock was a mass of upturned faces. Within the great ship a gong boomed fitfully and, to the chant of 'Visitors off, please!' in ones and twos people were beginning to file down the gangway.

Suddenly on the quay below, a tawny thatch bobbed up among the crowd. Preceded by a policeman adroitly shouldering a passage, Trevor Dene, bareheaded, his face glowing pinkly, fought his way through the press to the roped-off space about the gangway. With him was Inspector Bryce. Arrived at the foot of the gangway, Trevor caught Thornley's frantic signals and waved in response.

'Fourteen minutes to spare,' spoke the Inspector after a glance at his watch. 'You can take it easy, Mr. Dene.'

The young man mopped his glistening forehead. 'Gosh,' he murmured, 'I never thought we'd make it...' He held out his hand to Bryce. 'Well, good-bye, Inspector, and thanks for all your kindness...'

The Inspector returned the grip warmly. 'Nothing at all, Mr. Dene. It's been a pleasure. And congratulations again on a swell job!'

'Good-bye, officer!' The Scotland Yard man shook hands with the escorting policeman and dashed up the gangway. 'My sainted aunt,' he panted as he reached Thornley's side, 'if they hadn't given me a police car and a motor-cyclist to clear the way, I'd have missed the blinking ship. We came along in style, I can tell you—I felt like the Sultan of Zanzibar or the Queen of Rumania or someone. You got my message, then?'

'You bet,' said Bill. 'Your kit's below—D. 107. It's a lousy cabin, but I had a word with the purser and he's promised to move you presently. And here's your ticket!' He handed him an envelope.

'That infernal Manderton!' the young man fumed as he pocketed the envelope. 'After telling me on the 'phone, when I spoke to him from Freshwater early this morning, to stand by for the present and get all the evidence together, he rings me up at Headquarters at two o'clock this afternoon and orders me to catch the Megantic sailing at six—the Home Secretary is deferring all action in the Cloan case until my arrival. Of course, Gerry's cleared all right—Manderton admits it; but the scramble I've had,

what with sworn depositions and all the rigmarole...' He gazed around distractedly. 'Is it "Visitors ashore!" already, Bill? And I've so much to say to you...'

'I can stick around a bit longer,' Bill remarked composedly. 'How did you make out at Headquarters?'

'Okay...'

He lowered his voice. 'What about Nancy? Were you still able to keep her name out of it?'

Dene's nod was rather dour. 'It meant suppressing our discovery of Rontz's body and, of course, I had to gloss over Reardon's movements last night a bit. But otherwise I told the whole truth. Oh, and I had to cheat a little about the Calderon. They wanted to know about the girl who was seen to leave with me. I said it was Jennie. They may check up on that at Mike's place, but it doesn't matter, as I'm going away...' He broke off and glanced at his friend. 'About Jennie, Bill—I stopped in for a moment at the funeral parlour this afternoon. That was your doing, wasn't it?'

'One couldn't leave the poor child in the mortuary,' Bill explained apologetically.

'It was devilish decent of you, Bill. It was so quiet and peaceful in that beautiful little chapel, I was glad I went. I left some roses for her. I'd like to have them put on the grave...'

'I'll see to it. The funeral's tomorrow...'

'Are you going?'

'Of course...'

Trevor said nothing; but his hand went out to his friend's shoulder and gave it a brief squeeze.

'She was a sweet kid,' said Bill.

'It makes a good epitaph,' the Scotland Yard man rejoined soberly.

Perceiving that the crowd was thinning out, Bill said rather hurriedly, 'Did you get anything out of them at Headquarters?'

'Rocco's gone to ground, but they've rounded up some of his mob. From what the police have picked up so far, it would seem that Rocco and Rontz were in these jewel robberies together. Rocco found the "prospect" and our friend Hermie supplied the working force in the person of Reardon...'

'How did Pedder come into the picture?'

'That has to be cleared up yet, but they think he was brought in to finance the Priory job—it seems the gang was trailing the Cartwrights for quite a time. The money was ostensibly Hermie's—Pedder remained in the

background. What happened, of course, was that Pedder, recognizing Reardon's possibilities, managed to get in touch with him direct...'

'And persuaded him to double-cross the others on the Priory job, is that it?'

'That's the idea. Naturally, Rocco believed that Rontz and his star turn had done him out of his share of the split...'

'And Hermie's come-back against Pedder was to tip off you fellows at the Yard, of course?'

'Exactly...'

'What about Reardon?'

The Scotland Yard man shrugged his shoulders. 'None of the mob had ever set eyes on him—even Rocco, they say, didn't know his name or anything about him. Remarkable chap, Larry! He was obviously an Englishman and of good family at that. I'm taking the morgue pictures back with me in the hope that the French police may help us to clear up the mystery about him...'

'One thing puzzles me,' said Thornley. 'How did he manage to pull that job over in England without leaving any trace? I mean, was he staying in the neighbourhood? Or did he motor down from London? Or what?'

His friend laughed. 'His plan was beautifully simple. He was staying in a nursing home close by, one of these health centres—I remember the place. They found the bill in his luggage at the Longford—he was there for a fortnight before and a fortnight after the robbery. All he had to do was to slip out of his room one night, nip across to the Priory, do the job, nip back, and next day go on with his treatments, just a quiet, well-bred Englishman. A corking good idea, I call it...' He broke off and looked at his friend with a faint air of embarrassment. 'Bill, you haven't seen or heard anything of Nancy, I suppose?'

'Of Nancy? Why?'

'I was just wondering. I thought she might have called me at your apartment. I rang her up at Rosemount this afternoon to say good-bye, but she was out...'

'Too bad...'

'Robotham was round at Headquarters after lunch. He hadn't seen her all day—he said he came into town early, before she was up...'

'How was our Ernest?'

'Apoplectic. He can't get over falling for Pedder like that. And the Herr Doktor Gastein, he seems to stick in his gullet, too.'

Bill chuckled. Then, becoming serious: ‘Our Ernest isn’t asking any awkward questions about last night, is he?’

‘Not he! He made a little speech of thanks for what he called “frustrating a dastardly attempt by my vigilance.” He can talk of nothing but Pedder, anyway...’ He paused. ‘I never anticipated leaving America without seeing Nancy again. As I told you, I’m convinced that Rontz and Reardon between them were blackmailing her, but I was hoping to hear her own story...’

‘Now, then, sir, if you’re for the shore!’ An agitated official was accosting Bill.

Bill gave Trevor his hand. ‘So long, old top. It’s been fun seeing you. That Somaliland trip of mine will seem like butterfly-chasing after this!’

The Scotland Yard man laughed, but his mien was rather crestfallen. ‘Good-bye. Bill. I haven’t thanked you a bit for all you’ve done for me...’

‘Thanks, nothing, old boy. Gosh, I’m going to be so bored again! I shall probably get drunk tonight. As for you, I advise you to go straight to your cabin and get some sleep—you can do with it.’ Affectionately, he clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Damn it, man, don’t look so down in the mouth. They’ll probably make you a sergeant or an inspector or something over this...’

Trevor smiled wistfully. ‘If you should run into Nancy,’ he said in a low voice, ‘you might tell her from me that she doesn’t have to worry any more, that everything’s O.K....’

But Bill did not appear to hear him. With a wave of his hand he vanished down the covered gangway.

The Scotland Yard man departed in search of his quarters. Now that the excitement was past, the reaction of the crowded events of his three days in America was strong upon him. He realized that the expectation of seeing Nancy again had buoyed him up. Now that she had failed him, the success he had achieved seemed stale and unprofitable. He had no sensation of triumph: only an overwhelming feeling of moral lassitude, of utter physical weariness. Bill’s advice was good: he would go to bed and sleep... sleep.

But when he reached D. 107, the immediate execution of his purpose proved impracticable for the simple reason that the narrow bed was already occupied.

Nancy lay there asleep.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

HER small brown hat, tweed overcoat, and scarf were on the table, her bag and gloves beside her on the bed. Her face, flushed like a sleeping child's, was pillowed on her hand: her long lashes made dark half-moons on her cheeks.

The sound of the door swinging to behind him as he entered roused her. 'Oh,' she sighed, 'I thought you'd never arrive. I was so tired, I just lay down a minute—I hope you don't mind...'

Rapturously he gazed at her. She seemed to imbue the whole atmosphere of the rather dingy cabin with her fresh daintiness: he fancied that the fragrance of her presence would linger in the room during all the lonely six days that stretched between him and the cliffs of home. She had not forgotten him, then—she had come to see him off. His revulsion of feeling was so strong that it made him self-conscious, formal.

'It was terribly nice of you to come down to the dock,' he said rather lamely. 'I was afraid I wasn't going to see you again. And to think that I've been gossiping at the gangway with Bill Thornley and you were here all the time. I wish I'd known about it sooner, because, you see, my dear, we've got only about another minute before she sails...'

'Sit down in that chair,' she ordered, pointing to a chair opposite the bed, 'and listen to me...'

'But I tell you the ship...'

'Never mind the old ship...'

'But you won't be able to go ashore...'

Her serene eyes teased him. 'Would that be such a calamity?'

Her tone was gay, and it set his heart singing in harmony with hers. He was thinking to himself: this is America, the land of the unexpected. What harm, supposing she were carried on to Southampton? American money standards were different: the fare didn't matter and, as for the conventions, American girls appeared to do what they liked—this one, at any rate. For three days now in his relation to her he had played the policeman. But his mission was accomplished—he could become human again. He had warned her that the ship was due to sail—if she chose to disregard his warning—poor little Jennie's saying crept into his mind—what the hell?

'I'm all for it, of course,' he told her, laughing. 'But why do I have to sit so far away? I'd like to be as near you as possible, in case you change your



mind. Move up on that bed...’

‘Please sit where I tell you and don’t interrupt,’ she bade him. He took the chair she indicated: she was contemplating him out of grave eyes. ‘Did anybody ever tell you you were a swell person, Trevor Dene?’ she demanded.

He flushed and laughed. ‘Are you trying to pay me compliments?’

‘You’re a Scotland Yard man, you were on an official mission...’ Her voice was warm with feeling. ‘You took a big risk in shielding me, didn’t you?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Not so big. The fellow was blackmailing you—I should have known it from the start...’

‘I want to explain about Larry Reardon,’ she said. ‘I met him at Biarritz last summer. I thought he was the most wonderful man I’d ever seen. He was good-looking, with charming manners—well, you know what he was like. I was wild about him. You may think it was just a schoolgirl infatuation, but...’ She broke off. ‘Women do these silly things,’ she went on, smoothing out her frock. ‘We’re supposed to have intuition, I know, but when it comes to judging anyone in whom we’re sentimentally interested—it’s because we’re vain, I guess. Larry wanted me to elope with him and get married. But I wouldn’t do that. I’d known him for such a little time and I didn’t want to make a mistake. Besides, there was Ernest back in America. We weren’t officially engaged, but I’d told him I’d marry him. In my heart of hearts, though, I’d made up my mind, I think, to marry Larry—he seemed so decent and... and high-minded, out of the run of ordinary men. And he was crazy about me, or pretended to be...’ She smiled wanly. ‘It was just one of those mistakes a woman makes, I guess...’

‘Do you really have to tell me this?’ Dene struck in, ‘I mean, if it hurts you to go over it all again...’

She shook her head. ‘It’s all right. Only I never told anybody the story before, and it’s not very easy...’ She paused and resumed. ‘I broke with him when I discovered that he was keeping a woman, a Frenchwoman, at Bayonne, and I came back to New York. It was soon after that my engagement to Ernest was announced.’ Her laugh was rather bleak. ‘I’d had my love affair, such as it was, and I didn’t think so much of love, I guess...’

The ship’s siren wailed despairingly: footsteps drummed overhead; but the girl paid no heed. ‘One day last January, Larry rang me up here in New York. I didn’t want to see him, but he was insistent... He told me he was stranded, that he’d go to prison if he couldn’t raise ten thousand dollars at once. When I told him I couldn’t possibly find this amount of money, he

said he had some letters of mine which Ernest would probably be glad to buy back—I had never mentioned Ernest to him, but he must have read of our engagement in the newspapers...’ Her manner grew agitated. ‘I was... appalled. I knew he’d treated me badly, but to discover that he was just a blackmailer...’ She broke off, her hands pressed tightly together. ‘I’d no idea that people could be so vile...’

‘You paid him the money?’

She nodded. ‘Yes. But only on condition he’d sign an undertaking to leave America immediately and never return. He took me to Rontz to have the agreement drawn—I was afraid to go to any lawyer I knew. I had five thousand dollars of my own in the bank: the other five I borrowed from Ernest—I told him I’d lost it in the market: I’m paying him back, so much a month, out of my allowance. I burned those wretched letters of mine and saw Larry off myself by the next boat. I never set eyes on him again until the other night when I recognized him on board this very ship...’

She drew a deep breath. ‘You can’t imagine what I felt. I was sure he’d come over to blackmail me again. My first thought was Rontz. He was very reasonable at the only interview I had with him and I had a sort of silly idea that he might be able to persuade Larry to go away again or, at any rate, to stall him off. Then Rontz was killed. I was beside myself with fear...’

She paused. ‘Yesterday morning there was a letter from Larry in the mail. He said Rontz had had the letters photographed, but that, now that Rontz was dead, he, Larry, was in touch with someone who’d get the photos back and that I’d be hearing from him very soon. I was in a panic. Larry wrote from the Longford and I jumped in a car and drove straight there. To my surprise he was quite friendly. He said there was no question of any further payment: he expected the photos to be in his hands late that night and he’d bring them down to me at Rosemount. I was to wait for him in the summer-house between twelve and one. As we know now, that was just a ruse...’

The Scotland Yard man shook his head at her. ‘Why on earth didn’t you take someone into your confidence? What if Ernest had seen these letters? After all, you weren’t married to him when you wrote them...’

‘You don’t understand,’ she murmured in a low voice. ‘These letters were insanely indiscreet...’

He smiled at her. ‘They mostly are...’

‘One in particular. I spoke of... of a night at an hotel at San Sebastian...’ Her eyes, large and luminous, hung expectant upon his face.

He nodded and looked at the floor. ‘I see,’ he said soberly.

‘If Ernest had read that letter, he’d have broken off our engagement,’ she went on positively. ‘The trouble is that my father is absolutely dependent on Ernest; he’d have gone bankrupt eighteen months ago if Ernest hadn’t put fresh capital into the firm. And then there was Ruthie. She has always looked up to me. If she should ever think badly about me, I don’t believe I could bear to go on living. Now you see why I had to keep silent...’

He nodded again. ‘One thing you must never do and that is, tell Ernest. It would only make him wretched: he’d never understand...’

She looked at him squarely. ‘Do you think it would be honest to marry him without telling him?’

He shook his head. ‘No,’ he said.

Her eyes lingered curiously on his face. ‘Would you marry a girl who had had an affair before marriage?’ she asked.

‘I would if it were you,’ he answered rather huskily.

‘Why?’ she asked again, her eyes averted.

‘Because *you* could never do anything mean or vile,’ he answered steadily.

She gave him a glance warm with gratitude and affection.

‘I’d go down on my knees to a girl like you and ask her to be my wife,’ he said rather huskily.

‘Truly?’ Her eyes were alight.

He nodded. ‘If it were my last word...’

‘Notwithstanding what I’ve just told you...’

‘Because you were honest enough to tell me...’

She smiled at him happily. ‘I love you for saying that...’ Her eyes were tender. ‘Would you be cross if you found out I’d misled you?’

‘Misled me?’

She nodded, a little mischievous smile parting her lips. ‘I wanted to test you, to find out how much you really...’ She checked. ‘I’m not the abandoned hussy you think me. Though if you’d read that letter...’

‘Nancy!’ He had stood up.

‘Stay where you are!’ she bade him. ‘I haven’t finished...’ She paused. ‘You know, I used to pride myself on being so modern. I used to tell myself that a girl is entitled to live her life as a man does...’

‘Well, isn’t she?’

She shook her brown head. ‘Some women, perhaps. Not me. You told me the other evening I was old-fashioned—well, I guess you were right. At

any rate, when it came to the test, I couldn't go through with it...' She broke off, smoothing out her frock. 'Looking back at it now, I believe Larry laid a trap for me, although it all seemed plausible enough at the time. You see, I couldn't tell the Powells—the people I was staying with, who took me with them to Europe—about Larry, because they knew Ernest and knew that he and I were practically engaged. The result was that I was only able to meet Larry at odd moments on the quiet. Then the Powells had to go up to Paris for a wedding. They were to be away for a day and a night, so Larry and I planned to drive over into Spain and spend the whole day together at San Sebastian. But when we started back from San Sebastian after dinner in the evening, we found the frontier closed—it shuts at ten or something—and we couldn't get to Biarritz that night. So we had to return to San Sebastian and go to an hotel. I wasn't worried about spending the night away from Biarritz, as the Powells were up in Paris, and, anyhow, the people at the hotel were used to my coming in at all hours from the Casino. I thought it was quite an amusing adventure until I found that Larry... that Larry...' Her voice trailed off. 'He was furious when I locked myself in my room,' she resumed, 'and the next day he wouldn't speak to me. I wrote him that letter to try and make it up with him. Such a mad letter! Anyone reading it must have believed...'

She sighed and shook her head. 'Well, there it is!' she said. 'That letter is burnt with the rest. But I wanted you to know...'

With that she stood up abruptly, knocking over her bag which rolled from the bed to the floor. She walked to the porthole. Dene picked up the bag. A passport and a letter had fallen from it.

'Your passport?' he cried. 'Then you meant to sail all along?' It was at that moment he discovered that the Megantic was under way.

She turned and nodded to him, lips smiling, eyes dancing. 'That letter in your hand, it's for you...'

'For me?'

'It's from Bill Thornley...'

'You've seen Bill?'

'He got me my sailing permit, my ticket, everything...'

Dene laughed. 'Well, I'll be...' He broke the seal of the envelope. 'Dear Trevor,' he read, 'this is to warn you that if you don't ask Nancy to marry you, she's going to ask you...'

'Do you know what's in this letter?' he asked Nancy.

'Sure,' she answered sweetly, 'we wrote it together...'

‘But it’s absurd!’ he cried out wrathfully. ‘How can I ask you to marry me? Do you know how much I have to live on, salary and my tiny private income? Eight hundred pounds a year...’

‘But that’s marvellous. I’ve got one hundred and fifty dollars a month, or I shall have when I’ve finished paying off Ernest—that’s eighteen hundred dollars a year—about four hundred and fifty pounds, isn’t it? We shall manage beautifully...’

‘And, anyway, you can’t marry a cop!’

On that she crossed to where he stood and slid her arms about his neck. Laying her cheek against his, she said softly, ‘I adore cops!’

Still he did not yield. ‘What about Ernest?’

‘I left him a note. I told him I didn’t care enough for him to go through with it...’

‘And your father?’

‘I saw Daddy this morning and told him what I was going to do. He was wonderful about it. He said that Aunt Clara won’t let Ernest withdraw from the business and that, anyway, I was to go ahead and do what I think right...’ She paused. ‘Oh, Trevor, I’ve been so miserable all these months. In this life I’ve been leading—money, parties, rushing about—I seem to have got all my values mixed. Then you dropped from the sky and helped me to get them right. Oh, Trevor, dear, take me out of it all and make me happy again...’ The tears were in her eyes.

He stooped to the vital, gracious face raised to his and gently kissed the tears away. ‘Will you marry me, Nancy, darling?’ he said huskily.

Out of misty eyes she smiled up at him. ‘Am I the woman you spoke of, the one woman among all the millions on earth whom you want and who you want to want you?’

‘There was never anyone else,’ he told her tensely. ‘I knew it from the very first moment I set eyes on you outside the purser’s office... Nancy, could you care for me a little?’

She shook her head. He stared at her, wounded.

‘A lot,’ she whispered. ‘Didn’t you tell me yourself that I should marry for love? Someone that would carry me up to the stars...’ She clung to him desperately. ‘Trevor, do you remember?’

He caught her in his arms and she clung to him in sweet surrender.

‘There’s a little Norman church down in Cambridgeshire where my mother lives,’ he told her. ‘We’ll be married there...’

She gazed up at him happily. ‘The policeman’s wedding! I’d have brought Ruthie along as a bridesmaid, only I wasn’t sure...’

‘I don’t believe a word of it,’ he laughed at her.

She shook her brown head at him. ‘I don’t believe it myself...’ She sighed. ‘Oh, dear, and it’s a six-day boat. I have a stateroom somewhere, I believe. Let’s go and find it. And then we’ll go on deck and say good-bye to the skyline...’

But the beetling towers of Lower Manhattan slid by unnoticed as they stood arm-in-arm at the rail, looking into one another’s eyes, so that a messenger who brought a wireless had to cough and shuffle with his feet in order to attract their attention.

The message was for Nancy. It was signed ‘Bill.’

‘You or he?’ they read.

Nancy took the pad from the messenger and scrawled the reply.

‘Fifty-fifty,’ she wrote.

The unheeded skyline dropped behind in the sunset.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Clock Ticks On* by Valentine Williams]