

The Fourth Dagger

Luke Allan

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By the same Author.

THE DARK SPOT.
THE END OF THE TRAIL.
THE JUNGLE CRIME.
THE MASKED STRANGER.
MURDER AT MIDNIGHT.
BLUE PETE: HALF BREED.
THE BLUE WOLF.
THE LONE TRAIL.
THE WESTERNER.
THE RETURN OF BLUE PETE.
THE BEAST.
THE SIRE.
THE PACE.
BLUE PETE: DETECTIVE.

THE
FOURTH DAGGER

BY
LUKE ALLAN

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THE CHARACTERS

TIGER LILLIE, crime reporter of *The Star*, narrator of the story.

GORDON MULDREW, detective.

CONRAD SPERRING, writer of crime stories.

GUY HAMMERTON, manager of the Florence Hotel.

JERRY INKERLEY, City Editor of *The Star*.

AARON NETHERWOOD, old actor.

MRS. NETHERWOOD, his wife.

MONA NETHERWOOD, his daughter.

BLAYTON ANDERS, Room 324.

DAVID JEFFERSON, Room 326.

THE DARLINGS, husband and wife, Room 325, across the corridor.

JAMESON, a policeman.

SID NEWHALL and BUCK TAYLOR, of *The Star* staff.

INSPECTOR ARMITAGE, of the Detective Department, in the background.

A police doctor, a finger-print expert, a plain clothes man and several policemen.

Hotel guests.

Some violent, unnamed characters.

The Fourth Dagger

CHAPTER I HELP!

Jerry Inkerley had given me an assignment after my own taste. Inspector Armitage, goaded by *The Star*, of which Jerry was City Editor and I crime reporter, had set Gordon Muldrew on the trail of the counterfeiters; and Jerry, learning of it, had set me that night on the trail of Muldrew.

Gordy was my best friend, but that only added to the excitement of it, and on that lowering evening in late April I set out with every confidence of for once putting Gordy's nose out of joint.

My troubles started early. Muldrew was not at home, not at his office, and, of course, no one knew anything about him. After a couple of hours of pointless wandering the slight drizzle that had commenced to fall got under my skin, and I decided to look up Guy Hammerton in the comfortable lobby of the Florence Hotel.

I had turned into Orchard Street, and the upright, flashing electric sign of the Florence was before me, when I saw Muldrew lounging along not a hundred yards ahead.

A convenient dark doorway offered temporary retreat, and there I took shelter while I tried to figure what my friend was doing in such an ultra-respectable locality. And then I remembered that in these sophisticated days respectability is the cloak chosen by the most dangerous criminals—or in any other days, for that matter.

I peered from my hiding-place. Muldrew had disappeared!

In a moment I knew what had happened. A lane that ran behind the stores on Orchard Street emerged to the street ahead of me not far from the

hotel entrance. Into this Muldrew must have vanished. By good fortune another exit was not ten yards away, and after a careful look in both directions I dived into it and ran at top speed in the darkness toward where I thought Muldrew must be. At the corner of the branch that would lead me out again to Orchard Street I pulled up and cautiously bent forward to have a look.

Something that felt like a pile-driver dropped on my shoulder, and I was unceremoniously whirled from my feet.

I shouted to Muldrew for help, but my cries were cut short by a heavy hand over my mouth, and then I was plumped back on my feet with a thud that shook my teeth.

“I’m not deaf, Tiger. What do you want?”

Against the light on the street I saw Muldrew bending over me, and his jaw looked dishearteningly grim.

“You’re devilishly rough, Gordy,” I grumbled, readjusting my coat.

“You were looking for thrills, Tiger,” he said, in a low voice. “But you’re such a poor hound you forgot to consider what the rabbit might do. It’s a habit you have.”

“You’re jealous,” I jeered. “Just because I got ahead of you in the Jungle murder.”^[1]

“Did Inkerley think you did?”

“The devil with Jerry Inkerley!” I wasn’t likely to forget Jerry’s riotous explosions at my expense when I refused to tell *The Star* readers all that had happened in that strange case. “In the meantime, how about a companion for your stroll?”

“This is no stroll,” he barked, “and you know it. You wouldn’t be interested if it were.”

“How clever of me! Gordy, you’re really as transparent as a summer frock against a street light. But what the deuce does a detective find to interest him in a spiritless spot like this? The private mint the Inspector has started you after — —”

He cut me short. “Tiger, this is my busy night.” I knew that cold, grim tone that crowds a volume into a phrase, and my heart sank. Without another word he turned to leave me. With the temerity of a best friend—and of the

average reporter—I refused to be left. Over his shoulder he threw me a glance that lit up the lane.

“Gordy,” I pleaded, “I promise to be as unobtrusive as a soiled collar.”

“I never knew anyone with less flair for it,” he returned. “Anyone else I’d run in—prowling where you’ve no business to be. How’d you like a night in the cells?”

I stalked past him. “As a respectable citizen I demand my rights. I’m on my way to visit a friend, Guy Hammerton, across the street in the Florence Hotel.”

That ponderous hand of his crashed on my shoulder again. “No, you’re not.”

Tingles ran up and down my spine. We were near the mouth of the lane, and Muldrew’s steady eye glared into mine.

“Listen, Tiger. I’ve something important on to-night— —”

Strange that at that particular moment he should ask me to listen, should warn me that something important was afoot. Into the drizzling night broke an agonizing cry:

“Help! Help! He’s killing me! Oh-h-h, my Go-od!”

[1] *The Jungle Crime.*

CHAPTER II

MURDER!

The nerve-shattering agony of that cry cannot be reproduced on paper. The words were startling enough, but it was the tone of it, the awful finality at the end, the futile appeal for human help that became so swiftly the gasp of a soul facing its Maker, breaking over a deserted street in the darkness of a dismal night, that sent the blood pounding to my head. I had heard the death-cry of a woman in a darkened dance-hall, and I would never forget it; but this was worse.

Our eyes flew to an open window on the third floor of the hotel across the street. Along that eight-story façade half a hundred windows were lighted, but only one, almost over the entrance, was open.

Someone else, too, had heard and located the cry, for at that moment a window on the floor above was flung violently up and a man, coatless and collarless, thrust an agitated face through and leaned far out to look downward.

Muldrew had started on the run, and I was after him, my feet beating a machine-gun tattoo on the otherwise silent street. I was not in the best of condition, but in forty yards not even Muldrew could throw me off.

The frightened man on the fourth floor hung perilously from his window, the flashing sign lighting up his round-eyed, open-mouthed terror. He pointed to the window below.

“There!” he shrilled. “It was there! For God’s sake hurry!”

Muldrew had drawn his whistle, but he did not blow it. I wondered. As we came beneath the man hanging from the window he edged farther out, one hand clutching the frame, and I veered to the outside of the side-walk, having no desire to act as buffer to a hundred and ninety pounds catapulting from a fourth-story window.

My attention thus divided, I brought up hard against the glass of the revolving front door of the hotel. It refused to revolve, because Muldrew was wedged inside! My detective friend, who a moment before had set a ten-second pace, was standing between the glasses, looking about the lobby, calm as if he had dropped in for the evening paper.

I raised myself to my toes to see over his shoulder.

The Florence Hotel, built in a section never before considered suitable for an hotel, luxuriously furnished and high-priced, had had a struggle from the first. Then five months ago it had been given over to the expert management of Guy Hammerton, whose record in another city hotel had paved the way to such a promotion. Guy's sense of news-value had advertised well the hotels he managed—and had made him valuable to me.

Since his induction the Florence had picked up. The three upper stories had been transformed into luxurious apartments that were filled from the first month, and only a week ago Guy had declared swaggeringly, in a manner that threatened his usefulness to me as newsmonger, that all the Florence had needed was imagination and decision.

Staring over Muldrew's shoulder, I could scarcely believe my eyes. With that cry ringing in my ears, the serenity of the life there in the crowded lobby was dreamlike in its unreality. More than half the easy-chairs were occupied, while a line of uniformed bell-boys stood stiffly beside the elevators at the far side.

Then I saw Guy Hammerton, seated behind the office counter, lean forward and pick up the telephone. And as he listened his eyes flashed, and one shoulder twitched curiously. In desperation I threw myself against the glass door and managed to squeeze through.

A breath of hotel air greeted me, the murmur of modulated laughter and cultivated voices, the rustle of newspapers, the metallic click of the elevators. A few of the nearer groups regarded Muldrew and me with calm detachment; and I, taking my cue from my friend, bore it with outward indifference.

But Hammerton, telephone in hand, was close to the scene of the crime, not forty feet over our heads.

Some of those near the office caught the significance of his manner and tone, and conversation hushed. A tense stillness filled the lobby.

Hammerton's voice rose almost to a scream:

“Room 322? . . . What—what's that? You heard— — . . . Are you sure? But—but— —”

His hand trembled. His tone, pure alarm at first, was petulant now, indignant, protesting. Under other conditions the change would have been amusing. His roving eye caught a signal from the telephone operator that he

was wanted on another line, and with an effeminately manicured hand on which blazed an enormous diamond he waved it away.

“Hello! Hello! I’ll come right up.” The experienced manager now, with a personal and a business reputation to sustain.

I could stand it no longer. As I started forward Muldrew’s strong fingers closed on my wrist. He had heard, before me, the patter of running feet from the floor above. Then came the shrill scream of a pretty girl—pretty, I knew, though she had not yet come in sight. Then around the sweep of the red-carpeted stairs she appeared, her eyes staring, her face contorted with terror. Straight across the lobby she ran and, reaching over the counter, took hold of Hammerton’s arm.

“Oh, quick, quick! The door’s locked! They’re killing him—killing him!” Her breath caught. “It was his voice. He’s—dead! He won’t answer the door!”

Hammerton jerked himself loose with a savagery that made me twist to free myself from Muldrew’s grasp. But the girl had hold of Hammerton again, and this time he could only brace himself against the counter and glare.

“I’m coming,” he said in a low voice, darting a conscious, frightened look about the lobby.

In a dozen long strides Muldrew stood beside the girl.

“Three twenty-two, you said? Quick, Hammerton, your master-key!” He flashed about on the head porter who had raced across the lobby to his master’s defence. “You, there, lock that door. Lock every door in the place. Stop those elevators!” He showed his badge. “Call the police station,” to the operator, “and tell them to rush down half a dozen men.” He had wrested the telephone from Hammerton’s hand. “Who called on this?” he demanded of the operator.

“Three twenty-six, sir.”

The girl had stepped back, her white face turned expectantly on Muldrew. “He’s dead—I know he’s dead!” she murmured in a dazed way. “Do hurry.”

Muldrew flushed at the implied rebuke and started toward the elevators. Suddenly he stopped and handed me, following close at his heels, his whistle.

“Blow it outside, Tiger,” he ordered.

So that I, who had thrilled at the prospect of attending him at every twist and turn of the tragedy I knew had happened upstairs, was forced to the insignificant rôle of blowing a dime whistle. And Muldrew had done it deliberately.

But I was not yet beaten. Passing the whistle to the porter, I retreated to the shadow of a pillar. Muldrew, Hammerton, and the girl had disappeared in an elevator. I ran to the counter.

“Constance Bennett,” I whispered to the telephone operator, “I want you — —”

“I’ve heard that before,” she broke in serenely, proving that a murder is neither here nor there with a pretty telephone operator when a live man is in sight. “I’m not afraid of tigers.”

“I bet you’re a big-game hunter,” I returned. “But say, I know a road-house where they serve the best cocktails in America. Now, listen. There’s a ’phone in 322? All right. I want you to jam through a call for Jerry Inkerley, Midvale 5204, and tell him to stand by till I connect from 322. Jerry Inkerley, remember. It’s Tiger Lillie speaking.”

“O.K., Tiger,” she said. “I’m not afraid of cocktails either.”

Then I was off on the run. Lung-torn and gasping, I reached the third floor by way of the stairs. As I rounded from the branch-corridor that led from the stairs someone pounded down from the floor above, and dropped in behind me. A glance told me it was the man I had seen hanging from the fourth story window immediately after the cry for help. He had taken time to don collar and coat, but a tie was still missing in his excitement; and the turned-up collar of the coat added to the terror and incredulity of his big eyes.

From below came the powerful blasts of the porter exposing my trick; but Muldrew, centre now of a group before the door of 322, seemed to have forgotten. Hammerton stood with the master-key dangling in his hand, protesting petulantly:

“I can’t help it. He had a Yale lock put on just after he came. Of course, I have no key for it.”

“Why ‘of course’?” Muldrew muttered.

He drew a small German multiple tool from his pocket, opened a strong blade, and, seizing the sill of the metal transom, raised himself until he could thrust the blade through and pry the shutters apart. Through the opening thus

made came the pulsating beat of the electric sign outside. Muldrew looked through and dropped to the floor.

“Telephone the nearest doctor,” he ordered, “then to Inspector Armitage to bring Jasper. . . . The police doctor will do. Tell the desk sergeant what has happened.”

He spoke to Hammerton, who, thoroughly frightened and disorganized, stared at him.

“What—what has happened?”

Muldrew had cleared us from his back and retreated to the far wall.

“Murder!” He spat it at us as, foot raised, he charged forward. The panel cracked. The second rush tore it loose at one side.

CHAPTER III

A DISAPPEARANCE

Though from the first I had known it as murder, the word on Muldrew's lips, crisp and savage, made my flesh creep. Yet it was the word that drew me like a magnet to hovel and palace, that gave me my job—that kept me in touch with the police and, I fear, to some extent measured my friendship with Gordon Muldrew.

And then I noticed the girl and was ashamed. Murder had never meant more to me than news.

She stood close to the door, tight against the wall, unobtrusive but impossible to ignore. As Muldrew spoke her eyes widened, but she did not flinch. Something about her manner— I looked away, as if I had stumbled on her in her bath.

Muldrew was on his knees, feeling through the loosened panel. The Yale lock clicked, and he rose, opened the door enough to insert an arm to the switch, and then drew the door shut behind him. He wheeled on us. A crowd was rapidly collecting.

“Who are you?” he demanded, his keen eyes roving from face to face.

We shrank before him. One only refused to be disturbed, a wiry young man who had stood from the first against the wall, his arms folded. A slight smile seemed to struggle at the corners of his lips. Muldrew's jaw was set.

“You— who are you?”

The man nodded thoughtfully. “Yes,” as if speaking to himself, “I suppose it's part of the business.”

I could see Muldrew's hand close more tightly on the door-knob, but his voice was calm.

“Your name, please?”

“My name? David Jefferson. Both names may be familiar to you; they've played their part in history.”

Muldrew turned his back. He could have contrived nothing more scornful, more deflating, and Jefferson flushed.

“Go to your rooms,” Muldrew ordered. “I’ll talk to you later.” A policeman came panting along the corridor. “Jameson, keep these people in their rooms till I see them.”

Still he lingered, and the flexing of his hand betrayed a crowding discomfort. Suddenly he faced the girl.

“You’ll go to one of the rooms and— —”

He had looked away, whether interested in Jameson’s zeal or shamed by the girl’s wide stare. And in that moment she threw herself against the arm that held the door and darted into the room.

Muldrew made no move to intercept her. Surprised and chagrined, he followed her, but without hurry. I crept through after him, and behind me the man from the floor above. I threw him an indignant look, to be met with such ingratiating appeal that I was on his side immediately. So long as he was not a rival reporter it mattered nothing to me.

Muldrew stood just inside the room, looking about in quick surprise. The reason was plain. This was no mass-furnished hotel room but a man’s living quarters, a room crammed with personal tastes and personal comforts.

It was overcrowded with furniture—a bed, six chairs, most of them worn and comfortable, a desk in one corner, two tables, a large radio, and an antique footstool with a cross-stitch cover. I took it in quickly, partly because Muldrew was interested, partly because Muldrew’s big body shut off the tragedy in the heart of the room. Then my friend moved forward.

The body of a man lay there, stretched on his back, his hands folded primly across his chest, but the cold, grey face contorted with pain. But for that grey and agonized look, and the thick red stain with brown edges that ran over his coat to the carpet, he might have been passing a reflective hour.

The girl had dropped to her knees beside him. “Father! Father!” she moaned, peering into the bloodless face. Her golden-brown hair fell forward over the dead face, curling back at the ends as if shrinking from the blood.

Muldrew stood beside her, silent but watchful, but when she reached a hesitating hand toward the body he touched her on the shoulder.

“Come away now. Please don’t touch him.”

He raised her to her feet. She did not resist, but stood where he placed her, and her eyes never thereafter left him.

Muldrew dropped to his knees and gently lifted away one side of the dead man's coat. It was old and stained. The shirt and vest beneath were dark with blood. A glance at the eyes, a touch to the pulse, and Muldrew was satisfied. For a moment he examined the stained shirt, then raised his head and frowned about the room.

Our eyes alighted together on a beautiful Japanese dagger that lay on the table beside the body, an exquisite weapon, with a carved ivory handle and a long thin blade. But its beauty was lost in the ruddy brown that discoloured four inches of the blade. Some of the stain had dripped to the table-cloth. Muldrew rose to his feet and touched the stain delicately with his finger-tips, and his frown deepened. Again and again he bent over the stained coat and carpet, smelling it, touching it, even holding a magnifying glass over it. His wrist-watch seemed then to interest him for a time.

The strange man from the floor above began to edge along the wall to get a better view of the body. Muldrew must have heard him, for he looked up and for a time seemed to be trying to place him. But he said nothing, and when his attention fixed itself on the open window the stranger sighed and glanced at me knowingly.

Only then did he seem to notice the girl, and those round eyes that had not before lost their panicky awe narrowed. I studied the girl more closely myself, and was surprised to see that all her dread and most of her horror had vanished, as if assurance of death had brought relief. The thought disgusted me, and I steadied myself back to my job.

The murdered man was about fifty-six or fifty-eight years old, I judged, a man of intelligence and some social standing. Shame or expediency had driven him to conceal his age, for there was unmistakable evidence of artificial colouring in the hair above the ears. The deep lines and flexible creases about lips and eyes told of grease-paint and overworked expression. An old actor. And here before me was the perfect third act. Momentarily, I looked from the balcony on a violent scene.

There was much about it that puzzled me, not the least Muldrew's perplexity. There were the placidly-folded hands, the dagger, with its hideous stain, lying meekly on the table, the—open window, though that meant nothing to me but that Muldrew was interested in it.

Presently he crossed the room to it, and I followed. The stranger had taken his stand beside the radio, almost hidden by it, and from there he watched Muldrew with wide, interested eyes. I remembered Jerry and my

arrangement with the telephone girl downstairs. Turning aside to the small table, on which the telephone stood, I picked it up.

Muldrew had reached the window, but he must have heard me, for he looked back into the room.

I dare not hesitate. "Jerry," I called, "hurry down to the Florence. There's been a—"

Then Muldrew sent me spinning across the room. But I was content: Jerry, I knew, was standing by.

"If you touch a thing, Tiger," Muldrew warned, "out you go."

"That goes with me," I promised. "Hereafter I'm a Boy Scout. But you needn't—"

Muldrew had pounced on the stranger. "It was you heard the cries upstairs, wasn't it?"

The man shuddered, then his face brightened childishly. "I should say I did. It was awful." A sickly smile passed across his face. "It's foolish, I know, to let it affect me like this because—because I'm Conrad Sperring."

The *naïveté* and hopeful friendliness of it, his unaffected confidence that the name would be enough, failed to work on Muldrew as it did on me.

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently. "But how do you come to be here?"

Sperring crowded more tightly into the corner beside the radio. "I—I just came in. I couldn't stay away. That awful cry!" He pressed a chubby hand over his lips. "It—it interests me—this sort of thing."

Muldrew pointed with disgust at the body. "That sort of thing?"

Sperring nodded. "You see—you see, I write that sort of stuff—crime stories."

A flash of freshened interest showed in Muldrew's eyes. Then I remembered. Conrad Sperring. Of course. For a year and more the name had been featured by the best magazines. His latest story, in the *National*, had created quite a furore for its weird plot and clever development. I had started it idly one night, but before half a dozen paragraphs I forgot everything but the rising excitement and, at the end, the surprising denouement.

"So this," said Muldrew scornfully, "is nothing to you but copy. Perhaps now we'll have another 'Master Mind,'" referring to the story I had admired.

Sperring shrank before the tone. “No—no. The plot of ‘The Master Mind’ just—just came to me. . . . It was my master story. Took me three years to write it as you read it. That last twist where the doctor drops the tell-tale vial— —”

“Damned clever—and damned dangerous!” Muldrew muttered. “We’ve a hard enough time with criminals without new ideas for them from men like you.”

Guy Hammerton entered. “They’re coming,” he announced, “all but Inspector Armitage. He’s down with bronchitis.”

Muldrew appeared not to hear. “I don’t want a thing here touched. That radio, Sperring— —”

Sperring started away as if the radio would bite.

A smile flitted across Muldrew’s face. “Invention and actuality, they’re vastly different, aren’t they? Yet you’ve made much of finger-prints in your stories. Polished wood is almost as good a base as glass.”

Sperring flushed crimson, and looked at his fingers. “I—I’m afraid I did touch it.” With a deprecatory smile he added: “You’re right, I should know better.”

“Hammerton,” Muldrew asked, pointing at the body, “who was this man?”

The girl came to life. “I can tell you— —”

Muldrew waved her to silence. “One at a time, please. Your turn will come.”

Hammerton, who had paled at sight of the blood, stammered: “His name—it was Lightfoot—Thomas Lightfoot. He— —”

“But it wasn’t,” the girl protested. “It’s Aaron Netherwood. I should know; he was my father.”

Muldrew gazed over her head. “Yes . . . you should know. . . . But Mr. Hammerton’s information will be more recent—and more to the point. Go on, Hammerton.”

“Anyway,” Hammerton said sullenly, “he registered as Thomas Lightfoot. He’s been here five months or so. A quiet man—never spoke to anyone. Never sat downstairs, or only once or twice to finish a cigarette; then he’d pop away to his room, and we wouldn’t see him perhaps for a couple of days.”

“What was his business?”

“I never knew he had any. We don’t pry into our guests’ private affairs. So long as they pay their bills— —”

“They can get themselves murdered if they wish. I see.”

Hammerton reddened. “He was a respectable man.”

“Travelling under an assumed name. I never yet knew a respectable man to find it necessary.”

Muldrew was watching the girl as he spoke. Colour leaped to her cheeks, and she opened her lips as if to reply, but she fought the impulse back and stiffened her slim body.

Muldrew crossed to the door and examined the Yale lock. “Even this lock failed to make you suspicious, Hammerton?”

“If you had my hotel experience, Mr. Muldrew,” Hammerton returned, “you’d appreciate the cranks we get— —”

“And the crooks,” Muldrew put in, jerking his head toward the body. “A murderer has been in the Florence Hotel in the last few minutes. I want more about this man.”

“He was a strange man,” Hammerton continued. “Unaccountable dislikes and whims, I always thought. I’ve seen him turn on the stairs and run back, and the few times he has sat in the lobby he always left so hurriedly that it looked like flight. We used to laugh about it in the office. Days at a time he would stick to his room, having his meals sent up here; and those days not even the maid was admitted. We thought he was a grouchy old bachelor— —”

“Unaccountable dislikes, you say,” Muldrew put in. “Of people, do you mean? Of whom, for instance? Name someone.”

“I don’t remember ever noticing anything definite . . . unless it was— yes, that’s so”—his face lit up—“it was that Mr. Jefferson you talked to out there. He’s in Room 326. I remember once Mr. Lightfoot—Netherwood—turning at the foot of the stairs and running up at a mad pace, and the only one near was Mr. Jefferson. Of course, there may not be a thing in it.”

“Who is this Jefferson?” Muldrew asked.

“I know nothing more than I’ve told you. He’s in Room 326, the second from this. Been here a week. Inoffensive, rather friendly, I always thought him, until I heard him talking to you out there.”

Two policemen entered, and Muldrew ordered them to the lobby downstairs.

“In 326, you say,” he muttered. He went to the door, and conversed in low tones with Jameson. “Did you hear this man’s cries?” he asked of Hammerton on his return.

Hammerton had not.

“Where were you at the time?”

Hammerton considered. “I’d just gone down to the office from my own apartment on the eighth when someone called me up about it. That’s all I know.”

“Who called you up?”

Hammerton’s eyes danced. “Say! Yes, that’s curious, too—it was Mr. Jefferson!”

“Hm-m-m!” Muldrew showed the first signs of excitement. “Did you see anyone go downstairs at that time, by stairs or elevator?”

Hammerton was certain no one had gone down to the lobby. “I was lecturing one of the bell-boys, and I’d have had to wait if anyone passed down or up.”

“Did anyone—any stranger, I mean—come upstairs just before the crime?”

Hammerton glanced sideways at the girl. “Of course, I can’t say, because I wasn’t downstairs, but the clerk who was there says no stranger came up. I asked him on the ’phone just now. Yet—yet this young lady— —”

A tense silence fell over the room, and the beat of the electric sign outside was the pounding of my heart. I dare not look at Miss Netherwood.

She stepped forward, and lifted herself to her full height before Muldrew. “May I speak now?” she asked crisply.

Muldrew’s aversion to subjecting the weaker sex to his merciless inquisition was familiar to me, so that I was not surprised at his reply:

“You weren’t in the room at the time, Miss Netherwood, so you’d better — —”

The entrance of three officials interrupted him. One, bearing a black bag, trotted to the corpse, and knelt beside it with a professional indifference that made me shudder. After a glance he gave a significant shrug.

Muldrew must have been waiting for that, for he turned briskly to Sperring and me. We knew what was coming, and Sperring, who had shrunk back into the angle of radio and wall, making himself as inconspicuous as possible, poised with note-book and pencil in hand, dropped the pencil in his agitation, and stooped to recover it.

“Out you go, all of you,” Muldrew ordered. “Wait in the cor— —”

He never finished the sentence, for at that moment the lights went out!

In the first second thereafter the darkness was blinding, and then the flash of the electric sign outside revealed Muldrew making for us. With Sperring and me in either hand he made for the door. Miss Netherwood had partly suppressed a scream—it was part of the general confusion—and then we found ourselves in the corridor.

But the corridor too was in darkness.

“Jameson,” Muldrew shouted, “quick! Your torch!”

From down the corridor Jameson snorted. “Be damned if I have one!”

Muldrew slammed the door behind us and whipped out his own torch. “Watch this door, Jameson,” he ordered, and raced along the corridor. I heard a door thrown open—an angry exclamation in my friend’s voice. I hurried toward him.

“Gone!” he growled.

I raised my eyes to the number of the room. It was 326!

From somewhere in the darkness of the corridor—I could not place it—came a wild, chuckling laugh!

CHAPTER IV

PUZZLED

A door across the corridor opened, emitting a broad stream of light that fell directly on Jameson, angry and discomfited, and beside him Hammerton, plainly nonplussed and annoyed. Sperring came sidling along the hall, eager to be in on everything, yet restrained by the memory of Muldrew's harshness. He came to a stop beside me. Miss Netherwood seemed least disturbed of all. As she touched my arm on the other side, we three seemed to combine against the world. Almost unconsciously I returned the pressure Sperring gave my hand.

From the open doorway, through which came the only light that reached the corridor, three faces peered. A moment later a man detached himself from the group and crossed to number 324. Opening the door, he turned to face us, smirking triumphantly, I thought. I had noticed him before in the earlier group about the door of 322. He was short and stocky, with a heavy face that normally would be sullen, now impudent and exultant. Other doors opened along the corridor, so that now the scene was well lighted.

Muldrew stood swinging his head from side to side, looking from one to another. "What has happened, Hammerton—these lights, but only in the corridor and a few rooms on that side?"

Hammerton's bewilderment passed. "Why—yes—of course! The fuse has blown out. Those six rooms and the corridor are on the one fuse." He pointed to a small box-like affair, high against the ceiling.

Muldrew dived back into 326, and I could see the light of the corridor sweeping about the room. Presently he reappeared.

"I suppose," he jeered, addressing Jameson, "he shook hands with you before he went."

Jameson's face went purple. "He ain't gone—he can't be . . . or else he never was there. But—but—" he stopped to scratch his head—"yes, I saw him go in, but I never let that door out of my sight—"

"Perhaps you can see in the dark," Muldrew sneered. "You and Phillips go downstairs and look around. Of course," disgustedly, "that won't help."

As the two policemen hurried away Sperring tugged at my sleeve. “Gee!” he whispered, “did you hear that laugh?”

“I’m not likely to have missed it,” I replied. The taunting chuckle had terrified me, infuriated me, the cachinnation of a maniac, the sneer of utter self-confidence and ridicule. And it had seemed to come from everywhere.

Someone came running along the corridor, and Jerry Inkerley, his pale-grey hat pushed back on his perspiring forehead, picked me out and made for me. His hair was matted and tousled. I never knew hair with such a bias toward untidiness. Jerry kept behind his desk a small, brass-framed mirror, whose purpose was one of our favourite scoffing discussions.

“All right, Tiger,” he whispered. “Thanks.”

Muldrew frowned. “How did you get in, Inkerley?”

“Walked.” Jerry had surges of maddening conciseness.

“But I gave orders downstairs — —”

“None to go out. I came in.”

I trembled for Jerry, with Muldrew in his present mood. And then — —

Jerry ran his fingers self-consciously through his hair. He had seen Miss Netherwood. I could have laughed. But to Jerry at that moment Muldrew ranked with mosquitoes and income tax and minor pests like that.

Muldrew turned his back on us. “Hammerton, this fuse must be repaired immediately — immediately.”

“I’ll run down and have it attended to — —”

“You’ll telephone from the room there,” Muldrew ordered. “I need you here. Now I want an empty room, a lighted one.”

Hammerton reflected. “Three twenty-seven is unoccupied.” Muldrew’s abruptness had got under his skin.

“Good! You’ll all go there and wait for me.” Muldrew beckoned to a policeman. “They’re to wait in there.” He pointed to 327.

From the corner of my eye I saw the stocky man in the doorway of 324 slinking backward. It did not escape Muldrew.

“Here, you! You’re in this.”

The man seemed for a moment or two to contemplate defiance, but the policeman swept him along with the others. I too was caught up, but I threw

Muldrew an appealing look.

“Tiger! Here!”

In my eagerness I almost knocked Jerry Inkerley over. A workman hastened up with a step-ladder, climbed to the fuse-box, and the lights came on.

Muldrew and I passed into Room 322.

The three officials were still there. One of them Muldrew ordered to the branch-corridor leading to the stairs. “Those stairs can’t be seen from the main corridor,” he explained. “Take a look at that dagger, Jasper.”

Jasper, the finger-print man, scowled. “I have. Not a mark on it.” To Jasper to leave no finger-prints wasn’t playing the game.

Muldrew nodded. “I thought not. . . . And you won’t find them anywhere else.”

“But I have.” Jasper was leaning over the radio. “Here!” He pointed to the front edge.

Muldrew sighed. “I know all about them. Conrad Sperring made them just now. He had a hand there—like this.” He stood beside the radio as Sperring had done.

Jasper swore under his breath. “The rest is wiped clean—with a damp cloth, too, and not long ago. These maids in high-class hotels— —”

“No maid did that, Jasper—at this time of the day.”

Muldrew turned to the dead body, beside which the doctor still stood. “Got it to a pin-point, didn’t it, doctor?”

“Couldn’t have struck straighter if it had been a surgeon. Square in the heart. See that blood?”

Muldrew saw the blood. For a time he seemed unconscious of anything else. “How long would a man live after a wound like that?”

“He wouldn’t live at all—he’d kick out instantly.”

“But,” I broke in, “we heard him cry out—he called for help. There were several seconds of it.”

Muldrew nodded. “Tiger’s right. We heard him from the street.”

The doctor spread his hands incredulously. “Technically, he died instantly. . . . But there are strange reflexes in death. . . . More noticeably

among wild animals. A lion, now. . . . And I've seen with my own eyes a hen running about with its head off."

Muldrew was not listening. "Did you examine the window-sill, Jasper?" he asked.

"Not another mark but those on the radio," Jasper snarled. "No novice did this."

Muldrew leaned far out of the window, and I edged up beside him. He heard me. "All right, take a look, Tiger. I hope it tells you more than it does me."

It told me nothing—except that the window could have played no part in the murder. Outside was a sheer drop of forty feet to the pavement, with not so much as a finger-hold intervening, save the window-ledges of the floor below. To my left was the second window in the room, too far from the one beyond to be of service. On my right, just beyond the bathroom window of 322, towered the electric sign. It blinded me as I faced it. I pointed.

"Could anyone climb around that sign from 320?" I asked.

Muldrew smiled. "Coming or going?"

"It couldn't be going. We'd have seen him from the street. But we were downstairs for several minutes—"

"Tiger, my boy, the murderer of Aaron Netherwood left nothing to a chance like that. Besides, 320 is not only unoccupied but locked."

"What was to prevent the murderer escaping through the door?" I asked. "That Yale lock is opened from the inside—"

"How did he get in?" Muldrew questioned. "Tiger, the murderer was let in by the victim himself. . . . And that may complicate rather than simplify the trail I have to follow. How he escaped? Oh, Lord!"

CHAPTER V

THE OPEN WINDOW

“Also,” I puzzled, “he was in no hurry to leave, or he wouldn’t have taken time to withdraw the dagger and place it on the table.”

Muldrew eyed me approvingly. “You’re coming on, Watson, coming on. . . . But,” gloomily, “how does that help? I’m certain every move was planned—and carried through according to plan.” He swept an arm about the room, as if it was all so plain. “Yet delaying even for a few seconds might well have led to his discovery. . . . No, that dagger only tangles the affair still more. All along the corridor they heard the cries. Through that open window we heard them on the street. Sperring heard on the floor above. And Miss Netherwood— —”

“Why didn’t you let her explain, Gordy? She might clear up a lot.”

“The murder? Do you actually suspect her, Tiger—such a pretty girl?”

The twinkle in his eye annoyed me. “You know darned well she hadn’t a thing to do with it.”

“Do I?” was all he replied.

“It would only be decent to let her talk. Think of her, the dead man’s daughter, back there with that rabble, waiting to be grilled like a criminal, her father murdered almost before her eyes— —”

“I wonder,” he murmured.

“Yeah, you’ll wonder next if I did it.”

“I was going to say,” he went on complacently, “that I wonder if you noticed how placidly she bore everything—the blood, the murdered father—the absence of natural grief in a daughter.”

“She’s stunned,” I stammered. But Muldrew smiled.

Jasper was moving about the room, like a dog on the scent. He had disappeared into the bathroom, and Muldrew and I followed. Muldrew had looked it over once before, but now he gave it a thorough examination.

Save for a detail or two, it resembled any other bathroom in a thousand hotels—square, sunken bath-tub with surrounding shower-curtain, toilet

basin and built-in cabinet, a pale-blue enamelled chair to match the tiling. Its most distinctive feature was a cheap wooden cabinet, raised on blocks, that stood beside the bath-tub.

Muldrew pointed to the cabinet, but Jasper shook his head. “Too porous,” he grumbled, “and rough.”

Muldrew had turned away to the basin. A slight rusty stain ran around it just under the overflow vent. It interested him, though I could have shown him its duplicate on my own basin at Mrs. Altonen’s. A similar stain, though less distinct, was on the tub.

My friend returned to the wooden cabinet. It was about four feet high, strong and cumbersome. And securely locked. Muldrew stooped and lifted it. It came away easily, and with a growl he set it back. By means of the German tool he pried off the back.

“Empty!” he exclaimed with disgust.

“It wasn’t *kept* empty,” I ventured, “or it wouldn’t be here—and locked.”

“Thanks, Tiger.”

“And,” I continued, “if it had what was usually kept in it you’d be well on the way to the murderer.”

“That’s probably near the truth,” Muldrew agreed. . . . “And the murderer emptied it. But when?”

“I know when he didn’t: after the murder. He hadn’t time. I give it up.”

“So do I,” Muldrew said, “for the time being.”

We returned to the bedroom. The doctor was waiting for us.

“Nothing more here for me,” he said with a yawn. “Shock and hæmorrhage—anything you want to call it—a knife plump through the right ventricle.”

Someone knocked, and Muldrew admitted the police photographer. In six minutes, after four blinding flashes, without saying a word, he was gone.

“One moment, doctor.” Muldrew stood over the body. “How long would you say he’s been dead—when you arrived, I mean.”

“At least half an hour.”

“Impossible,” I challenged. “It couldn’t have been more than fifteen minutes— —”

Muldrew stared into space. “Half—an hour.”

“Yes,” said the doctor, “and if you hadn’t heard him cry out I’d place it longer ago than that.”

Muldrew had his watch out. “It was eight thirty-six as we entered the elevator. You were here within ten minutes after that.” He frowned down on the body and presently bent to the stained coat and the great blob of dark brown on the carpet.

“Some blood,” explained the doctor, “coagulates more quickly than others. Thick blood. Impossible to place the time of death to minutes.”

Muldrew turned on him savagely. “Everything about this case is impossible . . . conspires to baulk me.”

The doctor picked up his bag. “All right. Blame it all on me—except the murder.”

Muldrew stared at the door when he was gone. “I guess I’m peevish,” he said sheepishly. “But can you wonder?”

“Did you expect to find the murderer under the table?” I jeered.

“If I had. Tiger, I’d know he didn’t do it. . . . As a matter of fact, that would be on a par with the rest of his cleverness.” He dropped beside the body and examined the wound the doctor had bared, flexed an arm, touched the thin, white cheek. Pulling back the lower lip, he uttered an exclamation.

I went nearer. “Poison?” I whispered.

Muldrew shook his head and leaned aside for me to see. The skin inside the lip was broken. Muldrew lifted his eyes and frowned at the open window. “The deuce with it!” he muttered.

“Bashed on the mouth,” I ventured.

“Too shallow for that.” Muldrew scowled. “No, it’s pressure, not a blow—something pressed against his lips to stifle his cries.”

“Then it failed miserably. There wasn’t anything stifling the cries we heard.”

“Didn’t you notice—anything—peculiar about it?” he puzzled, talking more to himself than to me.

“The process of murder is still peculiar to me,” I replied. “A man with a dagger in his heart— —”

Muldrew leaped to his feet and roved about the room. Suddenly he stopped.

“Did himself well, this Netherwood,” he said. “Bound to be comfortable. His own chairs, his own desk and footstool . . . and even his own radio. And a dandy, too.” He went and stood before the instrument. “Must have cost a couple of hundred. Short wave reception, too. Eleven valves, I bet. Five—on a corner of the table—has to do me.” He bent to the dial and knobs. But in a few moments he lost interest and wandered away.

“I wish,” I grumbled, “you’d give me an inkling of what’s troubling you.”

“You’ve seen as much as I have, Tiger. You’ve the same chance. The room is jammed with interest . . . even with clues.”

“I hope I can make the readers of *The Star* see them to-morrow,” I returned sarcastically. “You’ll have the murderer by that time, of course. About all I see to talk about is that the fellow got away in time— —”

“And yet,” said Muldrew thoughtfully, “he spent a lot of time in this room—all he needed.”

“He certainly had time to place the dagger on the table and fold his victim’s hands over his stomach,” I puzzled. “And yet we were up here three or four minutes after the murder.”

“Then when did he get time to go through this desk?” Muldrew asked. “When did he wipe away every finger-print? . . . But, principally, when and why did he open that window?”

“Of course, he didn’t open the window; he just failed to notice it was open. You’ve often said every murderer misses something that should give him away.”

Muldrew wheeled on me. “This time, Tiger, I’m ready to swallow my words. The murderer of Aaron Netherwood missed nothing, neglected nothing.”

CHAPTER VI

A CONCEALED GUN

I was getting fed up with his mystification. "In another room," I reminded him, "a lot of people are dying to clear things up, Gordy."

"Especially a pretty girl," he grinned. And I, the fool, felt myself blushing. "All right, Tiger, let's face it. I suppose I'm in for it. It's amazing what a fury of indignation goes with a ten-dollar-a-day rate. They've probably combined against me by this time—letters to the papers, and all that."

As we emerged into the corridor Jameson's growling voice reached us. At the corner to the stairs two other policemen were talking. One hurried up to report that Jefferson could not be found. Muldrew shrugged and moved quietly down the hall to where Jameson held the fort before Room 327.

"I have my orders," he was saying, "and if you don't get back I'll—well, I need a bit of exercise."

"But," protested the stocky man I had come to think of as 324, "this isn't a jail—we're not under arrest."

"Some men never know their luck," Jameson retorted.

Muldrew tapped him on the shoulder. "Telephone the station, Jameson, to send someone to repair the door of 322—and tell him to bring a new Yale lock. The keys are to be given to me, to me only."

Jameson said that no one would do the job until morning.

"Then," Muldrew ordered, "get a torch from one of the men and remain on guard in this corridor until it's done. Let no one enter that room."

He stepped into the doorway, and with none too gentle a hand thrust the stocky man back into the room. There were seven people there. In one corner Miss Netherwood and Jerry Inkerley stood close together—so close that I reminded myself indignantly that I had met her first, had voluntarily brought Jerry into the affair. Jerry, of course, in his flat-footed, thick-skinned way, made a habit of ignoring rights and precedence, but never before where it brought him into contact with women. Now I had an uncomfortable

impression that Miss Netherwood found him neither flat-footed nor thick-skinned; indeed, she seemed almost to snuggle against him for comfort.

Muldrew was about to speak when Sperring stepped forward.

“Excuse me, Mr. Muldrew, may I ask a question? It’s about those lights. What happened—what made them go out? I—I want it for a story?” His smile was humble and appealing.

“It’s the why, not the how, that interests me,” Muldrew returned.

Sperring looked crestfallen. “Mr. Hammerton said something about a fuse. Is that what a short-circuit would be? I know nothing about electricity.”

“You’ve struck it. It was a short-circuit. Now — —”

“Then it was done deliberately!” Sperring exclaimed. “Someone wanted to get away—or to destroy evidence. That Mr. Jefferson, eh?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” said Muldrew. “Some day I’ll have a talk with friend Jefferson.” He turned to 324 and stared straight into his eyes for a few seconds.

The man tried to sneer. Behind those parted lips, full and loose, showed a double row of blackened but firm teeth.

“Why don’t you arrest me?” he jeered. “It would be funny . . . because it happens that I was in Room 325 when the lights went out. That room doesn’t seem to be on the same fuse. You can prove where I was by these people here.” He indicated with his thumb a man and a woman, the two who had stood in the doorway with him.

“That’s right,” the woman said, thrusting out her chin.

Muldrew was shaken by the alibi and the man’s assurance. He opened the door and spoke to Jameson. When he turned back to the room it was to Hammerton he spoke.

“You said 320 is unoccupied. What other rooms are on that fuse?”

Hammerton reflected. “From 318 to 328 inclusive, but 328 too is empty, and 318 is out of town for a week.”

Muldrew had Jameson make a personal inspection. Presently Jameson returned, driving before him two men and a woman. Muldrew looked them over. But when he spoke it was to 324 again, who had lost much of his defiance, much of his assurance. He had dropped back against the wall and stood leaning against it, wielding a toothpick with assumed indifference.

For a time they stared at each other. Muldrew's face was blank; 324 grew more and more uneasy.

"What is your name?" Muldrew jerked out.

A stiff smile made more repulsive the heavy face opposite. "Blayton Anders. Age thirty-two. Height five feet nine and —"

"Never mind that. The police probably have it already. I want your real name."

The smile was gone now. "Blayton Anders," he said with surly persistence. But now an accent was unmistakable.

"I don't imply an alias," Muldrew said, "but I want your original name."

"What does it matter?" The man shrugged. "It's no concern of the police. But if you want to know"—defiantly—"it's Ivan Lanofsky."

"Russian?"

"American citizen—these eight years."

"You were in the corridor when I came upstairs —"

"Sure—with a lot of others. . . . And I haven't tried to get away."

"You mean your neighbour did."

Anders looked up sharply but said nothing.

"And," Muldrew continued, "your room is nearest the murdered man's."

Anders straightened away from the wall, and the toothpick snapped in his fingers. "Well, it wasn't me short-circuited the wires," he snarled.

"You heard the murdered man cry out?"

"Sure I did. That's what took me to the hall. Wasn't I next door? He howled loud enough to be heard next block, poor fellow." A strain of feeling ran through the last phrase, and I examined him with fresh interest.

"I suppose you rushed right out?" Muldrew asked.

"No, I didn't. It wasn't any of my business. Besides, I—I wasn't sure where it came from. I was in the bathroom—and the walls are thick."

"I see. You've noticed how thick the walls are. . . . But this bathroom —"

"I noticed how thick the walls were not long before the cries," Anders broke in. "Someone was in there—in 322. There was talking."

“You mean Netherwood had a visitor?”

“Sure he had.”

“Was it a man?”

“I couldn’t hear; it was Netherwood’s voice I heard—if his name is Netherwood; I never knew him.”

Muldrew turned inquiringly to Hammerton, who replied: “I know of no stranger going to his room. You may inquire at the office.”

“How long after the cries, Mr. Anders, before you came out into the corridor?”

“Just a minute or two. I called up the office first. I couldn’t get Mr. Hammerton. It couldn’t have been more than a minute, though. I guess I was the first to look out. Unless it was the Darlings here; they’re in 325.”

“What did you see first?”

Anders thrust out his chin and pointed a stubby finger at Miss Netherwood. “That girl there—I saw her. She was running along the hall, and while I looked she ran back, all in a panic-like, and then she turned again and ran toward the stairs.”

Mrs. Darling had stood through it all, her hands folded over her stomach. “That’s right,” she said, “I saw her too. She ran away.” Her lips closed in a thin line as she glared at Miss Netherwood. And the girl flushed and dropped her face.

A man and another woman corroborated her. The man had Room 310.

Jerry Inkerley strolled across the room and planted himself before Muldrew. I knew that stroll, and had learned to cut and run.

“Why the hell,” he snapped, “don’t you cut the bunk, Muldrew, and get Miss Netherwood’s story direct? Of course they saw her. But you’d rather walk around the source of the river than cross by the bridge, wouldn’t you?”

Muldrew looked through him. “Have you any evidence of your own, Inkerley?” he asked smoothly. “I think not. Then be good enough to keep quiet. . . . Miss Netherwood may take her choice—to answer my questions before all these people, or to wait for a little privacy.”

“Please, please,” the girl broke in breathlessly, “I’ll wait.”

Restlessly Muldrew moved about the room. Suddenly he stopped before Hammerton.

“You told me, Hammerton, Netherwood had no friends— —”

“Pardon me. I said I *knew* of no friends. And if anyone was in his room I knew nothing of it. I wouldn’t be interested at that time, anyway.” He glared at Anders, who smirked back at him. “I don’t remember ever seeing Mr. Netherwood even speak to anyone— —”

“I’ve spoken to him,” Anders put in, “just said ‘good day.’”

The Darlings, too, had greeted him in passing.

“Yet,” said Muldrew, “you recognized his voice, both when he was talking and when he cried out!” He turned to the Darlings. “Mr. Anders was in your room when the lights went out. Then how did you open your door so quickly? The lights were still on in your room.”

Mr. Darling shifted from foot to foot. It was his wife replied: “We heard you all running about—we couldn’t help hearing it.”

“Did you hear Mr. Netherwood’s cries for help?” Muldrew asked.

“No—o. It was the noise in the hall that time, too, took us to the door.”

“Then it must have been Miss Netherwood made it—if what Mr. Anders says is so—that you looked out as quickly as he did. You failed to hear the cries, yet upstairs Mr. Sperring heard them plainly enough!”

Sperring nodded delightedly at being brought into it, and looked as if it was worth a note in his little book. “But,” he explained, “my window was up a couple of inches. I heard the cries from the street—the echo, I guess. Besides, perhaps my profession makes me more—more sensitive to noises. That’s why I chose this hotel on a quiet street and not— —”

He stopped, chagrined and slightly irritated, for Muldrew was not listening.

The detective stood beside the bed, and as Sperring stopped talking he leaned forward and drew something from beneath the pillow.

“Ah! So soon! And whose might this be?”

He faced us, holding aloft an automatic!

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST DAGGER

We stared at one another and away, accusing, guilty, each feeling, as I know I did, like a murderer caught in the act. At one time or another we had all passed the bed in our wanderings.

Jerry and Sperring and I were, of course, beyond suspicion, Hammerton, too, yet we were no more comfortable than the others before that accusing discovery. Sperring recovered first. His eyes danced with the eagerness of the writer stumbling on another twist for a story.

“But a gun wasn’t used for the murder,” he said.

Muldrew looked sheepish. “No. . . . Of course not. But we never know what might have been. At any rate, someone has a guilty conscience. Of course,” glaring at each of us in turn, “it belongs to none of you. Someone placed it there last month—or the builders had it in their specifications— —”

“That bed was used two nights ago,” Hammerton declared. “It’s been put there since . . . I wish,” he added, “you’d let me go. I must be needed downstairs. It isn’t good business for me to— —”

“Murder,” Muldrew retorted, “is bad business for any hotel, even the Florence.”

“What has the Florence to do with it?” Hammerton flared.

Muldrew shrugged. “All right. You may go—all but Miss Netherwood.”

They departed quickly. They had come angry and rebellious; they went relieved that they were well out of it. Muldrew had overwhelmed them. He fixed his eyes on Jerry. But it was to Miss Netherwood he spoke.

“You’d better sit down, Miss Netherwood. We’ll be some time.”

He carried a chair to her and seated himself in another. Sperring and I—for Sperring had chosen to remain—sat on the bed. Jerry remained beside Miss Netherwood. Sperring kept feeling surreptitiously over the counterpane and Muldrew smiled.

“No more guns, Sperring. They don’t mean a thing—now.”

Sperring grinned foolishly. Miss Netherwood had dropped into the chair and leaned her arm on the back. Plainly she had kept herself up by sheer force of will. Without preliminaries she began.

“You want to know how I came to be out there—there in the corridor — —”

“On the contrary, Miss Netherwood,” Muldrew interrupted, “that will wait. I want first to know all about your father—his life, his habits, your relationship, how he comes to be staying at an hotel. Go on.”

It was a familiar trick of Muldrew’s to disturb the rehearsed evidence of a witness. It was his habit to give a witness time to prepare a story and then to upset it all, as well as the witness’s poise, by approaching the subject from an unexpected angle.

“I’ll—I’ll tell all I know,” the girl stammered; and I knew the trick had worked what Muldrew wished. I knew, too, that she would *not* tell all she knew.

The girl’s head bent so that we could see only the foreshortening of her beautiful features. “What I can tell isn’t—recent . . . I haven’t seen father for —for some time.”

“How long?”

“It must be five months—between five and six months. . . . Neither mother nor I have seen him since November. He—left us. Something—happened.”

“What was your father’s business?”

“He was an actor—when last he worked. He was Netherwood, of Netherwood and Larkin, a vaudeville act of patter and impersonation. Half a dozen years ago they were top-liners.”

Muldrew nodded. “I wondered what had happened to them.”

“Two years ago they broke up. Business was going bad, of course, but it didn’t seem to us, to mother and me, bad enough to throw it up. . . . It was the first sign of trouble in our home. . . . You see, we had been accustomed to easy money, and then it suddenly ceased. Fortunately, mother had prepared; father had been growing restless for years, and mother saved what she could.”

“Do you mean your father has done nothing for two years?”

“Nothing that brought in much money. Before he went on the boards, and even while there, he had spent his spare time at his art. He always longed to be an artist—a painter—but in the end it settled down to illustrating and drawing for advertisements. It never earned much. . . . But that wasn’t the worst of it. Father became so restless and bad-tempered—absent-minded, too. It—it wasn’t pleasant at home, with father like that, and mother resenting it all and struggling to get him back on the stage. . . . One day he—left us.”

Muldrew sat frowning at the carpet. “You know of no reason for his leaving?”

“Mother and I often talked of it.” Her pretty face flushed, and she leaned her head on her hand. “We talked of little else . . . Father had made new friends. We blamed it on them. We never met them. We don’t know if he was ashamed of them or just resented our curiosity and our opposition to the life he led. There was one friend who came often, but always after we went to bed. Mother and I would look over the balustrade, but father always let him in with the lights out.”

Muldrew regarded her keenly from beneath his brows. “And you haven’t seen him since November—yet you were here to-day when he was—murdered.”

“I had found where he was,” the girl explained uneasily, after a quick look at Muldrew. “Ever since he went I’ve looked for him—what time I had from the job I had to take.”

“You’re a typist, Miss Netherwood,” Muldrew said. As she stared he explained. “Your hands show it—the short nails. So you had to go to work, yet your father could afford to live in an expensive hotel like this!”

“Only yesterday I found he was here. He had written to mother, and I waited at the Post Office until he claimed the reply. I followed him here. I got the number of his room from the telephone girl, then to-day I watched my chance and crept up here without being stopped. I knew he’d have given orders not to let us see him. . . . I suppose that’s why he adopted a false name. . . . He always had strange whims . . . strange fears.”

Muldrew pounced on it. “Strange fears, you say?”

“Afraid of something,” the girl explained vaguely. “At the last he seemed very much afraid—afraid someone would steal his inventions. What the inventions were mother and I never knew. He always kept his study

locked. He was ever promising a fortune for us just around the corner . . . always that fortune.”

“And,” Muldrew questioned, “he has sent you no money since he left?”

“That’s what makes it so strange, for he was always so generous. Part of his irritability since he left the stage was due to poverty, mother and I thought. But he always was so hopeful. Even in his last letter he promised we would have a fortune within a few days.”

Sperring started to speak. His eyes danced with excitement, but he cut the words off short and looked apologetically at Muldrew.

“What is it, Sperring?” Muldrew asked. “As a professional unraveller — —”

“That money—don’t you see? He was killed for that money. Did you examine his pockets, Mr. Muldrew?”

“I’m not through with that room yet, Sperring. There’s no hurry. When I have the Yale lock on it will keep things safe for me.” He turned to Miss Netherwood. “That brings us up to to-day. Go on.”

“I got upstairs without being seen by anyone in the office. I wanted to ask father why he had left us, to put it up to him. You see, I’m not much of a typist; I can’t ask much for my work. When I reached his floor, in my excitement I forgot the number of his room. I was wandering about when—when I heard him call out. I ran downstairs for help. That’s all.”

Muldrew leaned forward. “Miss Netherwood, I want you to answer this carefully: Are you absolutely certain the voice you heard was your father’s?”

“Of course it was,” she replied instantly. “There can’t possibly be any question of that. Besides—besides—there he is.”

Muldrew clambered to his feet and wandered blindly about the room.

“You ran downstairs, you say, Miss Netherwood. But not right away. We have several witnesses — —”

Her pretty face lifted sharply, and I saw dread in her eyes. “I scarcely know what I did. I was excited—confused.”

“Downstairs you said you tried his door. Did you locate the cries, or suddenly remember the number?”

“I don’t know,” she murmured. All her spirit had deserted her, and she draped herself limply over the back of the chair. Jerry took a step toward her,

but she waved him back. Why, I asked myself, hadn't I taken that step myself?

Suddenly Muldrew whipped the dagger from his pocket. "Did you ever see this before, Miss Netherwood?"

She stared at the stained blade and shrank back in her chair, her face pale. "Blood!" she whispered. "Father's blood!"

"Yes—driven to his heart!" The brutality of it made even me wince. "Where have you seen it before?"

"It was—father's."

"When did you see it last?"

"Why—just the other day. It was—in his study—where he always kept it. I remember dusting—"

She broke off abruptly, and her lips closed in a tight line.

"Ah, yes!" Muldrew almost purred. "A couple of days ago it was in your house. . . . Yet you say your father has never been home since November!"

"I never knew it—if he was there—I never saw him," the girl replied weakly.

Muldrew continued ruthlessly: "You tell me, Miss Netherwood, this dagger was in your house a couple of days ago—and to-day we find it in his heart." Abruptly he stepped toward her. "Have you any suspicion how it got there?"

The girl did not answer. She had fainted. It was Muldrew who caught her as she slumped from the chair.

CHAPTER VIII

AMATEUR CRITICS

To Jerry Inkerley and me that sudden weakness of Miss Netherwood's was little short of a tragedy. We had steeled ourselves against Muldrew's insinuations—and then she had failed us. Muldrew, too, seemed unhappy about it, as he eased the limp form to the bed. Sperring had dashed to the bathroom for water. Jerry and I were just angry—angry at ourselves for showing it, angry at Muldrew, and, with a sense of being let down, at least irritated at Miss Netherwood.

Jerry tried to take it out on Muldrew. "I hope you're satisfied," he snarled.

"It was no fault of mine," Muldrew replied, but without conviction.

In a moment or two the girl came to her senses. At the look of terror in her eyes Muldrew retreated to the door.

"I'll send a maid," he said. "You'll have this room for the rest of the night."

The girl on the bed lifted her head wildly. "I'm going home—home!"

"I'd rather you stayed here to-night, Miss Netherwood. I may want to talk to you later. I'll tell your mother."

Tears came unheeded to her eyes, but she said nothing. Jerry fussed about like a hen with a brood of ducks that had taken to water. I had to choose, and quickly. My job won, I followed Muldrew. Sperring tagged at my heels. Outside Muldrew was talking to Jameson:

"—around the corner in the cross-corridor to the stairs," he was saying, completing some instructions. "There's a couch—you'll be comfortable there for the night. Sleep if you wish. I just don't want anyone tampering with that room. There'll be the new lock to-morrow. Good night!"

He passed on to the stairs, leaving Sperring and me to stare after him.

"Gee," Sperring whispered, "I thought he'd rake that room over right away. Sounds as if he's going for the night—and Miss Netherwood in there waiting for him!"

I shook my head. I had a feeling that my detective friend was letting me down before an experienced critic.

“If I let a detective hero of mine act like that!” Sperring sighed.

“Muldrew has his own way of doing things,” I returned vaguely, “and they’re usually successful.”

“We’re both in pretty much the same line, you and I—writing, I mean—so I’ll take your word. Anyway, you’re a staunch friend. To tell the truth, I don’t know a damned thing about detectives; I just write about them.”

He grinned the infectious grin he had, and I succumbed.

“I don’t mind saying,” I confessed, “that Gordy’s conduct to-night has me guessing.”

We had moved along the corridor to the stairway. Sperring talked eagerly.

“I’m trying to figure why he wants the girl there all night. . . . He didn’t ask her if she saw anyone else in the corridor at the time her father cried out . . . and he doesn’t appear curious about Jefferson. Then there’s that short-circuit—and Anders—and the dagger. The dagger did get him somewhere, of course. . . . That girl took it hard, eh? And that gun—dropped it almost as suddenly as it came up! I’m afraid,” he ended with his apologetic grin, “my yarns are apple-sauce. Why are editors so good to me?”

“Gordy hasn’t finished with things yet,” I assured him.

“Well, you know him. . . . That short-circuit—it’s a grand trick for me.” He took out his note-book and jotted something down, writing with his tongue rolling behind his lips. “Now I’ll get back to my work. Let’s hope your friend is as good as you think him. By the way,” as he started to climb to his own floor, “I haven’t your name.”

I gave it to him, nickname and all, and he repeated it after me: “‘Tiger Lillie’ . . . Doesn’t sound friendly, does it? But I like its owner, if I may say so. Will you—will you do me the honour of lunching with me some day soon?” The old-fashioned formality pleased me foolishly, and I must have shown it, for his face lighted up. “How about to-morrow?”

I promised to call him up, and he descended the two or three steps in order to shake my hand. As I dropped to the next floor I looked up. He was smiling down on me in his friendly way from a landing above. We were bound to be friends.

In the lobby I found Muldrew pacing before the elevators. He smiled at me.

“How about it, Tiger? Are you going to warn me that *The Star* will beat me to it?”

I grunted, uncomfortably mindful of the tenor of the discussion with Sperring. Muldrew clapped me on the shoulder.

“Out with it, Tiger! You’ll feel better.”

“What’s the use?” I growled. “Gordon Muldrew will never explain—partly because no self-respecting detective will confess to overworking mystery to cover his own mystification.”

“Even in that we’re at a disadvantage compared with a reporter,” he laughed. “We can’t hide behind a cloud of words. But what was so mysterious up there? And this is not for publication.”

I groaned. “Gordy, you’re mean enough to hang a carrot before a donkey’s nose. Some day I’ll break loose in the Sunday edition and show you up.”

“Better let your new friend edit it for you.”

I had never connected Muldrew with jealousy, and the revelation surprised and pleased me.

“When old friends let me down, what can I do? You ask what was mysterious. What about that short-circuit? It must have been worked from 324 or 326—Anders or Jefferson. Two of the six were empty, one was unoccupied and locked, and we were in the sixth.”

“How simple cases can be!” he jeered.

“You accepted that yourself,” I challenged.

“Did I?”

“Jefferson needed the darkness to skip out. You didn’t seem upset.”

“I had the hotel searched . . . at least, as thoroughly as it was wise to have it searched. I knew we wouldn’t find him. The man who was clever enough to escape that way wasn’t likely to be found. What next?”

“Since the murderer of Aaron Netherwood must have left the room by the door, and Miss Netherwood must have been in the corridor at the time — —”

“I thought you’d come to that, Tiger. Why didn’t I grill her about what she saw in the corridor, eh? She was there—she couldn’t deny it—and she recognized her father’s voice. . . . Do you imagine any question of mine would have wrung from her information she would not volunteer? It’s evident that whoever saw the murderer intends to keep silent about it. . . . Besides, Tiger, that’s such a small thing. The murderer must have got away quickly, or he’d have been seen by more than Miss Netherwood. Yet how account for the time he seems to have spent in the room after the murder?”

“Only the dagger—and the folded hands,” I objected.

“Those least of all, Tiger,”

“But, Gordy, we know — — The murderer may have slipped away when Miss Netherwood’s back was turned. She was in a panic. There are certain facts we know — —”

He stopped me impatiently. “Nothing is so misleading as so-called facts. There are few *facts* in any crime. Belief in that is what makes the difference between—well, between a crime reporter and an honest-to-goodness detective. But with your belief in Miss Netherwood, with your admiration for her, you should be grateful that I refused to force her either to lie, and thus incriminate herself, or to admit that she was protecting someone.”

“And so,” I flamed, “you’re keeping her here all night as part of the third degree — —”

Muldrew dropped into an easy-chair. “There’ll be no third degree in this, Tiger . . . I don’t anticipate.”

“Then why don’t you let her go home? Here’s her father dead — —”

“It’s to prevent her going home that I’m keeping her here, Tiger,” he said. “One moment, please.”

He untangled his long legs and hurried to the office. In half a minute he was back.

“I’ve given orders that Miss Netherwood is not to be reached by anyone by telephone. I’ve given Jameson orders about the rest. Now, go on. You’re not through yet. You and that synthetic clue-chaser upstairs found more than that to criticize.”

“I hate,” I stormed, “the dramatic way you produced that dagger. As if you suspected her of wielding it. And then that gun.”

Muldrew's lips twitched. "Tiger, I've a confession to make. Talk about drama! That gun was my own! By the way, did you notice how guilty everyone looked?"

"Then what did you gain by it?"

"Did you notice Anders feel instinctively toward his pocket? Now, why does he go about armed? I'm going to find out. Well, come along." He caught hold of my arm. "You and I are going to probe Miss Netherwood's home life."

As we started for the door Jerry Inkerley came pounding down the stairs. He scowled at us.

Muldrew whistled at sight of him. "I'd clean forgotten Jerry. I say, Inkerley," as Jerry scowled and marched on. Muldrew caught him by the arm. "I want your word of honour that you'll not mention Miss Netherwood to-night, directly or indirectly, to anyone. I must have your promise."

"'Must'?" Jerry repeated angrily.

"Otherwise you'll come with me."

Jerry hesitated.

"I'm going myself to tell her mother all about it," Muldrew promised.

With a grunt Jerry yielded. I watched him stamp his way out.

"Poor Jerry! It's a bad night for him. He started out with the hope that I'd have something for to-morrow's paper about the counterfeiters. Instead we're tangled up in a murder you won't let us talk about."

"You stick with me," Muldrew smiled. "You'll have your copy for to-morrow's paper."

CHAPTER IX

THE WIDOW

The Netherwoods lived in a quiet part of the city that was rapidly losing caste. An air of depression, of dull paint and chipped cement and ancient trimmings hung over the district. The Netherwood house was distinguished from the others only by a fence that, under the circumstances, gave it an air of secretiveness and seclusion.

All the way from the hotel it had rained, an uncomfortable, clammy drizzle, and Muldrew and I felt miserable enough. Muldrew frankly sulked, for he hated having anything to do professionally with women.

Only one window in the house, and that upstairs, was lighted; everything looked lonely and deserted. Muldrew took it in with a shudder.

“I hate it, Tiger,” he growled. “I’m a blundering ass when it comes to breaking to a widow the news of her husband’s murder. I wish the Inspector was well enough to do it.”

I saw him fumbling at the pocket that held the dagger, as if seeking courage, and with unnecessary noise we ascended the front steps. Muldrew felt about for a bell.

“It’s a knocker, Gordy,” I whispered, pointing to a great bronze fist nailed to the door.

Muldrew eyed it suspiciously. “An antique, eh? So’s this dagger. Netherwood must have been a collector. You remember that Levack case—the antique dealer. But that was before your time. Some day I’ll —”

He lifted the knocker and let it fall gently, but the crash echoed through the house and out over the empty street.

“Sounds like a raid,” I whispered.

“Who knows?” he replied.

Someone came running down the stairs and the hall light came on, followed by another over our heads. A narrow curtain at the side of the door was pulled back and a woman peered through at us. The door opened a crack on a burglar chain.

“Mrs. Netherwood?” Muldrew inquired.

“You’re the police,” she murmured, and, closing the door, released the chain and let us in.

Muldrew was thinking hard. The woman too was aware of it.

“I know,” she said, in a dull voice. “He’s dead. Come in here.”

We followed into a room cluttered with odds and ends of trifling value and no art, a room robbed of every semblance of comfort to find space for pseudo-antiques.

The woman who had let us in was raw-boned and round-shouldered, dragged down by something that was not age. Her clothes were untidy and old, her hair carelessly dressed. Her face, pale and half-starved, had once been pretty; now it was grim and set, the eyes steely and hard. Deep lines grooved her forehead, and her lips were thin and tight. I reflected that with some women suffering breeds only grimness like that.

“How did you know your husband was dead?” Muldrew asked, his tone as hard as the woman’s face.

She made a weary movement with her head. “The manager of the Florence called me up.”

The twitch of Muldrew’s lips revealed his anger. “It was a brutal way to break it,” he said. “How long ago did he telephone?”

“It—it must be an hour or so. Does it matter?” A wary look had come into her hard eyes. “I’m waiting for my daughter—someone will have to tell her.”

Then Hammerton had not mentioned the daughter! Or was this a blind?

“Your daughter, Mrs. Netherwood, is at the hotel. She’s all right—she’ll be there all night. . . . You knew she was there—that she’d gone there.”

Mrs. Netherwood’s glance fell. “Yes, I knew. I thought— —” Her tight lips went tighter. Not for a moment had she shown sign of grief, not once had look or voice softened. Furtively she watched Muldrew.

The latter sat silent. It was the silence broke through her defences.

“You wonder,” she broke out, “that I’m—as you see me, but my husband had ceased to be husband or father. He left us, Mona and me, cut us from his life as brutally and inexplicably as if we were strangers. Oh!”—flinging out her thin hands—“I’ve cried myself dry long ago. I can’t—I won’t—assume

a grief I don't feel. When the man you've lived with for twenty years deserts you and his daughter, for no reason that they know, leaving them almost penniless, do you wonder the deserted wife is hard? Since he left us he has sent us nothing. Mona had to go to work. He didn't care—wrapped in his art and his foolish inventions that did no one any good. Promises, always promises; always a fortune just ahead. Do you wonder we— —”

She stopped short, biting her lip. From beneath my brows I glanced at Muldrew.

Suddenly he drew out the dagger. “Did you ever see this before, Mrs. Netherwood?”

He had chosen a moment when her shell showed signs of breaking through. Before that upraised dagger, with its blood-encrusted blade, she recoiled as Mona had done; but into the mother's eyes came more swiftly the look of terror, like a trapped animal. But she fought it down.

Muldrew pressed hard. “Your daughter says— —”

He paused significantly.

“Of course I've seen it,” she said hurriedly. “It was one of his collection. He was always collecting useless things like that, knives and daggers. There are a lot in the drawer there. He picked them up all over the world.” She talked too rapidly.

“Did you know, Mrs. Netherwood, that your husband was murdered—with this? Perhaps you can explain how this dagger, from your husband's collection, came to be there. Your daughter says— —”

Again that significant pause, and again it opened the mother's lips. “She couldn't say anything about it, for she doesn't know.”

In the silence that followed I distinctly heard a car with squeaky brakes slow down for the street corner; somewhere toward the back of the house a tap dripped. Muldrew waited.

“Mona doesn't know that—that I sent that knife to him only two or three days ago,” Mrs. Netherwood said. “I sent it by mail.”

“So you've been in correspondence with him?”

“Two or three letters, that's all.”

“Of course you have his letters.”

Her lips curled. “I wasn’t likely to keep them. There couldn’t be any more love letters— I wrote him care of the Post Office. I didn’t try to hide what I thought of him.”

“You sent him the knife as a reminder, I suppose, of his deserts?”

Colour flamed into the woman’s face—and fear, but she only said in a clipped voice: “He asked me to send it.”

“Why should he wish a dagger?”

“Why anything about my husband?” she retorted bitterly. “He wasn’t—normal, shall we say?”

“It was murder,” Muldrew said brusquely, “not suicide. Are you telling me your daughter knew nothing of this—sending the dagger?”

“I tell you,” Mrs. Netherwood replied fiercely, “Mona has nothing to do with any part of it from beginning to end.”

“Except,” Muldrew put in dryly, “to be on hand when he was murdered!”

Again that stricken look of fear, and for a moment I thought she would throw aside the mask, but she stiffened against it.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said in a low voice. “Do you mean she—she was in the room when—when he was murdered?”

“She was within sound of his voice—at least . . . in the corridor, she says. You knew she was at the hotel—you sent her. Why?”

“Surely a girl has a right to see her own father without questioning!” she sparred. “Did she—did she tell you—?”

“I’m asking the questions, Mrs. Netherwood. What was her purpose there? She said you had discussed the visit.”

“Then she probably told you why.” When Muldrew refused to be drawn she hurried on: “I sent her to induce him to return, to assume his proper responsibilities. That room alone cost him four dollars a day, yet he would send us nothing—nothing but promises.”

“Why did you not go yourself?”

Her lip curled again. “Lucky I didn’t. You’d be *sure* you knew who killed him. You can’t suspect Mona.”

Again Muldrew ignored the lead. “You say he was not normal. How did he show it—before leaving home, I mean?”

“He was so moody, always imagining disaster—that someone was trying to steal the fruits of his labour.”

“What labour?”

“We never knew. Even when he was gone there was nothing in here to show for it. . . . I thought perhaps he sent for the dagger to protect himself from those imaginary enemies. He was terrified before he left.”

“Of the stranger who visited him?”

The woman eyed Muldrew suspiciously. “Mona told you that. Then she’d tell you we never saw him. . . . But always after his visits Aaron was sullen—and worried.”

Muldrew sprang one of his sudden questions:

“Where have you been all the evening, Mrs. Netherwood?”

“Why—why—in the house.” She shot him a suspicious glance.

“So? Yet your coat in the hall is freshly wet with rain.”

Caught in the lie, her calmness momentarily deserted her. But she gritted her teeth against it. “Does it matter where I was? . . . If you must know, I started for the hotel, but on the way I saw my presence would make things worse.”

“Worse for whom—how?” When the woman did not reply he continued: “You mean you started to join your daughter?”

She nodded. “I thought she might need me.”

“So that you knew she was there.”

“I—I knew she would be there; it would be about the time she would arrive—the murder I mean. . . . And now,” fiercely, “you’re holding her. What for? You can’t suspect her—not Mona?”

Muldrew rose. “It would have done you no good to go to the hotel. You would not have been allowed to see her. Nor can you reach her by telephone. I’ve given orders.”

He stalked from the room. The last I saw of Mrs. Netherwood she had sagged forward, her shoulders drooped, staring at her trembling hands.

Outside Muldrew snorted with disgust. “I don’t like that woman. If she didn’t murder Aaron Netherwood it’s not because she wouldn’t. . . . I can’t picture that dead man bad enough to leave a steely grimness like that in the heart of a decent woman.”

CHAPTER X

THE LAUGH AGAIN

Though Muldrew had given no hint that our work for the night was incomplete, I judged by the pace he set that he was not laying off. Yet, with Jefferson gone, with Anders warned—and Mona Netherwood too—we seemed to face a blank wall. I was familiar with the usual police paregoric to the public: “Arrests are expected at any moment,” or “the police have information that is likely to lead to arrests within twenty-four hours,” but I determined *The Star* would have nothing to do with that sort of thing.

Against the mutual denunciation of Muldrew’s methods, that had entertained Sperring and me for ten minutes, battled my faith in my friend. And so I trudged along with him, saying nothing, content to be permitted to remain. Though we were the closest of friends, and I had worked beside him on many a case in the capacity of onlooker, more frequently we aimed at the same end by different paths, I to rake up scoops for *The Star*, he concerned with nothing but the criminal—usually anxious to conceal the clues I sought.

When, just before midnight, we dropped from a street-car at the corner of Markham Street and Ninth Avenue and struck south, I knew where we were going, and my heart beat quickly. My one worry was that he would renew his baiting of Mona Netherwood, taking advantage of her apprehensions and fatigue and using what he had learned from her mother. From the first I had seen Muldrew insinuating her and her mother into the crime.

Guy Hammerton was still in the office, the strain of the evening’s events plainly showing in the dark rings beneath his eyes. Hammerton had always seemed weak and effeminate, but his success as an hotel manager confuted that. He had, it was true, a mincing manner, an unmanly way of dressing, yet, if stories were true, women saw much to admire—too much for the good of his reputation. His supreme self-confidence, too, had sometimes jarred me to raillery to which he was maddeningly invulnerable. It pleased me now, therefore, to see his self-confidence shaken.

He greeted Muldrew with surprise and exasperation. “Not through with us yet, eh?”

“I wasn’t aware Aaron Netherwood’s murderer was caught,” Muldrew retorted. “Has the body gone yet?”

“Long ago. But that man Jameson of yours wouldn’t let me into the room—one of my own rooms! Said you’d given orders.”

Muldrew nodded. “I don’t suppose the undertaker needed you, anyway.”

“We got the body down the back stairs and out the back door,” Hammerton confided. “No one saw a thing.”

Muldrew was playing with a pen. “There are back stairs and a back door, are there?”

“Certainly. Back there—along that passage.” He pointed with the diamond-clad finger.

“Leads into the lane, I suppose?”

“Yes. Are you going upstairs again?”

“I just want to speak to Jameson a moment,” Muldrew replied. “You don’t mind him sleeping on the couch there in the corridor at the head of the stairs, do you?”

“He can have a room, if he likes,” Hammerton offered. “In fact, I’d like him to keep out of the way as much as possible. A policeman about gives an hotel a bad look. You know your way up.” He returned to his books.

We had gone only a few steps when Muldrew turned back. “By the way, might as well give me the key to 320 now. It’s empty, you said. I won’t need it to-night, but I’ll be on hand too early for you in the morning. I want to look about those rooms. I’m having that new lock put on 322 first thing in the morning. Just till I finish with the room.”

Hammerton handed the key over. “I don’t suppose we’ll need 320 to-night for guests. But as soon as you can let us have 322, to clean it up, I wish you would. That carpet will have to be changed.”

A mahogany-finished elevator shot us to the third floor, and we emerged into an empty corridor in which three lights burned. From where we stood Jameson and his couch were out of sight. Muldrew smiled enigmatically as we moved along the soft carpet. The Darlings, in 325, were still awake; we could hear their voices as we passed the door, and Muldrew paused to listen. But only a murmur reached us.

“Sanctimonious pair,” he grunted. “I didn’t like them. Good thing they married—shame to spoil two houses.”

“And such friends of Anders!” I said.

Muldrew grunted.

We found Jameson stretched in complete abandon on the couch, his feet raised to one end, his head on his folded arms. He heard us the instant we reached the corner. Without moving he grinned.

“Couldn’t you,” he asked, “strike a bargain with Hammerton and the Chief to make this my beat regular? I don’t see how the deuce I’m going to stay awake. These quiet, expensive hotels don’t give a policeman a chance.”

Muldrew dragged his feet to a more comfortable position. “You can be a policeman, Jameson, without staying awake to-night. It’s just a form placing you here. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll take a last look around.”

We returned to the main corridor. Instantly Muldrew’s manner changed. After a glance in both directions he tested the key of 320, found it worked silently, and passed on.

“Fine—fine!” He rang for the elevator. To Hammerton he threw a cheery good night as we passed.

On the street a bleak, damp wind was blowing, and Muldrew lifted his coat collar against it. At a determined pace, as if a warm bed looked extra good, we struck westward toward Ninth Avenue. We crossed it, still on Orchard Street. At Tenth Avenue he turned south, and after a few steps looked quizzically down on me.

“Sleepy to-night, Tiger?”

I yawned. “I will be soon—if something doesn’t happen. For a first-class murder, Gordy, this begins to look like a wash-out.”

He made no reply until we reached the end of the lane that ran back of the buildings on that side of Orchard Street.

“All right,” he whispered, and dived into the lane. “Follow me.”

We followed the lane to Ninth Avenue, crossed it quickly, and were swallowed in the darkness behind the Florence Hotel. We found the back door and tried it. It was locked. Muldrew seemed neither surprised nor disappointed. “We’ll try the front stairs,” he said. “If we can creep in there at this time of the night without being seen—”

“Ah,” I said, “you want to see if Netherwood’s murderer could have crept in unnoticed.”

“Miss Netherwood says *she* did,” Muldrew reminded me.

“But the murderer certainly couldn’t have left the hotel that way,” I said.

With the flashing hotel sign dark—it was turned off at eleven—Orchard Street seemed oppressively gloomy, though in the same light five minutes ago I had not noticed it. I tingled with excitement, for I knew Muldrew had more in mind than he mentioned.

For several moments we stood outside the revolving glass door awaiting our chance, then Muldrew touched my arm. We entered and dropped into the nearest chairs. A fair number of guests and visitors still sat about, conversing in hushed tones, as befitted the hour, or reading the evening papers. From our shadowed corner Muldrew kept his eye on the office. At another touch I rose and, keeping near the wall, we moved toward the stairs.

At the turn I looked back. “Hammerton isn’t there, and the clerk is too busy with the telephone operator to notice us.”

“Good!”

Jameson was sound asleep, even snoring gently—almost genteelly, as if, even in sleep, the unwonted magnificence of his surroundings weighed on him. His helmet lay on the floor and his belt was loose. Muldrew roused him.

“Don’t worry about us,” he whispered. “Finish your sleep. I’ll be here the rest of the night.”

Jameson grinned. “Keep an eye on me, will you? I don’t want to lose my socks. I’m sure making a night of it.” We left him snuggling back.

The main corridor was deserted; not a sound reached us from any of the rooms. Above the lobby sleep held sway. And presently we stood in the darkness of Room 320—with my hand touching Muldrew’s sleeve for comfort.

“Make yourself comfortable, Tiger,” he whispered, “but don’t touch the bed or make a sound.” He flashed his torch about the room.

“What’s on?” I asked, my scalp creeping.

“Your guess is as good as mine, old man. I’m testing a theory. Don’t talk. Sleep if you like.”

I knew I couldn’t sleep—not with the blood dancing in my veins. . . . But I did.

A click of the door catch and a subdued rush of feet in the corridor awakened me with dizzy abruptness. Through the open door I could hear Jameson growling:

“What the devil! I say, Muldrew! That you? What kind of a trick— —”

I saw then that the corridor was in darkness. As I felt my way to the door I crashed into Muldrew grovelling about on the floor.

“Stand back, Tiger! My torch—I dropped it!”

Jameson came plunging along the corridor.

Muldrew called: “Your torch, Jameson, your torch! Quick! Along the corridor there!”

“I—I can’t—get it out!” Jameson was still half asleep. Then the light shot out. It lifted, wandering uncertainly. In his right hand Jameson held his gun.

Muldrew leaped toward him. “Don’t shoot, you fool! The light—that way!”

From the darkness far down the corridor came a wild, chuckling laugh!

CHAPTER XI

THE SECOND DAGGER

Muldrew wrenched Jameson's torch from him. The light shot along the corridor—an empty corridor!

We raced to the end. There it branched to the left toward the back stairs. Muldrew snapped off the light and, pressing me tight against the wall, stood listening. All I heard was the pounding of my own heart.

“Damn it!” Muldrew exploded. “What an ass! Careless—just careless all through!” He turned on the torch and flashed it down the stairs and up. “The arm of the chair caught my hand and knocked my torch away.”

“But,” I puzzled, “where are the hotel lights?”

Muldrew made a sound of disgust. “Another fuse, Tiger. It's getting to be a habit. . . . But this time it's the whole building. That fellow takes no chances. . . . Except that he didn't know we were in 320.”

“I give the whole thing up,” I sighed. “I'm not even sure I'm awake.”

“Simple enough, Tiger. Someone wanted it dark.”

A door opened somewhere, then two or three more. The guests were awake. Muldrew paid no attention—he was examining the stairs. “No use following him,” he grumbled. “He'd have every advantage. All right, Tiger, the affair is over.”

But there he was wrong. A voice down the corridor growled.

“It's only the fuse,” Muldrew explained, in a loud voice. “It'll be fixed in a few minutes.”

“Funny effect you have on lights,” said a voice.

“Perhaps it's fortunate I'm on hand, Mr. Anders, when they blow out,” Muldrew returned smoothly.

“Anyway,” Anders sneered, “you can't blame *this* on me.”

Mrs. Darling's hard voice reached us from 325. “Looks as if this hotel needs a new lighting system.”

“Or new guests,” Muldrew replied.

“Oh, you and your wise-cracks!” Anders snarled, and slammed his door.

Muldrew chuckled. “Anders and I don’t love each other. I wonder which of us will get in a blow first.”

Jameson had taken his stand before 322, stiff as a sentry. As we neared him, the torch flaming over him, he shivered.

“Gosh, it’s enough to give a man the jim-jams. To wake up and feel a hand in the dark touching your face— —”

Muldrew jerked about and faced him. “You felt that—someone touched you?”

“I wasn’t dreaming.” Jameson shivered again. “I thought at first it was you trying to wake me quiet-like. But I’d already jumped—and then someone ran away . . . And that awful laugh!”

Muldrew shrugged indifferently. “Stay here, Jameson. I’ll send someone to relieve you. Remember, one of you must never leave this door till the new lock is on.”

And while I puzzled at the sudden change of orders Muldrew set off toward the stairs. I noticed then that he carried his gun ready. At Room 320 he paused to recover his own torch, sending me back to Jameson with his. As I ran after Muldrew I saw him round into the branching corridor where Jameson had lain. I arrived in time to see him dart forward and pick something from the floor beside the couch. He held it up, flashing his torch on it.

It was a narrow-bladed stiletto!

Beads of perspiration showed on Muldrew’s forehead. “My God! As desperate as that! I—I never thought of it!”

“If Jameson hadn’t jumped— —” I began.

“If I hadn’t opened the door of 320 at that moment, Tiger, there’d have been a second murder here, a dirtier murder than Aaron Netherwood’s. Don’t tell Jameson.” He wiped his face. “My theory—was right—as far as it went!” He turned to me. “Tiger, you’d better keep out of this.”

I pointed at the stiletto. “After that I’m likely to.”

CHAPTER XII

THE MOTHER

One more unforgettable moment in my life—as the light flashed from that stiletto. It was like the flutter of a heavy curtain, revealing a glimpse of tremendous things behind. A narrow escape for Jameson, yes, but far above that a world of fresh mystery Muldrew would need his every subtlety and art to explore.

And I was to be in on the exploration.

Muldrew returned to the corridor and knocked on the door of 327. To his first summons there was no response, and my heart beat painfully. Had Mona Netherwood tightened the net about her by running away? But at the second knock the door opened so suddenly that I knew the girl had all the time been standing close inside.

Muldrew crowded through. “Sorry, Miss Netherwood.” He sent the ray from his torch to every corner of the room, then crossed and looked in the bathroom.

Mona stood stiffly aside. She was fully dressed. The light slid over her white face.

“Unpardonably stupid of me,” Muldrew apologized. “You must be worn out. I forgot—I might have brought you some night clothes.”

The girl pointed to the bed. On it lay a pair of the hottest pyjamas I ever saw. Muldrew and I blinked.

“There are some who don’t forget,” Miss Netherwood said. “Mr. Inkerley has been kind.”

I felt faint. Jerry—and those pyjamas! Scarlet and purple! It was a wonder they didn’t rouse the hotel. And Jerry, I knew, wore a nightshirt. But if he had to select, this was about his line.

“Jerry—did that?” I couldn’t keep it back. “I’m swiggered!” The whole night must be a foolish dream.

Muldrew said: “Then you might have been comfortable.”

Her lips parted thinly. “Never in this place.”

Muldrew held out the dagger. “This, too, you have seen before?”

As with the first, she shrank before it, and for a moment I thought she would faint.

“Where—where—did you—find it?” she asked feebly.

“So you *have* seen it before? I thought so.”

He wheeled and made for the door. But she threw herself before him.

“What does it mean—this one, too? Please, please, tell me. How did those daggers get here?”

“I hoped *you* could explain that, Miss Netherwood. Your mother—I’ve had a long talk with her— —”

He stepped forward to catch her, for she swayed visibly, but she threw his hand away.

“What has mother to do with it—with anything? She was against me seeing father at all. She had given him up. She almost hated him.” She stopped, and a look of fear came into her eyes. She wanted to talk, but feared to say too much. “Yes, that dagger, too, was in father’s collection. There were always half a dozen lying about his study.”

“For protection?”

She shook her head miserably. “I don’t know—I don’t see how it could be for that. But now— —”

“Then this one, too, was in his study the other day?”

The girl nodded wearily. “I don’t understand. . . . You say you talked to mother. Does she know—anything? Does she know you kept me here?”

“I told her,” Muldrew said. . . . “She said—quite a bit—much that promises to help. She says”—certainly he emphasized the last word—“she sent the Japanese dagger to your father. You didn’t mention that to me.”

“I didn’t know it,” she admitted, in a tight voice.

Muldrew turned the light from her white face. “It would be better had you known—and told me at first. . . . You see how wise it was that I kept you here.”

“I don’t,” she flashed back.

“No? . . . Then I’ll tell you why. I found this dagger just now, this second dagger of your father’s, that was in your house only a few days ago, where it

fell from the hand of someone who had planned another murder. It failed only because— —”

The sound of excited voices sent Muldrew headlong to the corridor. Jameson was growling. A woman’s voice rose, shrill with protest. Miss Netherwood darted past me.

“Mother! Mother!”

In the corridor Jameson, in the light of Muldrew’s torch, gripped Mrs. Netherwood firmly by the arms.

CHAPTER XIII

FOUR DAGGERS!

The expression on Muldrew's face puzzled me. There was satisfaction, but disappointment as well, and not a little surprise and consternation. Some pet theory must have been sustained—and it failed to please him. I let it pass with the memory of his dislike of women in his professional capacity. Scenes were Muldrew's meat, but not with women in them.

At sight of him Mrs. Netherwood ceased struggling and a cold dignity stiffened her. At that moment the lights came on, repairs had been rapidly made downstairs.

"Ah, Mrs. Netherwood!" Muldrew was feeling his way. "Unusual hour, isn't it—unusual place?"

Mona turned on him fiercely. "Is it unusual for my mother to wish to see her daughter whom you imprisoned without cause? Must she explain to you? Hasn't she a right—"

I wondered if Muldrew felt as I—that the daughter was talking to give her mother time to prepare a story. But Mrs. Netherwood needed no time.

"I was looking for my daughter. Surely you haven't the impertinence to question my right. What has she done?"

"How did you get here?" Muldrew demanded. "Did they let you upstairs?"

"They'—who? I ask no one's permission to see my own daughter. I don't ask your permission now." Defiant enough, but she could not hide the rending uneasiness behind.

"It would be wise to answer my questions, Mrs. Netherwood. The police have certain—privileges in a case of murder. . . . I might have taken your daughter to the police station. Now, how did you get here?"

"By the back stairs." Her lips closed in a thin line.

"But not by the back door. How long have you been here?"

For answer she flung up her head.

He reached out suddenly and touched her coat. "You've been here for some time. It's raining—and your coat is dry. Where have you been in the hotel?"

"Searching for Mona. With this." She showed a small, nickel-plated torch. "I knew they'd stop me at the office."

"And I stop you now," Muldrew said firmly. "Please come with me."

Mrs. Netherwood frowned. "Where are you taking me? I refuse to leave this hotel without my daughter!"

"If I take you both to the station you'll be without her. But I won't ask you to leave the hotel. Your daughter will remain in 327. You'll have another room—on this corridor."

For a moment or two it seemed that the woman would refuse, but something in Muldrew's manner cowed her. Mona intervened.

"Go with him, mother. It's no use. I'll be all right. In the morning may we go, Mr. Muldrew?"

"The morning," said Muldrew, "is another time."

He led along the corridor, Mrs. Netherwood following. Jameson directed Mona back to 327. Muldrew opened the door of 320 and ushered Mrs. Netherwood in. As he turned to her, the stiletto was in his hand.

"Another of your husband's—toys," he said.

She glared at the shining steel, as Mona had done, her lips compressed, struggling between a desire to speak and to be silent. Then, with a quick look over Muldrew's shoulder, she asked in a low voice:

"Has—has Mona seen it?"

"Certainly. That's how I know it was one of his. Did you send him this one, too—by request?" His tone was sarcastic.

"Yes, I did . . . I sent him four. He asked for them." She spoke dully, as if she knew he would not believe her.

"So there are two more? Will you be good enough to describe them?"

She hesitated. "You're trying to corner me."

"I'm trying to save lives," Muldrew retorted curtly.

"The other two—I remember them—they were his favourites of the collection. One is a hunting-knife, with a deer's-foot handle. The fourth is a

long-bladed jack-knife that opens with a spring; one edge of the big blade is nicked like a saw.”

Muldrew was silent, fixing the descriptions in his mind. “Perhaps you sent more than four.”

“I’ve told you everything,” she replied. “Now,” she added, in a low voice.

“After one has murdered your husband, and the second barely missed. . . . And there are still two.” He lifted his shoulders, and his eyes flashed. “In a couple of hours it will be daylight, Mrs. Netherwood.”

Without another word he left the room, locking the door behind him.

“You’re not arresting her, Gordy?” I whispered.

“Who knows?”

“But surely you don’t suspect them—either of them!”

“Not as much as they do each other—or one does the other. . . . If I gave them enough rope they’d hang themselves—trying to save each other.”

“Of course, you really can’t think they— —”

He waved me to silence and opened the door of 322. As he closed it behind us he said:

“All I’m trying to do at present, Tiger, is to prevent two rash women from complicating the case by their persistent reticences and deceiving franknesses. I’ve task enough without trying to untangle two women with an idea.”

He called up the police station. “The operator thinks it’s a ghost,” he grinned. “Hello, Coddling! Send another man to the Florence Hotel right away.”

Then for a time he forgot all about me. He had taken his stand before the open window, legs spread, hands in pockets. Suddenly he called me to him.

“Take a look at this, Tiger. We were down there in the entrance to that lane—fifty yards, at the most. . . . Of course, we’d hear his cries. . . . And, of course, anyone within half a mile would hear them—almost. . . . Netherwood couldn’t have arranged for quicker and more certain succour if he’d planned his own murder. . . . And yet we know—we know succour could not reach him in time to save his life!”

I was weary of the mystification, of his inexplicable interest in that open window. "Of course," I jeered, "Netherwood just delayed his death a moment while he opened the window. One of those fresh air fiends."

"You heard what the doctor said, Tiger? Netherwood never moved after that knife struck home—except to fall where he was struck. And I don't think he was let fall even. No blood anywhere else, either."

"He had time to cry out a lot," I reminded him.

Muldrew only shook his head.

"What about the bruised lips?" I asked.

"Don't rub it in, please."

"It isn't so puzzling to me," I ventured. "The murderer tried to choke him off and failed. It's simple enough—"

"Is it? Did you notice in the cries—or here in the room—any evidence of a struggle? . . . Besides, the murderer of Aaron Netherwood would not fail there any more than elsewhere."

He wandered about the bedroom. The bed was unruffled, except where the doctor had sat on it for a moment before leaving. Each chair in turn was examined. The radio he glanced at for a moment, enviously, I thought, and passed on to the desk. Except for a few sheets of blank hotel writing-paper, two pens, and an ink-well, it was empty. One of the drawers was locked, and this he pried open with the German tool, but it too was empty.

"Nothing—nothing!" he growled. "Too carefully nothing! Everything cleared away."

"Then it couldn't have been done after the murder," I said. "There wasn't time."

Muldrew stood thinking. "Perhaps Netherwood entered to find a thief ransacking the room. That would account—"

He reached into a pigeon-hole in the desk and slid from against the side a battered photograph. As he looked down on it he whistled. "Well, what do you know about that?" He passed it to me.

I saw a thin, angular, but not unattractive woman, and a beautiful girl of perhaps fifteen. It was easy to recognize the two Netherwood women.

Muldrew tapped the picture. "Needn't tell me he'd forgotten them. . . . He didn't leave because he was weary of them. He left because—"

He continued to stare at the photograph.

“Because what?”

“He left because he loved them.”

“Sounds like the latest song hit,” I scoffed.

“Don’t sneer, Tiger. It’s a theory worth considering—and it starts a new train of thought.”

“Something to do with that midnight visitor,” I suggested. “Perhaps he left because his life was in danger, and he didn’t wish his women involved.”

Muldrew said nothing. He had wandered away to the bathroom. There he pounced on a tiny piece of curved glass in a corner. This he picked up carefully by the edges and wrapped in his handkerchief. After a few minutes with a magnifying glass over the wash-basin he returned to the bedroom and started aimlessly around it once more.

From the corridor came the sound of excited voices.

CHAPTER XIV

A SEVERED WIRE

Someone knocked on the door, and Muldrew glanced nervously about. Creeping close to the broken panel, he bent to listen.

“That you, Jameson?”

Jameson’s reply was inaudible to me, but Muldrew opened the door. In the corridor, beyond Jameson’s extended arms, Guy Hammerton, red-faced and disturbed, scowled at us.

“He won’t let me in,” he protested.

“How do you come to be there?” Muldrew demanded.

“When the lights went out I was roused from the office, naturally. Then when you telephoned for another policeman — —”

“Surprised you all, didn’t it?” Muldrew laughed. “I was just illustrating how simple it is to get into this hotel and upstairs without anyone knowing. And I’m not the only one. Mrs. Netherwood is here. She’s in 320 for the night. Be good enough not to disturb her.”

Hammerton was almost purple with suppressed fury. “I don’t see why the police have to do everything in such a sneaky way. Why can’t you let me know? These hordes of policemen running about—it’s bad for the meanest hotel, let alone the Florence. I’m manager here. It’s my duty to see — —”

“Some might think protecting the lives of your guests your duty, Hammerton,” Muldrew interrupted shortly.

It punctured the bubble of Hammerton’s indignation. “It would be better for everyone if we worked together,” he said. “When I don’t know what’s going on, anything might happen.”

Muldrew was losing patience. “My dear Hammerton, now and then the police are able to work alone. But I can assure you there never has been any intention of doing things behind your back. You simply don’t figure, that’s all. I have my job—and I’m doing it my own way. I don’t mean to be offensive, but I’ve no time to argue. I know how it must hurt an hotel like the Florence — —”

“What has the hotel to do with it?” All the time Hammerton was trying to peer over or under Jameson’s big arm, with the curiosity of a small boy.

“As I said, I’ve no time to argue. Good night.”

He was closing the door when Hammerton stopped him with a word:

“You wanted to know if Mr. Netherwood had any friends. I don’t know about friends, but I remember now I’ve seen him talking to that Mr. Jefferson, of Room 326.”

“Thanks.” Muldrew closed the door. For a moment he stood with dancing eyes. “Zealous chap, Hammerton. Keep at him and he may remember more—something of value. . . . But why all this agitation because I surprised them all by being here? I’m not going to steal the plumbing.”

“It’s the publicity he dreads,” I explained. “It’s certainly a nasty blow for the hotel, and Hammerton would like it handled in whispers, of course.”

“And don’t I do it that way when I sneak in? I’ve been most careful — —”

“Hammerton would prefer that you carry on the chase through a telescope.” I yawned. “Go ahead. By the way, I wonder if I couldn’t amuse myself with the radio. Only Anders next us. I’d rather like to bother him.”

I was standing before the radio. It was an elaborate affair; Muldrew’s guess at eleven valves was probably right. Muldrew came and stood beside me.

“I wish we could,” he murmured. “I’m through with the room for the time being.” He stooped to the dial. “Likes Boston, does he?” He turned the knob, but no light came in the dial with the click. “Something’s wrong here. D’you understand these things, Tiger? . . . Maybe that’s not the switch.”

For a moment or two he fooled with the knobs without response. I dropped to my knees and pressed home the wall-plug.

“Must be a wire broken—or another switch somewhere.”

I caught hold of the wire where it disappeared behind the machine and tugged at it gently, then, feeling at the back, found it fastened with a thumb-tack. A tug brought the wire loose in my hand. Muldrew and I stared at the broken ends, and at each other.

“Broken,” I murmured. “Disconnected.”

Muldrew took the wire from me. “Cut!” he corrected.

He dragged the instrument from the wall. The wire to the wall-plug had been attached only by a thumb-tack, while the end to the machine hung free. Muldrew took the latter up with some curiosity.

“Did you pull hard, Tiger?”

“I certainly didn’t break it. I felt the broken end before I pulled.”

He held up the end that ran to the machine. Each of the two twined wires was curled like a fish-hook.

I burst out laughing at his bewilderment. “Don’t you see, Gordy? Someone played a joke on Netherwood—someone annoyed by the machine. It was cut to stop the everlasting crooners who make life miserable for most of us. I’ve often wished I could do it. Cleverly done, too—Netherwood would never suspect what was the matter.”

“Then he must have had friends—or a friend—who called on him,” Muldrew declared, following only one line of thought. “This must have been done by someone who had access to the room. The Yale lock would keep anyone else out.”

I chuckled. That severed wire gave me an idea I planned to put into execution at the first opportunity on the radio of a friend who had the room next mine at the boarding-house. “Why worry about that?” I laughed.

“Why worry about anything?” Muldrew replied peevishly.

CHAPTER XV

A BREAKFAST ARRANGED

We remained in 322 the rest of the night. Weary of Muldrew's ceaseless prowlings, I lay on the bed and slept. When I wakened, disgruntled and confused by my surroundings, Muldrew was stretching himself awake on the rug beside the bed. In a moment he seemed as fresh as if he had slept the clock around at home. There was, too, a certain cheerfulness about him that irritated me. He even teased, a trifling to which he seldom descended.

"Don't neglect to comb your hair, Tiger. You do sleep mussily."

I inquired the time.

"Not quite seven." He did not look at his watch, but I knew his uncanny sense of time.

"I feel," I grumbled, "like last week's rose. I hope they've a place to grub at the Florence."

"I hope you can afford it," he said. He rubbed his unshaven chin. "I seem to remember a barber's shop downstairs. I should have time to—"

"You've time," I declared, "to eat two poached eggs and three slices of bacon with me, Gordy. Let's start the day right."

"Thanks, I haven't time." He had remained seated on the floor. Now he rose on his hands and hung there, his knees doubled to his chin. "You don't mind if I take time for my morning exercises?"

I told him I didn't. "I'll only think you an ass."

I watched him through a series of contortions. As a finale he stood before the open window and drew several long, noisy breaths.

"And," he mused, staring down on the street, "if I called out—only half as loud as poor Netherwood—there'd be a score outside the door in forty seconds! Let's get downstairs and greet the staff."

I tumbled from the bed. "Not me. I'm on the trail of a cup of coffee. I'll leave the amenities to you."

We used the stairs. As we passed the couch where Jameson had slept Muldrew shuddered. "And I'd have been to blame!" he muttered. He turned

to me with a twinkle in his eye. "A twist there for your writer friend, Tiger. Better pass it on."

"I'm lunching with him to-day," I said. "I'll tell him. . . . But darned little I have to tell. A whole night in a room where a man was murdered a couple of hours before, and not even a ghost to brag about—nothing but a colossal grouch and a ravenous appetite that's going to cost me dear."

"Why not pile it on Sperring?" Muldrew suggested. "I don't charge for the idea. Make it breakfast instead of lunch. You'll never be so hungry again. Besides, I may need you later. Sperring will need you sooner. You'll be able to discuss the imperfections of the professional as compared with the creation of Sperring's pen. In real life we always come off so badly." He was laughing at me, and loyalty to Sperring hid the joke in it for me. "By the way," he added, as we reached a lower landing, "there are two women in this hotel who must wonder where their breakfast is coming from." He hastened back up the stairs. "I clean forgot about them. Why not make a family party of it—you and Sperring—and Jerry Inkerley?"

"What has Jerry to do with it?" I grumbled.

He laughed aloud and clapped me on the shoulder. We had reached the third floor. Suddenly he darted from me. When I reached the main corridor he was stooping before the keyhole of 320. With a scowl he inserted the key and threw the door open.

I arrived in time to see him wrench the telephone from Mrs. Netherwood's hand and tear it from the wire.

"I didn't expect this," he exclaimed angrily.

Mrs. Netherwood regarded him scornfully. "I wonder what you did expect."

"You were told not to communicate with your daughter."

"I was told I *couldn't*. I was proving you wrong. I'm only sorry I didn't think of it sooner."

They glared at each other. "There are several things," Muldrew said slowly, "it would have been better to have thought of sooner."

He left the room, carrying the telephone with him. As he locked the door he sighed. "These women! When will I learn to cope with them? . . . I'll have something to say to that operator downstairs."

The night clerk blinked at us a little sullenly as we approached the counter. Muldrew seemed to have forgotten his irritation.

“Mr. Hammerton told you we were here?”

“Yeah,” replied the clerk. “Gave us a slating, too, for not seeing you come in.”

Muldrew offered his cigarette case. The clerk, after a quick look around, took one, turned his back and lit it, drew four or five luxurious breaths, and concealed the burning cigarette beneath the counter. With a sympathetic wink Muldrew handed the case to the telephone operator.

The girl winked. “No thanks, I belong to the W.C.T.U.—this morning.”

“Poor Mr. Hammerton!” Muldrew lit his own cigarette. He hadn’t offered me one—I simply didn’t count. “Not much sleep for him last night. You shouldn’t have called him when the lights went out.”

“But I didn’t.”

“Oh!” Muldrew puffed away.

A suave voice broke on us from behind. “Good morning, gentlemen. I hope you slept more than I did.” Guy Hammerton, smelling of scented soap and powder, lifted the flap of the counter and entered the office.

Muldrew shrugged. “We were not paying guests, Hammerton.”

“Try a night as *my* guests,” Hammerton offered genially.

“Awfully good of you. In the meantime I’m going to try a more familiar bed—after a shave and a plate of bacon and eggs—”

“The barber’s shop is open,” Hammerton said, “and if you and Lillie will try the Florence breakfast I’ll take time to eat with you. I think you’ll agree we serve the best bacon in the city.”

But Muldrew had not the time, and I had Sperring in mind.

“As Sperring’s guest or mine,” Hammerton said, “you’ll get the same breakfast. A mighty good advertiser for us, Mr. Sperring is . . . if only he didn’t keep that damned typewriter going so late. There’ve been complaints.”

Muldrew squeezed the spark from his cigarette. “If you give him such plots, Hammerton, what can you expect?”

“A plot with no solution as yet,” Hammerton retorted. “But perhaps he has more faith in the police than I have.”

As we emerged to the street I sidled closer to Muldrew. “These telephone operators!” I murmured.

“For a bachelor who isn’t at his best with women,” he replied, “I sometimes find them useful.”

CHAPTER XVI

A DIFFERENT ARRANGEMENT

I stopped at the barber's shop, but Muldrew preferred his own razor. In the chair I snatched a few winks, and was the better for them. For future reference, as he handed me my hat, the barber informed me of his hour of opening. I must have looked like that.

I had telephoned Sperring from the shop, and before I had time to knock he threw the door open and welcomed me with a beaming smile and outstretched hand.

"Grand idea!" he exulted. "The one meal of the day I hate alone." He led me to the most comfortable chair in the room. "I don't see how I could have waited till lunch, Lillie. I've had a distressing night. This awful affair downstairs. The intricacies of it—they won't let me sleep. And yet," he grinned, "they fill my waking hours with scintillating ideas that should be worth so much per . . . unless in print they looked like a peanut when a monkey is through with it. Overnight I've developed an inventiveness that bewilders even myself. I may like to read my own stuff yet."

"If it solves the crime — —" I began.

He waved the thought away. "That's Muldrew's work. . . . And yet I'd like to help. Anything happen last night?"

I told him so much had happened that I scarcely knew where to commence. But I did commence. Even at that I bared only the outlines. Though Muldrew had imposed no restrictions on the tale I should tell, the secretiveness of a reporter concealed some of the night's incidents. Besides, I was anxious about the Netherwood women—certainly about Mona.

Sperring listened with rapt attention, and at the end he applauded my powers of narration. "By Jove, if only I could go along with you and Muldrew! . . . Another fuse blown! Getting deeper and deeper! Did Muldrew chase this one down?"

I had to confess another laxness in my friend, but I rallied to his defence. "It must have been blown in the basement—and it couldn't have anything to do with—anything."

Sperring shook his head. “And that second dagger! What the devil happened there? Surely no one wanted to murder Jameson, a mere policeman. Wait!” He held up his hand. “Could it be that the murderer took Jameson for Muldrew in the dark?”

“Why should anyone wish to murder Muldrew?” I countered.

“Because, in spite of the bunk we talked last night, you and I, your detective friend knows more than he is talking about . . . and the murderer probably realizes it.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe Muldrew has discovered anything like that.”

Sperring paced the room, rumpling his hair. He was collarless and coatless again. I gathered that thus he worked. The typewriter stood on a small table, open and ready for use, a heap of yellow copy-paper beside it.

“What puzzles me,” Sperring mused, planting himself before me, “is how the fellow could hope to blow out the main fuse—if it’s in the basement—and get back to the third floor before the disturbance of the darkness would foil any plan he had in mind. If he knew Muldrew was there— —”

“No one but Jameson knew we were there. And, since we were sitting in the dark, we had no way of knowing the lights were out.”

Sperring nodded thoughtfully, but he was not satisfied. “Jameson was left on guard . . . yet Muldrew let him sleep—out of sight of the door he was supposed to be guarding.”

I explained that Muldrew had no thought of anything happening.

“Then what was he hiding in 320 for?” he countered. He did not wait for an answer; indeed, I had no answer. “If I let a detective of mine do what Muldrew does!” He was fumbling with his collar before the mirror. “I don’t understand your detective friend. He’s awfully interesting to me. I wish I had your chance.”

“I’ll do my best to keep you in touch with things,” I offered.

The beaming gratitude of his round face was reward enough. “Say, that’s fine— —”

The telephone rang, and Sperring, tie in hand, picked up the receiver.

“Hello! . . . Why—why, yes, certainly, Miss Netherwood. No, I’m up and almost dressed. Working this last hour. . . . Yes, Mr. Lillie is here. . . . Wouldn’t it be better to come up here? Give me five minutes. Room 420.”

I had risen to my feet. “Golly, I clean forgot Jerry!”

Sperring turned from the mirror to scowl at me. “What has he to do with it?”

“Muldrew told me Mona would be free, and I was to tell Jerry to look after her.”

“Don’t you think you and I can do that?”

“I’d only be too glad of the chance,” I confessed. “That’s what makes me more sensitive about it. May I use your ’phone?”

But Jerry was not to be found.

“Why,” I asked of Sperring, “should Miss Netherwood call *you* up?”

“Because she couldn’t find Inkerley—or he wasn’t in, I suppose. Just the same,” struggling with the large black bow he always wore, “that doesn’t account for her calling me. Did I say a word to her last night? I don’t remember if I did. Still,” with his boyish grin, “I accept the favours of the gods. Only two minutes left, and my hair unbrushed.”

In something less than the two minutes a gentle knock announced Miss Netherwood’s arrival. Sperring pulled down his vest, winked at me, and started for the door. As he passed me, he whispered: “Don’t tell her what you’ve been telling me. Let her do the talking.”

The warning confused me, and the fact that Mona looked at me and not at Sperring when she entered added to my confusion. I dropped my eyes; I could not face that look of appeal, of doubt, of dread—and, above all, of beauty.

“There was no one else in the hotel to come to, Mr. Sperring,” she explained, still looking at me.

I could stand it no longer. “I must beg of you, Miss Netherwood, to dissociate me from anything Mr. Muldrew does. I’m his friend—but I’m yours, too, I hope. Above all, I’m a reporter. I happened to be with him — —”

Sperring came to my relief with a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Anything Lillie and I can do for you, Miss Netherwood, pray command us.” He bowed with his old-world gallantry.

The girl sank into a chair, and I had a feeling that if the chair hadn’t been there she’d have tumbled to the floor.

“It’s about mother,” she moaned. “I can’t find her.”

Sperring was bewildered, for I had not mentioned Mrs. Netherwood’s presence in the hotel. “Your—mother? Did you—expect her here?”

“She was here all night,” the girl said. “Mr. Lillie knows— —”

“Muldrew released her this morning—he told me he would,” I said. “She’s probably at home.”

“She isn’t at home. I’ve telephoned. Besides, she wouldn’t leave without me. But she’s not in the room I saw Mr. Muldrew put her in. I tried the door and there was no response, and then the policeman made me hurry on. I—I don’t know what they’ve done with her.” Her voice broke.

Sperring’s eyes were moist. “Miss Netherwood, we’ll find your mother if we have to knock on every door in the hotel—if we have to break them down— —”

Someone knocked on our own door. Mona Netherwood looked wildly about, and Sperring, without a word, motioned to the bathroom. When she was out of sight, with a face of cherubic innocence Sperring opened the door. Jerry Inkerley pushed in, his face dark with angry questioning.

“Tiger,” he growled, “why the devil didn’t you tell me she wanted me?”

I was so surprised and flustered by his unexpected appearance on the scene that I could only gulp. But when he made a furious move toward me I remembered Mona in hiding so near at hand.

“I forgot,” I said.

“Yeah—you forgot!” And how Jerry could sneer! “You always did lose your senses before any pretty girl.”

I found my tongue then with a vengeance. “And you— —” I began, and remembered that he was my boss. “I had no idea—I haven’t yet—that Miss Netherwood wanted you.”

Mona saved a scene by appearing in the bathroom door. For a moment or two it seemed like salvation, for Jerry staggered back. Then he leaped at me. I ducked. Sperring ran behind a chair, his eyes big with amazement. Mona caught Jerry’s arm as he struck.

“Jerry! Jerry!” And that cry killed every hope I had entertained.

Sperring said: “Mr. Inkerley, Miss Netherwood came to us for help. Do you resent that others were able to do what you weren’t on hand to do?”

Jerry turned sullen, distrustful eyes on the girl.

With crimson cheeks she explained.

“What I want to know, Jerry,” I grumbled, “is how you knew—anything.”

But no one was listening to me. Sperring laid a hand on Jerry’s arm. “In the meantime we’re delaying the best breakfast the Florence can serve. See how weak with hunger Miss Netherwood is. And you and Lillie look as if you’d be the better for a bite. It isn’t often I have a chance to breakfast with so many friends.”

Jerry’s temper was as quick to go as to come; he looked ashamed.

“I hope you don’t mind walking down,” Sperring said, as we left the room. “I’ve promised Miss Netherwood to find her mother.”

At the third floor Sperring made a sign for silence. Somewhere out of sight we could hear two men talking, and we tiptoed to the corner of the main corridor. A man was working at the door of 322, Jameson looking on. As we watched, the workman closed the door, tried a key in the new lock he had fixed, and, locking the door again, asked where Muldrew could be found.

“I was to give these keys into his own hand,” he said.

Jameson turned to point down the hall and saw us. “Were you looking for Muldrew, Tiger?” he asked. “He’s down there in 310. I guess he won’t mind you knowing.”

Muldrew’s unannounced change of plan confused me, but before we could make a move a door down the hall opened and Mrs. Netherwood and Muldrew emerged into the corridor.

As mother and daughter caught sight of each other they rushed together. Muldrew did not interfere, but he was plainly startled when he saw us.

“Gordy,” I scolded, so that no one else could hear, “you promised to let me in on everything.”

He waved an indifferent hand. “This was nothing—a mere formality. You can’t complain—they’re both free now. I’ve only been making sure it was the daughter and not the mother who was seen in the hall after the murder.”

“I hope,” Sperring said, bowing low, “you’ll both join us for breakfast.”

But Muldrew had too much on his mind, and without more than a word of refusal he left us. Taking the two keys from the workman, he disappeared down the stairs.

Sperring watched him go with lifted brows.

“Lillie,” he whispered, as we waited for the elevator, “something has happened. It’s been Muldrew versus Mrs. Netherwood—and it looks as if the woman won.”

CHAPTER XVII

A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

It was a strange breakfast, that one in the grill of the Florence Hotel, even at that time. Stranger now as I look back on it—with Sperring, stranger to us all, as host, and the rest of us for the most part strangers to one another. How it went its course so smoothly, with such a tragic event as its sole connecting-link, puzzles me yet.

The grill-room was fairly well filled when we entered, and a waiter ushered us straight to a table near the door leading to the kitchen quarters. “Better service here, sir,” he whispered to Sperring, who seemed to be well known and liked by the staff.

Sperring made an ideal host. His position was a difficult one—with the wife and the daughter of the murdered man beside him, a stranger, eating their first meal since the bereavement; but his old-fashioned grace and dignity made his generous, almost excessive hospitality so pleasing that it was not hard, for me at least, to forget the one bond between us. I had not, indeed, much as I admired him, thought it was in him to handle such a delicate situation, and I found myself marvelling throughout the meal at his resources. If his aim was to keep our minds from the tragedy until the ice was broken, he succeeded admirably.

His attitude toward Mrs. Netherwood was a perfect combination of gentle sympathy without flagrant pity; there was no sadness about the meal.

First of all he directed our attention to the somewhat weird decoration of the room, wine-coloured chairs and tables against bricky-pink walls, over which played the light of concealed pink bulbs. Something psychologically effective about it, from the view-point of an eating place, for I suddenly felt ravenous.

As I ate I studied Mrs. Netherwood. Slowly she brightened, threw aside her hardness, but beneath it all I read a tearing anxiety she tried to hide, even from herself. Again and again I caught her regarding her daughter with frightened, incredulous eyes; and then she would throw a suspicious glance about the room.

Mona, too, was uneasy. Sometimes her glance met her mother's, and both would look away. It worried me.

I found myself wondering what Sperring had meant in those last whispered words. Had he, in his expert study of the case, unearthed something that escaped me? Muldrew, certainly, was suspicious. I refused to entertain thought of the guilt of either of the women. But it would be blindness to ignore their anxiety, their concern for each other.

The meal was half over before the subject of the murder arose. Sperring had pressed on Mrs. Netherwood a fresh helping of toast, and the warm, appetizing slices, with the good coffee, livened the colour in her thin cheeks. Mona saw it and sighed.

"I didn't know I was so hungry," Mrs. Netherwood said in some confusion. "I ate so little last night. . . . Eat your bacon, Mona, dear. You must have had a hard night."

A waiter bustled in from the kitchen, leaving the door to the pantry ajar. The hum of many cooks and the odour of coffee and toast and hot fat reached us from the kitchen beyond.

"It was my own fault," Mona replied, "if I was uncomfortable. There was a bed—if I could have slept."

Mrs. Netherwood's eyes flashed. "They didn't wish you to sleep. They thought to wear you down, to get you to— — They tried it with me— —"

She broke off both sentences abruptly and closed her thin lips. Then I saw that her eyes were fixed on Mona's in a strange way. Questioning or warning? I did not know.

"Why should he wish to wear her down?" Sperring asked innocently, helping himself to a slice of toast.

The eyes of the two women flew to him suspiciously, but he looked so inoffensive, so sympathetic, that no one could suspect him.

"I'm not so very tired, mother."

The question had not been answered, and the omission was significant, I thought. Plainly they longed to be alone together, to discuss the night's events. To warn? To combine? I had no way of knowing that either.

"You shouldn't have come, mother," Mona went on. "What could you hope to do?"

“Under the circumstances—” Mrs. Netherwood let it rest there, but she glared defiance at us all.

Sperring, the perfect host, spoke soothingly: “Even in fiction, Mrs. Netherwood, we have to make our detectives foolish—a little. Of course, there’s a difference.” For a time he elaborated, half seriously, half whimsically. “I’m beginning to think the only agreeable detectives, the only sane ones, are in fiction.”

Loyalty to Muldrew brought a protest to my lips. “The trouble is no one in real life knows what’s in the detective’s mind.”

“If anything,” Sperring grinned.

We argued it. Sperring winked at me, proving what I already suspected—that it was part of the entertainment.

“But,” he said finally, “we shouldn’t talk of it. You’d rather we didn’t, I’m sure.”

Mona lifted her chin. “It has to be talked about. Mother and I have to face it—till father’s murderer is found. And,” determinedly, “if the police fail I’ll never give up.”

Mrs. Netherwood’s hand reached out spasmodically and touched her sleeve.

Sperring saw everything, though he seemed not to be looking. “Same here,” he said. “Lillie and I have formed a league for the same purpose. His practical experience and my imagination—well, it’s going to be an interesting experiment . . . though perhaps I’m the only one to profit from it.”

Some of our earlier criticisms of Muldrew’s methods cropped up, and there Jerry joined in. Sperring outlined our course.

“What we must uncover is what Mr. Netherwood was doing here, and who his friends were. . . . Then there’s that Jefferson. In a way I don’t blame Muldrew for dropping him. The evidence against Jefferson was too flagrant. In my stories I wouldn’t dare make him guilty.”

“Muldrew is nobody’s fool,” I defended, “and the murderer knows it. He must have tried to kill him last night.”

I was forced then to tell the story of the stiletto in detail. An idea struck me. “Or was it an attempt to get back into 322?”

Sperring's hand stopped half-way to his mouth and his eyes widened. Then he dived for his note-book. "That's it! By Jove, you've struck it, Lillie! Great idea. May I use it?" He scribbled feverishly. "Jameson was left on guard. To guard what? . . . The murderer must know—and he wished to get into that room for it—or to destroy it. . . . Some clue, of course. . . . And Muldrew suspected it." His eyes sparkled. "I wish I had your chance, Lillie. To work beside a real detective—gee!"

He lifted his head and frowned. "Strikes me we're getting more than our share of that kitchen." He looked about and saw the pantry door ajar. "If you catch the waiter's eye, Lillie, please."

Jerry had said little; he had never quite thrown off the mood aroused by events in Sperring's room. He addressed me across the table:

"We'd better break away, Tiger; we've a lot to do. Have you got your stuff for the counterfeiter screed to-day?"

I protested indignantly. "Surely a murder is enough for one day!"

Sperring was instantly alert. "Counterfeiters, you say? Oh, you mean the lot you've been writing about in *The Star*. Good work, too. All in my line."

Jerry paid no attention. "I want that stuff, Tiger. I can handle—this myself."

"If you want me to drop it," I returned stiffly. "I'm working in with Muldrew. No one else can get what I get."

Jerry caught Mona's reproving eye and dropped the subject. "But don't forget the other," was his last word.

Sperring was still looking for a waiter, so I rose myself to close the pantry door. It opened inward, and as I reached for it I caught a shadow of movement in the dark room. So that all the time one of the staff must have been there and ignored the open door. Hammerton should know of it.

The meal over, we left the room; and nothing that had happened surprised me more than the ease and grace with which Jerry drew back the chairs of the ladies, made way for them, opened doors for them. So flagrant was his attention to Mona, that as Sperring and I watched them leave the hotel I laughed sarcastically.

Sperring's eyes were half shut.

"Lillie, don't be too kind in thought about those women, don't be too easy on them. Does it sound nasty of a host. . . . I hope I played my part

decently. . . . The perils of a pretty woman—I’ve used it a dozen times in my stories. . . . And Mona Netherwood is—beautiful. . . . The mother? Do I need to speak of her—those hard eyes, that tight mouth, that cold face? Her husband was a fiend in her eyes. . . . Oh,” with a shrug of his wide shoulders, “I’m a cold-blooded cuss. . . . If only I could hit on the theory behind this murder! What publicity! What a price for my stories! . . . To get ahead of a real detective in running the murderer down!” He rubbed his hands together.

I grunted. “I’ve tried that often enough with Muldrew—with no gratifying results.”

“Perhaps I’m an optimist.” Sperring stretched. “But that isn’t going to rob me of the next four hours’ sleep. That breakfast was a bit of a strain.” He caught my hand and shook it. “So glad of my new friend, Lillie. I find you a goad to imagination.”

Outside it was cloudy. I hurried along Orchard Street, determined to get in my copy to forestall Jerry. In the barber’s shop I had read the brief report in the *Morning Times*, and I exulted at the scope it left me.

Someone touched me on the shoulder, and I turned to see Muldrew grinning down on me.

“Honest, I didn’t do it, Gordy.”

“I should arrest you for the murder,” he smiled, “considering your interest in it—everywhere—with everyone.”

“Too bad,” I said. “So many of us interested—and with such unimpeachable alibis.”

“Only you and Sperring,” he replied. “Ah, well—you enjoyed your breakfast?”

“You missed a lot, Gordy. A perfect host—perfect meal—perfect companions. But you might have spoiled it.”

“Jerry, too?”

“Jerry most of all. The big simp’s in love.”

“Then I did better than I thought when I telephoned him.”

“You—telephoned him?”

“Certainly. You see, I wished you all to have a nice, friendly, unrestrained discussion of the murder—sort of get yourselves talked out.”

Suddenly he was serious. “Tiger, I want your help. I’m looking for two daggers.”

“Don’t I know it? But how can I help?”

“By keeping your eyes open—everywhere. You heard Mrs. Netherwood describe them?”

I repeated the descriptions, and he seemed satisfied. “I’ll not forget,” I told him, “not if you’ll let me in on things.”

He laid a hand on my shoulder. “You’re a useful friend, Tiger. You’ve earned it. . . . Your discretion at the breakfast table was admirable.”

I faced him. “So it was you there in that dark pantry.”

But Muldrew had turned into a side street.

“You must feel flat,” I called after him, “if you thought to get anything on two innocent women.”

“Two beautiful—dangerous women,” he replied. “What a pity I can’t be one of Sperring’s heroes!”

CHAPTER XVIII

A REPORTER'S JOB

Jerry was waiting for me at *The Star* office. I had written my story at home, conscious that the less we saw of each other under the circumstances the better for me. He accepted the sheaf of pages and absent-mindedly shoved them to the back of his desk, all the time frowning at me, as if wondering where I figured in events.

"It'll take two columns," I told him; "more with display heading. If that isn't enough—"

Plainly he wasn't listening. "It's about the murder," I shouted. "You may have heard of it."

"Ah—yes—the murder!" Suddenly his gaze took on understanding and he looked out at me sheepishly. "I've handled it," he said.

"But—but you don't know half—"

"I know enough to put in the paper—with what Mona told me."

So it was "Mona" already!

"Mona," I declared boldly, "knows little more than you—or she wouldn't tell you any more."

He glared at me. When he said nothing I knew his case was hopeless. The havoc love plays with a man!

"All right," I stormed, "go to it. And you can take over the whole damned thing. But you can't stop me getting the inside dope from Muldrew—not even if you fire me. If you do that you'll never get it."

In his wavering eyes I saw that I had beaten him.

"Of course. *The Star* needs all the information it can get," he said apologetically. . . . "And Mona and I need your help, Tiger."

He was so different from the Jerry I knew that I couldn't believe my ears.

"You see—you see, Tiger," he went on, "for some reason, absurd, of course, Muldrew suspects—Mrs. Netherwood and Mona. What a beast he is!" he burst out.

“Muldrew doesn’t see smoke where there’s no fire,” I retorted.

At that I had the old Jerry—all over me, in a tumble of searing words that had me gulping. It taught me something more about love—how shallow it is, after all. Jerry was a whole library on love. And when he ran out of epithets referring to myself and my ancestors he switched about and gushed such slushy homage to the Netherwood women that I could have got sick on the spot.

“And so Mona and I are going to find the murderer ourselves!” he announced. “And that’s where you fit in. You can help us a lot by keeping us informed of what Muldrew is doing.”

“The devil I will!” I thrust my hands stubbornly in my pockets. “You’ll get nothing from me Gordon Muldrew wants kept secret. My first rôle is to help Muldrew. I’m a sight more eager to run down Netherwood’s murderer than to find stuff for *The Star*—and you and Mona stand a bad third in the list. If you’re so sure of her innocence, what do you want to keep track of Muldrew for? You’ve nothing to fear.”

“That’s what Mona says,” he murmured, and I knew I’d shot my last bolt—and missed.

“If you’re so eager to find the murderer, why not join Sperring and me?” I suggested. “We’re working on clues— —”

“Just what I was coming to. Sperring—there’s a man with ideas—ideas that would never occur to a detective.”

“But Gordy is no ordinary detective.” I had a hard time riding so many horses. “And it’s not ideas but clues that count. Anyone can get ideas— —”

“Don’t try to teach your grandmother to suck eggs,” he jeered. “I’m giving you a week off, Tiger, on condition that you stick to this case. I trust you to tell me what you uncover. You’ll enjoy yourself—the thrills you live for.”

I crammed my hat down. “Thanks—for nothing. A week’s holiday—at work. The first ten hours of it I’m going to spend in bed. Then I’ll hunt up Sperring; he’ll have a dozen solutions by that time.”

I remembered that Sperring was not apt to divulge them for the benefit of the Netherwoods.

CHAPTER XIX

JEFFERSON BY NAME!

I slept but six hours, for Sperring was on my mind.

He received me in a more dishevelled condition than ever, and on his round face were the lines of mental stress. Smudges from the typewriter stained his fingers, and a chaos of yellow copy-paper littered table and floor.

For a moment he seemed not to recognize me, then he smiled apologetically.

“Sorry, Lillie. When I’m working I’m a poor companion. And this is real labour. Never faced a problem like it. In fact, I never before got up against the real thing—what I’ve penned at so much a word. . . . Clues—clues—clues, and every one of them only increases the muddle. . . . That open window—what the devil does Muldrew think of that? . . . I don’t believe I’d have noticed it if he hadn’t; and now it looks like the one vital clue.”

“I’m glad you see that Muldrew isn’t quite a wash-out.”

He eyed me with surprise. “Good Lord, Lillie, I never thought that. . . . I’ve rapped his methods, and his apparent indifference—but I guess it was only jealousy and irritation that he was moving ahead of me. You see, I’m not half bad on paper, but the real stuff—that’s what Muldrew faces every day. This is my first chance to test my imagination, and I’d hate to fail. I’d lose my self-confidence. See the point? I’ve a sincere regard for Muldrew’s capacity, but I can’t help hoping my brains are something better than useless. I’m staking a lot— —”

A knock sounded on the door, and Sperring’s eyes flew inquiringly to mine. With an impatient exclamation he flung the door open. Muldrew walked in.

“They told me in the office you were here, Tiger,” he explained. “Good day, Mr. Sperring. I took the liberty— —”

“No liberty whatever,” Sperring assured him genially. “A real pleasure. . . . In fact, we were talking about you.”

With the eye Muldrew could not see he winked at me.

“I hope you’ve been indulgent.”

“More indulgent with you than with ourselves,” Sperring laughed. “We admit we’re groping in the dark.”

“That’s frank enough. So am I.” The confession surprised me. “You have the better end of the game, Mr. Sperring—writing about mystery instead of unravelling it. And,” looking about the comfortable room, “evidently it pays better. Nice quarters you have. Never was in an author’s sanctum before.”

Sperring sighed. “Yes, it’s comfortable; but it looks as if I’m going to have to give it up. I’ve taken a dislike to Hammerton, the silly fop. Silly of me, I know, but these things get under my skin. The hotel isn’t so bad—though not what it might be. But that law-de-daw manager beats me. . . . Fact is,” with that boyish grin, “they’ve been complaining about my typewriter. Hammerton was up here not half an hour ago grouching about it. . . . He tried, too, to pump me about what was going on—the murder, I mean. Of course, I didn’t discuss it with him—I wouldn’t even if I had anything to say.”

He walked the length of the room and back.

“One thing puzzles me so I can’t think of anything else. It’s that open window.”

He had turned directly to Muldrew. But Muldrew’s face revealed nothing.

“Yes, a real puzzler that,” he returned indifferently.

“You’ve no ideas about it?”

“None worth repeating.” Muldrew strolled to the window and stood looking into the darkening street. “That’s only one of the tangles, Mr. Sperring. I can’t see why so few heard the cries. You heard them away up here. The open window would do that—the echo against the opposite walls.” He leaned his hands on the sill and thought for a moment. “Well, I must drop that part for the moment. If you’re free, Tiger,” dusting his hands, “we’ll toddle along. I’ve something in mind.” He examined his soiled hands. “These expensive hotels have their weaknesses,” he said. “The maids spend little time dusting. May I use your bathroom, Mr. Sperring?”

When Muldrew and I reached the third floor he led the way to the room where Netherwood was murdered. The panel had been repaired and protected inside with iron bars. Muldrew tested the new lock again and again and seemed satisfied.

As we crossed the lobby downstairs I asked where we were going, but he made no reply. The usual crowd of hotel loafers sat about in the easy-chairs, but Muldrew was too absorbed to notice them or me. Outside he set off toward Ninth Avenue at a swinging pace.

I caught his arm. “Gordy, I’m not split to the neck. Go easy. I feel like a Baby Austin beside a Rolls-Royce.”

He slowed down a trifle, but said nothing. At Ninth Avenue he turned around the corner of the stores that were under the hotel there. They were all dark. A dozen steps, then, with the first sign of excitement, he stopped.

“You asked where we’re going, Tiger. I didn’t know then. But—now! Did you see him, Tiger, did you see him?”

“Oh, cut the mystery!” I groaned.

“In the hotel lobby we just came through sat a man we want, want badly—the occupant of Room 326, Jefferson by name!”

CHAPTER XX

TRAILERS TRAILED!

I gulped with excitement, but suddenly the thrill thinned. "Then all you have to do, Gordy, is to lay a hand on his shoulder—and you have the murderer of Aaron Netherwood."

"So uninteresting for you!" he murmured. "All right, there's your way home." He pointed toward Markham Street.

But I could read Muldrew. "I'm hanging on," I said.

He lifted his face to the sky. "Perhaps it's best. I may need you."

He stood so long that I grew restless. "I don't see why you don't nab him."

"Because Jefferson free is worth an army of Jeffersons in captivity. . . . I'm gambling on that."

"You leave him free for more of his dirty work," I ventured. "He's got some game on."

"And we may be on hand to see it, Tiger. . . . That's where you may be useful. A pair is less suspect than one."

He returned to the corner and peered around it toward the front of the hotel. Ninth Avenue was deserted almost to Markham Street in the north. To the south, a new shopping district, everything was dark except a cheap restaurant and the show windows of a men's clothes store.

"If anyone comes out of that lane," Muldrew whispered, pointing to the opening that was the lane running back of the hotel, "get in the shadow as much as you can and offer me a cigarette." He lifted his hand to feel the wind. "We'll retire to the entrance here."

Presently, after several looks around the corner, he seized my arm and drew me into the dark entrance of the closed shop beneath the corner of the hotel. Through the two corner sheets of glass show window we could see several yards of Orchard Street without being seen ourselves. I took out my cigarette case and offered it to Muldrew. Match and cigarette in hand, he waited. I kept my eyes on Orchard Street.

A man strolled into view from the direction of the hotel. I scoffed.

“You don’t mean you thought that was Jefferson, Gordy? You must be off your feed.”

“Wait!” The hand on my shoulder tightened.

And then there came simpering along, twirling a cane, one of those absurd, young-old gentlemen recognized the world over as “sugar-daddies”—milked outrageously by relentless “gold-diggers.” Along the hand that held me passed an electric thrill.

“Jefferson!” Muldrew whispered. “A master of disguises. He should be a detective.” Turning his back on Orchard Street, he struck the match.

I was ready to believe anything, for the man who had first appeared was Anders, of Room 324!

“What does it mean?” I asked.

“Simple enough: Jefferson is trailing Anders— —”

“And we’re going to trail them both,” I put in excitedly.

Both men passed beyond our range. Muldrew stepped out on the pavement. He threw me a distressed look.

“I hate to run you into this, Tiger, because I don’t know where it may land us. But it’s sure to be trouble—and probably much danger. If you wish to drop out— —”

“You can’t drop a burr, Gordy.”

He gave me a grateful glance. “On such short notice I couldn’t get anyone else—and I’ll need someone all right.”

“Let’s start the procession,” I said.

We moved into Orchard Street. A hundred and fifty yards away the men we followed were in plain view. I snorted with disgust.

“Any fool can see Anders knows he’s followed.”

“And Jefferson is no fool,” Muldrew brooded.

“Anders acts it too well.”

“And I’m not sure that isn’t part of the plan,” Muldrew muttered.

We had just started on when the sound of a closing window over our heads made Muldrew whirl about.

“Where was that?” he whispered.

“Someone in the hotel putting down a window.”

Muldrew ran his eye along the rows of windows, many of them lighted. As he turned away his head shook again and again.

We hurried then to cut down the distance between us and our quarries. It was well we did, for in a minute or two they were almost lost in the crowd of a cross street. They continued along Orchard Street.

“It has me guessing,” Muldrew sighed.

Beyond the busy cross street Muldrew pulled up and took another cigarette from me. Fumbling with the match-box he dropped it. As he straightened from recovering it, he said under his breath:

“Tiger, are you game for the thrill of your young life? If you aren’t, crowd out of this right away. There’s danger, real danger, my boy . . . and I don’t know how great.”

“You can’t get away now,” I told him; but tingles raced through me. “Spill the latest scare, Gordy.”

He spilled it. “The procession has become a parade, Tiger. *We’re being trailed ourselves!*”

CHAPTER XXI

STILL TRAILING

There followed for me perhaps the most difficult, the most exciting half hour of my life. I was not to look back—and I knew how Lot's wife must have felt. What was going on? What had Anders in mind? Where did Jefferson figure? And how had we come under surveillance?

Muldrew had quickened our pace, and Jefferson was not more than seventy-five yards ahead. A succession of busy streets demanded it.

I grumbled. "You're as bad as Anders, Gordy. They'll know what we're doing."

"Am I overdoing it?" he inquired anxiously.

"What you overdo is secrecy—even from me," I complained.

Muldrew chuckled. "Keep your eye on the last chapter, Tiger. Your new friend Sperring would advise that. . . . This should be another story for him—and a commission for you."

And so Muldrew was really jealous! I laughed to myself.

We had lost sight of Anders, for the streets were darker here; we could only take it for granted that Jefferson had him in sight. At any rate, it was Jefferson we wanted. We had reached the lower part of the city, toward the river, where the foreign element predominated. Small fruit stores and groceries were still open, and here and there a miserable tailor or shoe shop used by the owner and his family as a sitting room.

Several times we had changed our course, always working westward. Though I knew the city better than most, I had only a general idea where we were.

"Looks as if Anders is really trying to throw Jefferson off now," I suggested.

"Stop guessing, Tiger. I'm having troubles enough. . . . This thing is bound to reach a crisis soon—it has to. . . . One word of warning—don't kick too hard against the pricks."

I didn't bother to delve his meaning. Just then we caught sight of Anders. Another man had joined him, and as they conversed Jefferson stopped before a fruit stand and bought an orange. Anders and his companion went on, then the latter turned into a side street and disappeared.

“Remember what I said, Tiger,” Muldrew whispered hurriedly. “Don't fight too hard. They'll take no chances.”

Before I could digest his meaning the crisis snapped on us.

CHAPTER XXII

CAPTIVES

Jefferson had gone on in time to make our hesitation not too noticeable. . . . We were passing the mouth of a lane when there came a rush of feet and two men leaped on me, pinioning my arms before I could raise them in self-defence. I had a vision of flailing arms and legs where Muldrew was—and then I fell. A few seconds later I was whisked into the dark lane.

No one had uttered a sound. I couldn't, for a smelly hand pressed my lips, almost smothering me. Muldrew, too, had disappeared. I recalled his warning and ceased to struggle.

Helpless, arms and legs bound and a thick sack tied about my waist, I was tossed into a closed car. A gag effectively closed my lips. Two men were in the car with me. As we moved away, I could hear another car behind us. A bandage was tied over my eyes.

The car turned and turned, and in a few minutes I lost all sense of direction. For perhaps twenty minutes we drove, and then a sudden cloud of darkness and the echo of our exhaust told me we were passing beneath an arch. The car stopped, and I was carried into a building. By the echo I took it to be a factory or a large barn.

I was unhurt except in dignity. I could hear Muldrew being carried in behind me. They bore us up a flight of stairs and dropped us in a small room. Someone removed the bandage from my eyes, and there they left us, closing the door behind them. My gag had loosened, and I had little trouble working free. I could hear Muldrew breathing beside me.

“You guessed right that time, Gordy,” I whispered. “Something happened.”

“Shut up!” he snapped, under his breath.

That we were left so carelessly proved that our captors had no fear of escape, or of making ourselves heard. Muldrew's sharp command confused me.

Then from a distant corner of the room came a sound that sent the blood pounding in my ears. I raised my head and listened until my body ached.

Muldrew, I could hear, was working his way toward me. I rolled to meet him, and in a moment we bumped together. He put his lips to my ear.

“Are you hurt?”

“I can’t feel whether I am or not. At any rate, I’m alive—and that’s something.”

“Sh—sh!”

We lay listening.

Again that mysterious whisper of sound, as of a heavy body slithering along the floor. Nearer and nearer it crept. I could feel my hair creep, my hands, tied in the sack, shook, a cold perspiration broke out all over me. I wanted to scream and knew I couldn’t. . . . Still the thing came on. I crowded closer to Muldrew.

“Keep your pecker up, Tiger,” he whispered. “I’ll see what it is.”

He rolled his body away, his head still against my shoulder. The whispering sound came nearer. Muldrew struck out with his feet—and there came a grunt of pain.

“It’s a man!” Muldrew’s exclamation was full of relief. “Here, lie still, you.” He moved away. “Say, Tiger, a man trussed up like ourselves, and gagged in the bargain. Wait a moment—lie still, I say. I’ll work around to your gag if you keep still.”

Presently there was a great puff of breath and a sigh.

Muldrew asked, “Who are you?”

The immediate reply was a laugh, a reckless gurgle that filled the room with courage and defiance, the chuckle of a man who would never be beaten.

“So it’s you, Mr. Muldrew? Me? I’m the man whose life you’ve just saved. That’s enough. Another minute and I’d have smothered. Now I’m fit as a fiddle for the next scene—and perhaps in a position to repay a debt.”

“If you can untie my hands,” Muldrew said.

“I can, but— In a few moments I’ll be free. That gag had me cock-eyed—I believe they wanted to smother me. I’m not such a friend of theirs as you, it seems.” He panted and struggled as he talked. “You, too, wish to be free. . . . I’ll consider it.”

“Perhaps you want to be paid,” I sneered.

The stranger chuckled. “How did you guess? . . . But the payment will not be in species. . . . I wish to the devil you’d stayed out of this. I find you a nuisance—except to get me out of that gag. One must swallow the bad with the good, I suppose. You see, if I don’t escape—well, I’m not ready yet for Saint Peter. Your case is different. Even a detective has a fighting chance against this gang.”

I heard it all, but it sounded so incongruous in that dark room that I thought I must be dreaming. Presently the stranger sighed and stood up.

“Ah, that’s better.”

“What do you want to release us?” Muldrew asked.

For a moment there was no reply. Then: “Do you know where you are, Mr. Muldrew?”

“Only vaguely.”

“But in a day or two, if you were free, you’d nose this place out.”

“I don’t think it would take me long.”

“Pre-cisely. . . . And that wouldn’t do, no, it wouldn’t do. So we come to my pay. You must promise me not to give the police information that will bring them to this place within a week.”

Muldrew snorted. “I’ll remain where I am.”

“Tut! Tut! So foolhardy! I think when it’s too late you’ll regret it. This gang is utterly ruthless. You and your friend—it’ll mean two lives.”

For some time Muldrew said nothing. I knew how deeply the threat to me would stir him. “So it’s only a plant,” he sneered. “Well, you won’t wring a promise like that from me.”

“A plant? You mean I’m not in the same position as yourself? I assure you— I’m a sort of Houdini, that’s all. I can work free from anything except a gag; that throws me into a panic. Sh-sh!”

Someone was coming, and in a moment the door opened. I had twisted toward it, but the room beyond was only a little less dark than the one in which we lay, so that I caught but the faintest outline of the man who entered. The door closed.

“Everybody happy?” jeered a voice that touched a familiar chord. The ray from an electric torch shot along the floor, picking us out one after another. As it left Muldrew and moved across the room my eyes followed it

eagerly. It lit on the stranger. In some mysterious way he seemed to be as helpless as we were. In those few seconds he had accomplished it.

As the light slid over him I recognized the simpering old gentleman we had followed from the Florence Hotel. Jefferson!

I tried in vain to see the man who held the torch. That voice! I failed to place it, but I knew I disliked its owner. The light fell on me.

“You fool!” he sneered. “Why did you butt in?”

In a gust of fury I strained at my bonds.

“You carrot-tops,” he jeered, “you’re all alike.” Abruptly his manner changed. “I wish I was boss.” He hissed it through closed teeth. “I’d set you free, all of you—in the one safe way for us.”

The light snapped off and he left the room.

“Anders!” I cried.

“Bright lad,” said Muldrew.

Jefferson swore under his breath. “Of course, I knew that stroll of his was affected, but I took the chance. I didn’t think they’d penetrate my disguise. I’ve had such luck before—the time the fuse blew out.” He laughed. “Sort of peeved you, didn’t it, Mr. Muldrew?”

“All you accomplished by it was to convict yourself,” I said.

Jefferson laughed easily. “I prefer being suspected of murder to being the second victim. . . . I know it doesn’t look like it—running my head into a noose like this. My wits must have been wandering . . . and I count so much on them.”

The cool impudence, his indifference to the fate he appeared to foresee, made him more and more a puzzle. Was he, as Muldrew suggested, a plant placed in the room to draw something from us? I didn’t think so. What then? I made up my mind to keep eyes and ears open.

CHAPTER XXIII

A BARGAIN

Muldrew had said little, but I knew nothing escaped him. While I had gabbled he had kept his eyes on the goal. Jefferson, too, noticed his silence.

“Of course, the detective is still suspicious.”

Muldrew made no reply.

“Naturally,” I ridiculed, “this sort of thing all through is apt to allay suspicion. Even detectives are human.”

Jefferson took a turn about the room. “You think I led you into this trap, eh? . . . So far is that from the truth that I’ll let you into a secret: I’m worse off than you. You’ll probably be allowed to live. I haven’t more chance than a pat of butter on a hot stove. They may not exactly love you, Mr. Muldrew; toward me they’re murderous.”

“Perhaps,” I suggested, “you’re a detective yourself.”

The idea tickled him, and for several seconds he continued to chuckle. I began to think him crazy. Was he so indifferent to his plight—if what he said was true—or so confident of escape? If the latter, why did he linger to chatter with us?

Muldrew said: “You ask for a week. For a week I’m to do nothing — —”

“Not quite that. I’m not concerned with your pursuit of the murderer of Aaron Netherwood, but you mustn’t come near this place. I’ll take a chance on being run down—but this place can’t be got out of the way. . . . If a week seems too long. . . . I might make it three days. That might serve my purpose. I don’t wish to be unreasonable.”

“And in three days it would be too late,” I sniffed.

Still Muldrew hesitated. And all I could do was to leave it to him to decide, though I knew a single night in the discomfort of our position would wring any promise from me.

“You tell the whole story, Jefferson,” Muldrew said presently. “Tiger is right—after three days nothing.”

“Without the promise,” Jefferson retorted, “worse than nothing. Take my word for it, even if they let you go it will be too late. You have your choice.”

“And so,” Muldrew said scornfully, “you admit you’re trying to wring from me in this way what they can have by simply keeping me here. In other words, getting without danger what they wish.”

Jefferson clacked his lips. “Dear me! I never recall admitting anything—ever. My forte is denying.”

“I believe you,” Muldrew agreed.

“If you can reconcile that with what I’ve told you you’ve too active an imagination for a mere detective. You should take on Sperring’s job. . . . But let that pass. I’d hate to leave you here. What’s your answer?”

Still Muldrew hesitated. I knew that, his promise given, he would stick to it, since he would never acknowledge his position hopeless enough to justify a promise he had no intention of fulfilling.

I waited, loath to think consideration for me might force his hand, yet aching miserably with the fear that he might refuse.

A decision was delayed by something that happened outside. From somewhere out there a scream, distant but distinct, reached us, a short, piercing scream and then silence deeper than ever. I could almost see the brutal hand that cut the scream off.

A woman’s scream—and there within the building where we were captive! I struggled madly to free myself.

Jefferson spoke first: “Aha! Getting desperate, are they? Well, Mr. Muldrew, I can afford to wait no longer. Do you agree, or must I go alone?”

“I agree.”

It relieved me to know that it was the scream did it. Not Jefferson’s threat, nor dread of what might happen to me. Instantly Muldrew drew back.

“Unless I find the place by some other means.”

Jefferson was forced to be content with that. But as he worked at Muldrew’s bonds in the darkness the sound of approaching footsteps sent him scurrying. The door opened, breaking the blank darkness of the wall, and two men entered. A torch flared over us.

Both men were masked, and the sight of those masks alarmed me more than anything that had gone before. In utter silence they remained just inside

the door, the eyeholes of their masks making me creep.

How Jefferson had managed in such a short time to arrange himself to pass inspection I could not understand, but the newcomers suspected nothing. One of them, with a snort of fury, strode across and dealt the seemingly helpless man a brutal kick in the side. Jefferson's legs contracted, but he restrained himself, grunting protest through the gag he had somehow replaced.

His assailant—I recognized Anders—cursed at him; then both men turned their attention to Muldrew. I trembled, fearing an attack, but they contented themselves with going through his pockets. That completed, they hurried from the room.

Jefferson breathed as if his lungs would burst. “And he's got only one life to take!” His teeth grated.

“Did he hurt you?” Muldrew asked.

“Ask me to-morrow—or the day after. . . . It will hurt till I've had my revenge.”

“Pooh!” I scoffed. “They're just ordinary hold-up fellows. A dollar or two, with little danger to themselves— —”

“And,” Muldrew muttered, with something that sounded like a chuckle, “a bunch of keys.”

From somewhere outside came the wild, chuckling laugh I had heard twice before in the dark corridor of the Florence Hotel!

CHAPTER XXIV

PROWLING

The room in which we were must have been far removed from any busy street, for only the dimmest of city noises reached us. For a time no one spoke. We were all waiting, I knew, for the next chapter.

I heard Jefferson moving about, and after a moment he spoke from near the door. "I'll be back."

"I gave you my promise, Jefferson," Muldrew reminded him.

"And I'm not forgetting mine. I'm going to look around first."

Then that oblong of dim light that was the open door, and Muldrew and I were alone.

"Tiger," Muldrew whispered, "I want you to promise not to ask questions. Whatever I do, say nothing. Leave it all to me."

"If only my hands were free!" I moaned. . . . "Say, won't *The Star* gloat over this to-morrow?"

"You're not a reporter now, Tiger, but a friend. This looks like a bad tangle. You'll think it worse before you're out of it."

I moaned again. "I wish you wouldn't talk like a mystery story, Gordy. And don't count your chickens. Jefferson has no intention of freeing us. He's gone for good."

"He'll be back," Muldrew said confidently.

"Then you must have changed your mind about the murderer of Aaron Netherwood. The Inspector'll be sure this time you're crazy."

He did not reply for a few seconds. "That kick in the ribs was the genuine thing, Tiger. . . . But I understand him less than ever."

"Don't let him fool you, that's all. . . . You were wild to lay hands on him not so very long ago. . . . You know as well as I that the Netherwood murder and all this is one and the same affair. And right now we're hotter on the trail than we ever were."

“It all helps some, Tiger,” he agreed, “even when it adds to the mystery. . . . I’m not thinking of the murder but of Jefferson. Where does he stand in it all?”

“He’s standing somewhere out on the street right now, wondering a detective could be so simple—and leaving you and me to hold the baby. . . . What did they get off you, Gordy?”

“My keys.” He laughed. “The key to the new lock on Room 322!”

I whistled. “Sperring said they were trying to get into that room again—that that was why they tried to knife Jameson.”

“Tiger,” said Muldrew, “I wouldn’t have missed this little adventure for anything. Sh-sh!”

The door opened and closed ever so softly and Jefferson stood panting within the room. That quick breathing—I knew it was not fear.

“What did you find?” Muldrew whispered excitedly.

Jefferson laughed. “Everything—and then some!”

“Perhaps,” I growled, “if you told us in small doses we could bear up under it.”

“If only you weren’t a reporter and a detective!” Jefferson continued to chuckle. “No—it’s all mine—mine—mine!”

Muldrew moved restlessly. “I’m waiting, Jefferson.”

Jefferson felt his way across the room. “Keep the sack where you can slide into it in a hurry. Roll nearer the wall, so they can’t walk around you.”

“When I get free,” I promised, “they’ll never have a chance to walk around me. Nothing short of lightning will be able to do that.”

“Hm-m!” I knew Jefferson had stopped working at my friend’s ropes. “I didn’t promise to release *you*. In fact, if Mr. Muldrew is wise he’ll leave you to cover our retreat.”

“I see Gordy doing it,” I jeered.

“Yes—perhaps it’s asking too much.”

In a moment or two Muldrew was free. The sound of his luxurious stretching made me frantic.

“Gordy! Gordy!”

He came and knelt beside me. “Are the ropes hurting you, Tiger? Listen,” as I started to protest. “I’m leaving you tied for a time. I want to look around. If they should return— —”

There was a sharp movement toward the door. “What’s that you plan to do, Mr. Muldrew?”

“I’m taking a look around first.”

“You’re not.”

A dead silence followed. Then: “What’s the idea, Jefferson?”

“I didn’t untie you for that. You’re going straight out of here. I’ll get you to the door. And you’re not going to speak of this place or run it down for three days.”

“That wasn’t in the bargain,” Muldrew declared. “I want to see— —”

“It’s in the bargain now.”

“Are you going to try to prevent it—by force?”

“By any means in my power, even if it exposes us all.”

There was a rush—a gasp of pain. I trembled, helpless to move. The struggle continued for a few seconds, then Muldrew said in a low voice:

“Jefferson, I want to talk to you. May I let you go?”

Jefferson grunted through tightly held lips, and Muldrew must have let him go.

“I’m sorry, Jefferson, but I had to do it. I know how much I owe you, and I’ll stick to my promise. But I must take a look about before I leave.”

“You want to locate it,” Jefferson protested bitterly.

“I’d have done that the moment I was outside. . . . However I locate it doesn’t affect my promise.”

Jefferson sighed. “I can’t prevent it now. Go ahead. What you find now won’t help you three days from now.”

“Gordy,” I wailed, “suppose they catch you, and me trussed up like this! Give me a chance. You’d have to run without me.”

“I won’t leave you, Tiger. I’ll get you out—or stay.”

“The ‘greater love’ stuff,” said Jefferson contemptuously. “Now, trot along, Mr. Muldrew. I’ll stay here till you come back.”

CHAPTER XXV

HORROR!

With Muldrew gone I felt deserted, left in the lurch. Jefferson, over there somewhere near the door, only added to the weirdness of things. Why did he stick by me when the way was clear for him to go? Were Muldrew caught, the game was up for us all. That is, if Jefferson was what he professed to be.

Outside everything was still. The blackness of our small room seemed to thicken, to crowd down on me. Jefferson must have heard my breathing, for he came to me.

“Don’t get in a panic, boy. He’ll be back.”

“Of course he’ll be back,” I replied. “Muldrew never deserts a friend. But for God’s sake let my hands free; my nose is itching.”

“You seem to expect more of me than your friend was willing to grant.” His foot touched me disdainfully. “You over-estimate your importance, young man. To me you simply don’t count. You’re really only a nuisance. . . . I have a plan, a purpose, you may have guessed, and no reporter is going to baulk me—nor a detective, either, for that matter. I didn’t face all this alone to be stopped so easily. . . . Three days! Yes, that’s enough. . . . But if only I had a lieutenant like your friend. There’s a man. A bit violent, but sometimes brawn counts. One can’t have brawn and brains together. All my life it’s been brains with me, though I can hold my own with most men in a fight. . . . Brains! That’s why I work alone.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“You will—in three days. When Muldrew leads the police to this place. I’ll be far away then—safe. Think of the front page of *The Star*. . . . Of course—of course, sometimes even my plans go wrong. But, good or bad for me, *The Star* will have its thriller. . . . Death—the stake!” He laughed in his throat. “I’ve always gambled with it. Big stakes—big risks. That’s what makes life worth living.”

“Death?” I repeated. “You mean murder. Muldrew will get you yet for the murder of Aaron Netherwood.”

“Call him Thomas Lightfoot,” he urged. “That’s how I knew him.” He laughed in a way that sent shudders through me.

“A horrible crime,” I said.

“That depends. Perhaps he was a horrible man—in the eyes of the law.”

“That’s no excuse for murder.”

He was silent for a time. “So your friend thinks I murdered Netherwood? . . . You’d think worse of me if I denied it, wouldn’t you?”

“One expects denial of a murderer.”

“Also a denial that I blew out that fuse to escape? All right. The best I can say is that escape was necessary—for whatever cause. I carry no passport, no credentials. . . . And I appreciate the joys of a thrilling world. No, no, it was not the law I feared. Between you and me, all I fear is—failure.”

“I wish you’d go,” I told him wearily.

He laughed. “Because you understand so little. The reporter in you. I’m waiting for your friend. I know he’ll keep his promise, but out there anything is apt to happen— —”

It happened then. That scream again. And this time I recognized not pain, not even pressing fear. It was a cry for help.

“What—what is it?”

Jefferson had opened the door. He closed it again softly. “I wish I knew. God, I wish I knew. There’s a woman— — But, phut, she counts no more than you do.”

But I knew she did.

The door opened suddenly. Jefferson and I held our breath. Muldrew was there, panting as Jefferson had done. Some overwhelming excitement had caught them both out there.

“You here still, Jefferson?” Muldrew whispered.

“I said I’d wait. I’m seeing it through. You’ve got me on my toes, Mr. Muldrew. . . . And I’m an ass for it.”

Muldrew came to me. “Stand it a little longer, Tiger. There are fiends out there, fiends. I must find out.” He leaned over me and whispered so that Jefferson might not hear. “It’s bigger than I thought, bigger than I should have let you in for.”

I asked where we were.

“I—I don’t know. I forgot to look. There was so much else. . . . It’s some sort of factory, with machinery—I don’t know what kind. I had so little time, and I had to move slowly and carefully, it’s so dark out there. As it was I came within an inch of falling into a vat of water. At least, I think it’s water.” He smelt his hand. “I reached down and touched it.”

I asked about the scream.

“There’s a woman, somewhere up at the front in a closed room. They aren’t hurting her. I couldn’t do a thing about it. You’re my first care till I get you out of this.” He stopped abruptly. “Run away, Jefferson, I hear you.”

Jefferson’s laugh came from just beyond Muldrew’s shoulder. “So secretive. I couldn’t hear *you*. I’ve done a lot for you with no return.”

“What do you want?”

“Did you find where we are?”

“No.”

“That’s the sweetest word I’ve heard to-night.”

“I’ll promise this, Jefferson, unless they bump me off to-night I’ll find out.”

“I should have bumped you off myself,” Jefferson growled. “What about that woman? Anything we can do?”

“Yes—leave her alone. She’s not suffering. I’m making another trip out there. Then I’ll let my friend loose and we’ll go. . . . And for three days I’ll turn Heaven and earth to run this place down and forestall you—and them. But I’ll not make use of what I learn while we’re getting away.”

“I shouldn’t have let you go,” Jefferson sighed, “but the picture of their fury when they find us all gone was too much for me.” Suddenly he uttered an exclamation. “What a fool! What a fool! When they find us gone they’ll—spoil everything! They’ll clear out! What a fool! What a— —”

He and Muldrew rushed for their sacks, for someone was coming.

Footsteps paused outside, giving us valuable moments. Then five men entered. I counted them in the light of the electric torch one of them carried, a smallish man, with a peculiar way of holding head and chin. They were all masked. Muldrew and Jefferson lay seemingly as they had been left. The light was turned on Jefferson and the other four made for him. They were all

in new overalls. I kept my eyes on the man with the torch, struggling to fix him in my mind for later identification.

Jefferson must have realized that further concealment was impossible, for with a kick he freed himself and bounded to his feet. Momentarily it staggered them, then they rushed. I saw Muldrew stir, but he glanced across at me and lay still. It was well he did, for the man with the torch blew a whistle and three more men ran in.

Jefferson's boast that he could hold his own in a fight with most men was justified during the next three minutes. He fought like a cat, leaping and striking out, and twisting from their hands. All the time the man with the light kept it on them, himself well out of the way. One thing puzzled me—through the whole fight Jefferson made no effort to dislodge a mask, though he might have done so. And Muldrew, I knew, was watching for that.

But resistance was hopeless. Roughly they tied him up, each examining the ropes, as if distrusting one another after his earlier escape.

And then, without warning, they jumped on Muldrew. While four of them held him, another picked up the rope that had bound him. It was intact, while all about Jefferson his ropes were cut. I understood. Jefferson had planned that Muldrew should take the blame for our escape.

With frank scorn Jefferson looked on. "Why don't you get a chain?" he jeered.

A heavy foot dug him mercilessly in the ribs, and he exploded with a vicious oath. Whereupon a gag was thrust cruelly in his mouth and two men picked him up and carried him from the room.

Muldrew and I were alone. I rolled over to him, but there was nothing I could do for him. . . .

It must have been an hour later. Muldrew and I had talked the affair out and reached no reasonable or enlightening conclusions. I felt weary almost to nausea, and at last I dozed.

I was awakened by a violent noise in the room—a struggle, a threshing about of a heavy body, loud breathing. My scalp crept with the terror of it.

"Gordy! Gordy!" I whispered.

The only reply was a choking cough—another—and then awful silence.

I wanted to scream, but my throat refused to act. I knew that choking cough—the gasp of a dying man! I had seen deaths before, in accidents, in

fires—even murders. But this—this was Muldrew! Muldrew was paying with his life for sticking by me!

Desperately I rolled about the floor. The whole event was like a terrible nightmare—but I knew it was real. Real death! I fought my bonds until I thought my head would burst. When I feared I was about to faint with the horror of it, a sound reached me from near the door. I raised my head. Dimly I saw the door open, and against the faintness beyond an unearthly shape lifted itself and passed through. The door closed. I must have fainted.

But even as I lost consciousness I fancied a tumult outside—and then that shuddering cackle of a laugh!

CHAPTER XXVI

THE AWAKENING

With a sense of intense discomfort that defined itself at last as chill and an uneasiness in my eyes I wakened. Slowly. Still half asleep, I reached for the coverlid—and my fumbling hand encountered instead the leg of my trousers. Then I was wide awake—sitting up. My eyes opened directly into the morning sun, and I stared incredulously over the sunlit field that quickly resolved itself into the corner of a golf course, with flags and bunkers and stretches of shorn grass. Beside me rose the skeleton of a building under construction. I lay on a bank of sand.

I recognized where I was—the new Lakeview Club.

The very reality of my surroundings made them more unreal—the bare bones of the clubhouse I had written up only three days ago, the high board fence that divided the course from the railway, the first tee close to the outline of the new veranda, the distant cluster of trees that veiled the fourth green, the more distant hills—I had worked it all up in my stuff.

Behind me, protecting me from a chill west wind, a barrier had been built of construction material, but I ached in every bone. My hat lay beside me, and automatically I put it on, struggling to recall the bootlegger who had supplied me the villainous stuff.

Then I remembered Muldrew!

With a pang like the thrust of a knife I scrambled to my feet. The end of the street-car line was not four hundred yards away, and the screeching of wheels rounding the loop sent me running. My legs trembled, my lips twitched, my head swam dizzily. A cloud of vivid memory pressed on me—those last conscious moments in the awful darkness of that room, that choking gasp, that shapeless mass against the dim light beyond the door.

The conductor of the car eyed me suspiciously. I think he, too, wondered about my bootlegger.

As the car jolted toward the city I tried to plan a course. I would carry the whole story straightway to Inspector Armitage. . . . But what use now? What could anyone do? . . . But there was Anders! My teeth ground together. Yet I knew Anders was but a helpless subordinate in the murder-gang.

Gradually I came around to my own experience. Why had I been freed? Why had I been set down on a soft sandpile, with a barrier to hold off the morning wind? . . . I thought of Jefferson and his unaccountable ways.

Without being conscious till too late of what I was doing, I left the car at Ninth Avenue and was well on my way to the Florence Hotel before I realized that all the time my real hope had been Sperring. Why hurry to the Inspector? Gordy was dead—dead!

As the hotel came in sight I remembered Anders. He would be there in his bed, sound asleep, thinking himself safe. Another plan formed in my mind.

Guy Hammerton was at work in the office—and I knew he was not an early riser. The murder, however, might well have upset everything. He was more surprised at seeing me than I at seeing him.

“You’re bright and early,” he chaffed, “and looking like an also-ran.”

In my mood the banter peeved me. “So gratifying to be noticed by anyone as classy as an hotel manager,” I yawned.

He liked the return banter no better. His manner altered. “The things that have happened force me to things I don’t do willingly.”

I waved “the things” aside. “They’re your business, not mine. By the way, has Jefferson shown up yet?”

“Not to my knowledge. . . . Not likely he will, after what happened. I wish the police would nab him. All this uncertainty is death to business.”

“I’ll bet it didn’t interfere with the sleep of that roughneck Anders,” I said. “He isn’t the kind to be scared off by murder. . . . I’d also say he isn’t the sort of man to patronize an hotel like the Florence.”

Hammerton shrugged. “As long as he behaves and pays his bills, that’s all I’m interested in. . . . If you’re trying to get information about Anders for Muldrew,” eyeing me suspiciously, “why don’t you have a talk with him. Call him up now.” He started to push the telephone across the counter to me, but quickly withdrew it. “No, he’s probably asleep.”

“Muldrew has nothing to do with this. It happens that of all your guests I know only Anders, and Sperring, of course—and the Darlings.”

Hammerton gave an angry snort. “You’ve picked a poor lot. The Darlings went this morning—and I’m not sorry. That woman’s face was spoiling my meals. Not half an hour ago they stormed down here and

declared they wouldn't remain in an hotel so overrun with police—and murders. It was that last fuse did it.”

For a moment or two he played nervously with the telephone. “Lillie, that fuse was deliberately blown out—in the basement!”

I yawned again. “That’s not news to us. Both fuses were deliberately blown.” I turned and started for the street.

As I reached the door someone ran across from an elevator and caught me by the shoulder.

“By Jove, Lillie, this is luck. We’ll have another breakfast together. I’ve tasted the joys of companioned meals and it has spoiled me.”

The friendliness of his manner and his cheery round face brightened the morning somewhat, but any relief looked like treason to my friend.

“Sorry, Sperring, I’m in a hurry.”

He looked surprised and crestfallen, “Oh!” was all he said.

It made me feel mean. “I really can’t stay. I—I’ve had a terrible night.”

He peered into my face. “Don’t tell me a thing—yet. Get home and have a sleep. You’re fagged out.” He gripped my hand and pushed me through the revolving door.

In the taxi I felt better for a real friend, an understanding friend. I knew how Sperring must have hungered for my story. Thinking of him comforted me a little. Sperring, with his active mind, his faculty for digging into mystery, might succeed where the dull methods of the police would fail. Sperring and I would run our own show—and win.

The Inspector lived at the north-eastern fringe of the city; it left me ample time to think. . . . But the one result of my reflections was a growing sense of inadequacy. With Muldrew gone I had to admit that the gang had been too much for the police. Nor could I hope to help. I had little idea where the factory was in which they had held us, and, with no support for my story Anders could laugh at me.

Always there clung to my mind a deep resentment against Fate, a sense of being let down, a profound surprise that Muldrew had lost—Muldrew, always so self-sufficient, so immune from the ordinary penalties of recklessness.

My gloomy reflections were broken by the stopping of the taxi. The driver jerked his thumb toward the Inspector’s house. “Here you are, sir.” He

looked at the meter. “Eighty-five cents. I’d hate to pay so much for that. Giving yourself up, are you?”

I tossed him a dollar bill, noticing for the first time that my money had not been touched.

As I stepped on the side-walk a hand fell heavily on my shoulder and I was whirled about—to look into the beaming face of—Gordon Muldrew!

CHAPTER XXVII

A STRANGE DELIVERANCE

He had hold of my hand, wringing it until my shoulder ached. But it was an exquisite pain. I clutched his sleeve to steady myself.

“It was—only—a dream then!” I gasped.

He grinned, but I saw the lump in his throat moving up and down. Cold, emotionless Gordon Muldrew! Finally he gulped himself back to some semblance of control.

“Tiger, old boy!”

“I thought you were dead, Gordy,” I whispered.

“And *I* was shuddering at thought of the reporters’ hell.” He stared into my eyes. “Tiger, do you know where that place is?”

“Haven’t the foggiest.”

He sighed comfortably. “Then that’s all right.” He turned away from my blank surprise. “When I promised not to lead the police to it I included you, of course.”

“You had no right to. Anyway, I owe nothing to Jefferson.”

“How do you know that? . . . Do either of us know anything about Jefferson?”

“I know he murdered Aaron Netherwood; he as good as admitted it. . . . And we know he’s one of the gang—we know that now.”

He did not reply to that but led quickly away from Inspector Armitage’s house. I saw him look over his shoulder in a guilty way.

“You *should* feel guilty. Surely you’re not going to keep anything from the Inspector—after what happened!”

“You can’t get out of your mind what you *thought* happened,” he countered. “After all, what did happen?” He walked beside me in silence for a time. “Tiger, I was chloroformed!”

It explained everything. “Me, too—and it felt like the morning after. . . . Just the same, it was so terrible I—I guess I fainted.”

I told him all I knew, and he listened with flattering attention, even making me repeat parts.

“So you aren’t sure Anders is at the hotel?” he asked.

“I’m pretty sure he is. I’m glad now Hammerton didn’t let me call him up; that would have given the thing away.”

“You’ve done that already, Tiger. Strange interest in the fellow you showed.” He caught me playfully by the arm. “Don’t worry. Anders isn’t at the Florence Hotel.”

He gave me his own story, an incredible succession of scenes that ran the range from ridiculous to tragic; but I knew it was only Muldrew’s way of speaking that kept it all from being tragic.

He had no idea who chloroformed him. Like myself he had dozed, and he wakened to a sweet odour he was still conscious enough to recognize. Bound as he was, resistance was futile, but he had sense enough to feign unconsciousness before his wits left him completely. That was how he knew something of what happened thereafter.

“I was picked up and carried from the room. That was the strange shape you saw. But outside something happened—there was a fight of some kind, I think, though I’m not sure, because I went completely under then. When I came around I was in a car, upright in a corner of the back seat. Something soft lay across my feet, and at first I thought it was you. Then, as we passed a street light, I saw it was Jefferson. He looked to be dead.”

At the corner of Twenty-Eighth Avenue and Brock Street he recognized where he was. The curtains were tight down in the car, but through the windshield he saw enough to locate himself. All the time he dare not move, dare not open his eyes more than enough to see through the lashes. Two masked men sat beside him, their feet on Jefferson’s body.

He stopped at that point and strode ahead. I saw his fists clench.

“They dropped me off across the river,” he said shortly. “Some workmen found me early this morning.”

“What happened to Jefferson?”

His face twitched. “They murdered him, Tiger—brutally, hideously. . . . They threw him from the Brock Street bridge. Picked him up, bound as he was, and dumped him over the railing like—like a dead cat. . . . When I saw it I must have forgotten my part, for when they returned to the car the driver

whispered to one of them, and they chloroformed me again. God, if only they hadn't worn masks!"

I knew the Brock Street bridge—a thirty-foot drop to a rushing current fifteen feet deep. Many a suicide had chosen that way out. Jefferson free wouldn't have a dog's chance; bound and unconscious, he probably never came up. I shuddered. Jefferson had touched my imagination and, I admitted it now, my admiration. Though he was no friend, he was certainly not an enemy.

"I'm having the river watched for his body," Muldrew said.

"And to think we doubted him, Gordy!"

"I doubt him yet, Tiger. . . . But I'd give a lot to see him alive."

At that time we had no idea how much Jefferson had done for us. That was to come later.

"That's why," Muldrew said, "I'm more particular about my promise—and glad I cut you off from the Inspector."

"But Jefferson's death releases you from the promise."

Muldrew did not see it that way. "Would you have me break faith with a man who—who gave his life for us? . . . Tiger, leave it all to me. I'll tell the Inspector all he should know."

"And you're the poorest liar outside a revival meeting," I scoffed. "Besides, you have a duty—"

He shook me violently. "Stop it. No two people spell that word the same. Now you'd better toddle home and sleep it off."

I told him I'd have to report to Jerry Inkerley first. "And after that," I continued defiantly, "I'll talk it over with Conrad Sperring."

"Of course. I wouldn't think of interfering with *that*. You and Sperring will have it all straightened out by noon. . . . Seriously, Tiger, if Sperring can help I'll use him. If his special job fits him for explaining how a man in a locked room, with people in the corridor before the door, can be got at and murdered, and the murderer escape, I'll take my hat off to him."

"Part of it is simple enough," I said. "Netherwood himself let the murderer in. After that—blank."

"It would be so simple and reasonable to accuse Miss Netherwood . . . if we could explain the unhurried crime it was. No, I'm eating humble pie, if

it's going to earn me the expert unravelling of a master-mind—but I'm not humble enough to let Sperring know how I feel. I hope I have your promise to save me that shame."

I promised willingly. I pitied Muldrew, not so much for his helplessness in the case as for his inability to conceal it. The slight air of indulgence with which he made his confession did not deceive me.

He left me, with a slap on the back, to present his story to the Inspector, while I boarded the street-car and made for *The Star* office. Both of us, I knew, were in for a bad time. The eagle-eyed Inspector was not apt to be deceived, and Jerry would greet me with his eternal air of boredom, all the time dragging from me more than I wished to tell.

I ran through the front office, waved to "Small Advertisements," and leaped upstairs to the City Room. Except for Buck Taylor, our sports writer, the room was empty. Buck was at his usual morning task of running through the morning papers. Jerry's desk in the alcove showed no signs of the day's work.

"Where's Jerry?" I asked.

Buck raised languid eyes. "Jerry? Mr. Inkerley, you mean? I don't know." He returned to the *Morning Times*.

I jerked the paper from his hand. "Buck, I must see Jerry right away. It's important."

"All your piffle is soul-stirring, Tiger." He dodged the blow I aimed at him. "If you must see him you must. Fact is, he hasn't shown up yet this morning."

A wave of dread swept over me, an inexplicable presentiment. Buck saw how serious I was.

"Another guy was in here not long ago asking for Jerry. Seemed a bit fussed up, too. Telephoned first, but had to come himself to see I wasn't pulling his leg. Jerry has attained unwonted popularity this morning."

"Oh, shut up!" I pounded down to the lower office. "Small Advertisements" assured me that Buck was right—Jerry had not come in; and Jerry's apartment did not answer. Nor did the restaurant, where he always breakfasted, know anything more about him than that he had not been there. I was getting in a fine heat.

"Small Advertisements" grinned. "Hist!" he whispered, referring to my special rôle, "the plot thickens!"

I decided to carry my worries to Sperring.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ANOTHER MYSTERY

Guy Hammerton was not in the office when I reached the Florence Hotel, so I made straight for the elevator, and in a few seconds was knocking on Sperring's door. There was no response, and I knocked again, oppressed with an unnamed fear. Jerry gone! And now Sperring! In my weakened condition it threw me into a panic.

I could think of nothing to account for it but the Netherwood murder. Surely it was dragging us all into its toils!

After another attack on the door I wandered along the corridor, uncertain what to do next. As I turned at the end I caught a flicker of movement and a glint of light from the direction of Sperring's room—and then he was out in the corridor, rushing to take my hands. He was in pyjamas, his hair tousled, his eyes still misty with sleep.

"Gosh, I'm glad to see you, Tiger! You broke in on a nasty dream."

He interrupted my apologies and ushered me into the room and shoved me into the easiest chair.

"It's no fault of yours that my time-table is topsy-turvy. It's that miserable affair in Room 322. I can't settle down to anything, not even to sleep." He stopped before me. "Tiger, have you seen Mr. Inkerley this morning?"

I knew then it was he who had tried to find Jerry at the office.

"He's—missing," I murmured.

Sperring blinked. "I telephoned him, but he wasn't down, then I went to the office. It was so—so confusing, so sort of overwhelming, Tiger, I simply had to try to sleep it off." He ran his fat fingers through his hair. "Tiger, I'm frightened."

"Then—then you think he, too, is somehow mixed up in the murder?"

"I'm sure of it. I can't tell you why, but I'm as sure of it as that some day we'll strike an absurdly simple explanation of it all."

He slithered untidily about the room in his over-large slippers. He was almost ludicrously disturbed. The tingle of pleasure that mingled with my excitement came from his use of my nickname. We were rapidly on the way to being the best of friends.

“I can’t see how Jerry’s in it,” I puzzled.

“Isn’t he in love with the girl?” He stared down at me with those round, delving eyes of his.

“Suppose he is— —”

“No supposing. He is. All right.” He shook his finger before my nose. “It may sound absurd, Tiger, but remember that I’m not infatuated with her, like the rest of you. Admit my bad taste—and my common sense. . . . Even a pretty girl is open to suspicion.”

“But—but that’s impossible.”

“Doesn’t Muldrew, too, suspect her?” he inquired slyly. “But all I say is that she *may* have been concerned. The professional detective and the professional writer—we’re a nasty-minded lot. We suspect the most unlikely—as a guiding principle. Even Inkerley— —”

“Jerry never saw her till the night before last—just after the murder—never so much as heard of her.”

“Could you swear to that—so a judge would believe you? No, no, Tiger, we’re all too eager to make positive facts from negative knowledge. What we don’t know we assert is impossible.” He turned to his work-table and picked up a handful of sheets. “I was building a plot around Inkerley—the lover who murdered his sweetheart’s father for love of the girl. The indignation of blind adoration. See?”

He read dissent in my face and grinned sheepishly. “Come to think of it, Tiger, it is a bit thick . . . but I thought I saw a story in it.” With a nervous twist he tore the sheets to bits and dropped them in the basket beside the table. “I need a cold-blooded critic like you. There, I feel better—and so should Inkerley. . . . Fact is, I planned to read the outline to him and watch his reaction. It would probably have been a fist in the eye. It was asinine of me.”

“If you have nothing better than that,” I said, “we’re going to land nowhere. And I counted so much on you. . . . So much has happened since I saw you last.”

He had gathered up his clothes to finish his dressing in the bathroom. At the door he turned.

“I’ve been waiting for it, Tiger. Go ahead. Tell me all about it while I dress.” His eyes danced. “Wait a moment; I must have something to make notes on.” He took paper and pencil with him and disappeared. “You can’t believe how lucky I think myself to have been right here in the hotel when Aaron Netherwood was murdered. Fire ahead.”

I moved nearer the bathroom door and dropped into the chair before the typewriter. There I told him the whole story. Beyond a grunt now and then, a stifled exclamation, the rustle of paper as he wrote, he made no sound save his dressing.

At the end he exhaled a deep breath. “Tiger, it’s a nightmare, wilder than I ever fancied. Never again will I ridicule that truth is stranger than fiction. . . . And I’ve a hunch you’ve wielded a mild brush.”

He returned to the bedroom in trousers and shirt. I was absent-mindedly fingering the yellow copy-paper on the table. With a shy laugh he gathered it up.

“The one thing a writer can’t face is to have his unfinished stuff read by another. It’s really a bit of swank—reluctance to expose the ugly bones of the model that appears in the magazines. We want to hide our clay feet. . . . As a matter of fact”—he selected two or three sheets and tossed them before me—“much of this is nothing more than an effort to estimate newspaper space on the typewriter—to see how space rates pay. I’ve had that sort of work in mind as a relief from short stories. That’s only an article from the *Morning Times* on the Russian five-year plan.”

He stooped to get within range of the mirror on the dresser.

“While you were talking I was doing a bit of thinking. Muldrew is right—it’s all part of the same mess. What we must uncover is the connection between Aaron Netherwood and this gang. . . . Too bad we daren’t put it up to Anders. . . . And where does Jefferson come in? . . . And why did they treat him so horribly and you two so considerately—under the circumstances?”

He tugged irritably at the bow tie.

“Take this Netherwood. He may have found out something that compromised the gang, and they had to get rid of him. . . . Or he may have belonged to the gang, and Jefferson murdered him—for some reason. Or it may have been his friends in the gang. . . . Or Jefferson may be a private

detective fishing for a reward. By Jove,” facing me, “that sounds most reasonable—it would explain his thought for Muldrew.”

“But why did they take us and let us go?” I queried. “How dare they treat Muldrew so contemptuously! That’s where they missed—Muldrew will get them yet.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said doubtfully. “Of course, Jefferson may have belonged to the gang and turned traitor. . . . That three days—he planned to double-cross them, I suppose. Some bright ideas there.” He rushed for paper and pencil.

I was storing all he said, to take it to Muldrew.

Sperring was getting more and more excited. “When I get started there’s no controlling me,” he laughed. “Now, Mrs. Netherwood. We’ve been neglecting her—and that does her an injustice. . . . Listen! Is it possible that she and her daughter have made away with Inkerley too?”

“Nothing is impossible—to your imagination.” Inside I was uncomfortable. After what happened the night before nothing was impossible to my own imagination. In fact, the more unreasonable it sounded the more possible it was—if you understand. The whole Netherwood case was a wild chaos. “Why strain for the improbable?” I asked. “Anders and Jefferson are facts. And we know Anders would stop at nothing.”

Sperring stood frowning at the floor, rattling the pencil against his teeth. “Are you perfectly sure it was Anders? In that light— I don’t want Muldrew to be led astray; that’s how murderers escape. . . . My own inclination is to go farther afield. Muldrew can’t really suspect either of those two or he’d be less confused. . . . But—Inkerley. Does his present intimacy with the Netherwood girl support your contention that they never met before a few hours ago? Why should they rush together at first sight — —”

“Love is a silly affair all through,” I said. “You may have written of it.”

“Not I. I try not to write piffle. . . . You think you can vouch for Inkerley. Think it over, and you’ll see how little you really know of him. One knows only one side of even his best friend. At heart we’re all Jekyll and Hyde—more or less.”

He picked up the telephone and put through a call. I leaned forward to listen.

“Is that Mrs. Netherwood? Good morning, Mrs. Netherwood. Conrad Sperring speaking. I hope— — What’s that you say?” He straightened and glared around at me. “But—but, Mrs. Netherwood, I can’t believe it. . . . Have you told the police? . . . Well, do so immediately. There’s not a moment to lose. One moment.” He turned to me. “Where’s the most likely place to find Mr. Muldrew?”

I told him of Muldrew’s visit to Inspector Armitage, and Sperring passed it on to Mrs. Netherwood. Then he hung up.

“Tiger,” he whispered, a bright spot glowing on either cheek, “what does it all mean? I’m floundering. Miss Netherwood, too, has disappeared!”

CHAPTER XXIX

A PAIR OF AMATEURS

I had never seen Sperring like this. He was grave now rather than excited, and I realized how portentous this latest development looked to him. Throwing on coat and hat, he made for the door.

“Come on, Tiger, let’s get into the heart of this.”

“What—what are you going to do?” I asked, as we tore down the stairs.

“I don’t know—but I’ve got to be doing something. What we’re *not* going to do is wait for the police. You and I are going to find Inkerley—and that Netherwood girl. ’Member what I said about that pair?”

“But this proves nothing. How can Mona’s disappearance— —”

“I could ask questions from now till snakes look pretty,” he said dryly. “What I want is answers.”

“You’ll feel like a punctured tyre,” I laughed, “when we find Jerry at the office, snorting about as usual. He’ll have the laugh on us.”

“I’d like to see Inkerley laugh,” he said.

At the office only Sid Newhall, our dramatic critic, was in the City Room, and he could tell us nothing of the morning we did not already know. But Sid had been working late the night before when Jerry dropped in. Jerry could no more pass the office without turning in than he could go without breakfast. Someone called him on the telephone, and Jerry spoke excitedly into it. After he hung up he told Sid that Muldrew and I were waiting for him in the West End.

It confirmed my worst fears. Sperring and I decided that no time must be lost.

“To Mrs. Netherwood’s,” he announced, as we ran down the stairs.

“Why not to Muldrew?” I suggested.

He thought it a good idea. “But don’t tell him what we plan to do. Let us have our little triumphs.”

But Muldrew was not to be found. I left what information I had with the desk sergeant, and Sperring and I set out for the Netherwood home.

“Keep your mind open, Tiger,” Sperring warned, as we waited for the knock to be answered. “I’ll want your unbiased impressions when it’s over. And, remember, nothing is impossible.”

Mrs. Netherwood was a different woman from the other times I had seen her. All her grimness and cunning had vanished, and in their place crowded fear. The steely eyes and set jaw were weak with the anxiety of a mother.

She had, as Sperring suggested, told the police, and had been assured they were losing no time. But she had little faith in them. Sperring never took his eyes from her as he talked.

“She’s gone,” the woman wailed. “I’ll never see her again.”

“Don’t you *want* to?” Sperring demanded sharply.

At the tone a glint of suspicion clouded her eyes. “What do you mean? Do you hint that— —”

“A little faith would encourage the police.”

“But—but they’ve got her—they’ve got her— —”

“Who’s got her?”

“Why—why, the same ones that murdered her father.”

“Yet you say you know nothing about the murder.”

Mrs. Netherwood’s hands fidgeted with each other. “Of course I know nothing, less than nothing.”

“Mrs. Netherwood, why should the murderer of your husband be interested in your daughter?”

The common sense of it struck her to an uneasy silence.

Her story was that Mona had gone out the evening before to meet Jerry. Mrs. Netherwood had retired early, and had not known until morning that her daughter had not returned.

And then—for some reason I remembered those screams in the factory where we were captive. I knew right away they were Mona’s. But I managed to hold my tongue, though I boiled to speak.

Sperring informed her bluntly that Jerry too had disappeared. To Mrs. Netherwood it seemed the last straw: she swayed, and a look of utter terror

made me turn my face away.

Sperring was unmoved, but I couldn't think her such an actress.

"Then it *was* with him she went!" Mrs. Netherwood sobbed. "They've gone together — —"

Sperring hurled a question at her: "Mrs. Netherwood, did you or your daughter never meet Mr. Inkerley before the murder?"

"No, never. We never even heard of him."

"How do you account for the sudden intimacy of your daughter and him?"

"I don't account for it. . . . That's my daughter's business, anyway."

"It's everyone's business. . . . How can you be sure of your daughter—you can't hope to know all her friends."

"I know as much as a mother could."

"If only you'd be completely frank, Mrs. Netherwood!" he complained.

"I am frank. I'll answer any question you ask."

"It's not so much answers as information we want."

"You mean—I'm hiding something?" Her voice was low.

"You've hidden much from the beginning. One thing: any affection for a husband you lived with for eighteen years. Another: those daggers — —"

"I had no affection for him at the last," she broke in. "He killed that when he left us. The daggers . . . that was foolish, but I knew it would sound so strange."

"It does still. . . . If you wish your husband's murderer to be found you'd better remember more," Sperring said grimly.

We were getting nowhere, and Sperring gave it up. Either she knew nothing or was determined to conceal what she did know. Sperring said nothing until we reached the street-car. Evidently he had counted on Mrs. Netherwood and failure depressed him.

"I hate to admit it, Tiger, but at the moment I'm all at sea."

I told him then of the screams we had heard, a point I had omitted in my first story. His eyes flashed.

“Tiger, it’s bottomless. . . . It’s so shudderingly deep we’d be wise to get out of it and leave it to Muldrew. But,” he added with a grin, “we’re neither of us wise, so let’s be a pair of asses together.”

CHAPTER XXX

FAILURE

At *The Star* office nothing had been heard of Jerry, and there Sperring left me, both of us unsettled and confused. But in Sperring's manner I fancied I detected a certain satisfaction that events seemed to be supporting his latest theory. About Jerry he was completely impersonal, an attitude I could not attain; my faith in Jerry had not the slightest weight with him, and for this I could not condemn him. Before we separated he even suggested that Jerry might be involved in another way—the kidnapping of Mona, for which he confessed he had no reasonable evidence.

I was in no mood to work. Sid Newhall had been put in temporary charge of the City Room, but he made no attempt to dictate to me. My assignment from Jerry, not yet countermanded, placed me beyond the authority of a temporary successor; but the counterfeiters had faded from the picture, though I was prepared to revive them at a moment's notice had Newhall attempted to give orders.

For half an hour I fussed at my desk, floundering among Sperring's various theories and introducing some absurd ones of my own; and as I considered each I grew more and more confused. I envied Sperring the confidence and enthusiasm with which he passed from one clue to another and twisted them to his purpose; I envied him the ease with which he shifted his position. I realized that to him the whole case was nothing more than "copy" for his fanciful pen. To me, in addition to "copy" for the paper, which must be fact, I could not rid myself of the feeling that Muldrew's reputation was at stake.

Through every phase of my mental peregrinations the Florence Hotel kept intruding. Everything centred about the hotel. Not only had Netherwood been killed there, but in the adjacent two rooms were guests who were justly under suspicion—more than suspicion. It was plain that in some way the three men were connected, but whether as friends or enemies, or friends changed to enemies, I did not know. Their relationship toward one another, apart from the actual murder itself, was one of the bewildering twists. During that day it was forced on me that Muldrew failed to give the hotel its proper consideration. So that by night I had worked up an

unbecoming doubt concerning him, a driving irritation that any clue should be neglected. Sperring, I felt, had anticipated us both.

It was not unnatural, therefore, that with a free night before me I wandered after dark along Markham Street in the general direction of the hotel. Unwilling thus pointedly to define my destination, I passed Ninth Avenue and proceeded to Tenth. There I turned south to Orchard Street. As I reached the corner the flashing electric sign wiped out any scruples I had, and I made straight for the hotel, trying to convince myself that I was merely going to have a talk with Sperring. The day, I knew, must have been as feverishly unsparing to him as to me, and that he had arrived nowhere I knew from the fact that he had not got in touch with me.

Suddenly I jerked to a stop.

A block and a half ahead of me the upright electric sign threw to the quiet street its intermittent message. And as my eyes dropped to the hotel entrance beneath, someone passed swiftly through the revolving door and disappeared. It was but a fleeting glimpse, so swift that I could scarcely credit my eyes, but something more impressive than sight struck me with almost stunning effect—memory, a blow, a stab, that unnerved me and shot tingles through my veins and rooted me to the spot.

That figure, that curious projection of the head, chin first. It was the man who had held the torch the night before while Jefferson had fought for his life in the otherwise dark room against overwhelming odds!

I broke into a run. But in a moment I realized that to enter like that, to attempt of myself to find the man, would only give the alarm. We had too many proofs of the cunning of these men to hope to catch one of them so easily. Even should I recognize him in the crowded rotunda, what could I do? Besides, the conditions under which I had seen him both times, a flashing, indefinite, indirect light, might have to be reproduced to enable me to recognize him again.

The difficulties I would face were increased by the fact that at least half a dozen other men entered the hotel before I reached it. I decided, therefore, to leave it to the police.

Seventy yards or so up the street, on the opposite side, a lighted show window promised what I sought, and there I hurried. A suspicious window-dresser working after hours permitted me to use the telephone. But Muldrew was not at his house, and the night desk-sergeant at the station could not help me.

But Inspector Armitage was at home, and in his acute way he leaped into the affair.

“Keep the door in sight,” he ordered, “I’ll have half a dozen men down there in five minutes. No, on second thoughts, go into the lobby and take a seat where you can keep the room and the door under surveillance, without, of course, seeming to watch. I’ll have the place surrounded. A plain clothes man will go inside. You’ll know him when he takes a handkerchief from his breast-pocket and wipes his lips. He’ll turn to the right as he enters and sit down. Get in touch with him, as inconspicuously as you can, though it’s not important. By the way, you have your reporters’ badge? I’ll have to pick up what men are available, and they may not know you. In the meantime I’ll try and round up Muldrew.”

I returned to the hotel, thrilling to the task assigned me. Hammerton was not to be seen, and no one in the office looked my way as I seated myself to the right of the door. From an adjacent chair I retrieved an evening paper and buried myself in it, but gradually I let my eyes roam over the lobby.

It did not take long, in spite of the crowd, to convince myself of the hopelessness of the task I had foolishly assumed. No one in sight resembled in the faintest way the man I sought. All the time a thin line came and went through the revolving door, and I concentrated on the departures. As the time approached for the police to be in place about the hotel I was satisfied that the man I had seen enter had not gone out.

I had neglected to time the arrival of the police, but it seemed a week before a tall man in a Derby hat entered, gave the required signal, and sat down not far from me. Seeing no reason for secrecy, I went to him.

“My name is Lillie,” I told him. At the same time I showed my badge.

He smiled a broad, welcoming smile and grasped my hand like an old friend. We sat down.

He asked if I had spotted the man again, and in my reply he seemed to sense my uncertainty, for he examined me with quizzical, slightly surprised eyes.

“Well,” he said, “we’ll have to do our best. We’ll comb the hotel. Let me have a description of the fellow.”

I told him as much as I could, more and more uncomfortably aware how little it was, for beyond that curious projection of the chin my memory was nothing more than impression.

“Smallish in size, you say,” he mused. “All right, I’ll stop every smallish man in the place for a once-over. There’s Hammerton coming now—near the elevator. Come on.”

We approached the counter. Hammerton eyed us in none too friendly a way. The plain clothes man leaned across the counter.

“Mr. Hammerton, you know me—Flavelle, of the police department.” He showed his badge. “We’re looking for someone who entered this hotel about ten or twelve minutes ago.”

Hammerton frowned. “In twelve minutes probably fifty have entered—and I haven’t an idea who or where they are. Apart from that it’s absurdly easy.” His lip curled.

Flavelle remained unmoved. “Yes, of course. I realize the difficulty. There won’t be any more going out till we’re through. You understand?”

“What the devil?” Hammerton’s face went red. “Say, you’ll ruin the hotel— —”

“Not if you do your part with more grace, Mr. Hammerton. There’s a way out—for you. I want you to take Mr. Lillie from room to room. I’ll stay down here and stop anyone coming downstairs or in the elevator from going out. In fact, the doors will be guarded. And the quicker you get to work the sooner the hotel will be open for the usual business.”

“But—but,” Hammerton stammered furiously, “you can’t do that.”

“There’s another way,” Flavelle admitted suavely. “We can block the hotel for the hour or two it will take to get a warrant. If you prefer that— —”

Hammerton glared—and lifted the counter-flap. “Come on, Lillie. Surely this hotel has had trouble enough about that murder!”

I protested that it was not the murder. “A few minutes ago I saw— —”

Flavelle pushed me toward the elevator. “Don’t waste time, Lillie, and don’t talk.”

I took the hint and was silent.

“One moment,” Hammerton pleaded. “My wife is waiting for me. I’ll just telephone her.” He returned to the inner office, but in a minute he was back. “It won’t take long,” he said. “At this time of the night not a third of the guests are in their rooms.”

As a matter of fact he over-estimated the proportion. On the first two floors not a dozen rooms were lighted. Hammerton performed his part well. I was a fire-inspector—it would give me entrance to all the rooms and an opportunity to inspect the occupants. Only once or twice did we meet with opposition. One couple was already retiring, and we were delayed there for a minute or so.

In the midst of the second floor inspection a floor-maid intercepted us with a message that Hammerton was wanted in the office. But he angrily refused to leave. “Nothing down there more crowding than this,” he said.

But we had just started on the third floor, the floor I knew so well, when another maid waylaid us with a similar request; and Hammerton, with an oath, ushered me to the linen-room on that floor to wait out of sight until he found what was wanted. With some difficulty he found the switch and turned on the linen-room lights. He would, he promised, be back in a couple of minutes.

The room in which I was to wait interested me. Even for its busy and untidy purpose it was inexcusably upset. The Florence, I decided, like so many “first-class” hotels, beneath the surface was frankly shocking. Three walls were lined with cupboards, the doors of which were for the most part left open, revealing a disarray of clean bedding hastily tossed in. The floor was cumbered with great cane clothes-hampers, their contents straggling over to the floor. The table on which I seated myself was used for ironing, for two electric irons stood on one end and the sheet with which the table was covered was badly singed. In a corner of the room, near the door, was a cumbersome electric ironer, banked about with clothes-hampers.

Hammerton had closed me in when he left, and I tried to interest myself in the contents of the room. Behind me, in the cabinet along the rear wall, two doors were closed, and I leaned across to learn the reason for such unwonted order. To my surprise they were empty.

But my surprise was greater when, as I peered into them, there was a click somewhere at my back and the lights went out!

For a moment I sat where I was, listening. The purpose of my visit to the hotel, for my presence in that room, was on me, and everything that happened circled around that purpose. But a moment’s reflection told me that I had probably unwittingly wandered into the hiding-place of an hotel thief who had taken advantage of my preoccupation to arrange for his escape.

I watched the door, assured by the line of light beneath it that no one could leave the room without my seeing him. For a time nothing happened—not so much as a sound.

I asked myself why I waited. Outside in the lighted corridor I was not only safer, but the unknown would have no chance of escape. I dropped from the table and made for the door, my flesh creeping with the continued stillness in the dark room.

“Who’s there?” I demanded, more to tighten my courage than with hope of reply.

But reply there was—in the shape of a pair of powerful arms that wrapped themselves about me and, before I could do more than gasp, whirled me from my feet. While still in mid-air my assailant’s hold shifted—shifted again. With what reason remained I realized that I was in the grip of a practised wrestler. The airplane spin. At the fourth revolution I was too dizzy to reason; and then I was sent spinning, to drop in a pile of soiled bedding. And as I sat, dizzy almost to nausea, the door opened—and from somewhere far along the corridor came that wild, chuckling laugh!

That laugh, familiar now, more unnerving with each repetition, revived me as nothing else could. I staggered to the door. My assailant had fled toward the back stairs and I blundered in that direction. But, leaning over into the abyss of the well, I could hear nothing. It was dark down there, and I had sense enough not to go farther. I swayed back toward the other stairs. Just as I reached the copper doors of the elevator Hammerton emerged. At sight of me, bleary-eyed and unsteady, he stifled a cry.

“Someone—was in there—in the dark!” I stammered, holding my sick head in my hands.

He took hold of me, led me to an empty room, and helped me to the bed.

“I’m all right,” I protested. “Just half a minute.”

He stood over me, mouth open, waiting to ask a hundred questions. “In there—in the linen-room—someone in there? Impossible!”

“Do I look as if it’s impossible?” I growled.

“But—you don’t mean—someone—attacked you in there!”

Without waiting for a reply he started back to the corridor. The elevator man had followed and stood gaping in the doorway. Hammerton swept him aside and ordered him back to work. I got up and hurried to the corridor.

Hammerton had stopped before a door, his ear to the keyhole. The number above the door was 324!

Hammerton shook his head and, inserting his master-key, opened the door. The room was in darkness. The light revealed nothing, and a frightened look came into Hammerton's eyes.

"A plot," he whispered, glancing fearfully about, "a plot from beginning to end. That call to the office was a fake—to get me away. It came from this room!" He began to prowls about. "I don't like it, Lillie, I don't like it. I haven't seen Mr. Anders since—it must be early last night. The scoundrel!"

I knew what was in his mind: Anders had skipped without paying his bill—which, to me, was an offence of ludicrous unimportance compared with the other offences I knew. One solitary suit-case remained, empty and open, and a couple of old magazines on the table.

Hammerton swore. "Twenty-four dollars gone—and I don't know how much for meals. His week was up to-morrow. Another of those damned fly-by-night rogues who make our lives miserable! I'm in for a hot time from the directorate—all these things going on. Netherwood owed me four days, and that Jefferson, he got into us for some more—that is, if he doesn't show up again—and now this fellow. A hell of a job having to treat bums like them as gentlemen!"

He sighed. "There's only one thing to do—get that plain clothes man up here. That was no ordinary hotel-thief roughed it with you. Let's go down and talk to Flavelle."

Downstairs I told the whole story as I knew it, and Flavelle lost no time.

"Lock that front door, Hammerton. I'll get in a constable and go through the place myself with him and Lillie."

Hammerton groaned, but did as he was ordered. I went outside with Flavelle to complete his plans. Police were everywhere about. We passed around to the back entrance.

It was the guard stationed there who upset everything. Someone had rushed out that way a few minutes before, shown a reporter's badge, and hurried away. I grabbed my lapel. My badge was gone!

CHAPTER XXXI

DISCUSSION

With a snarl of disgust Flavelle raised the siege. The only conclusion to come to was that the man we sought had, by some mischance, taken refuge in the very linen-room where I had gone to wait for Hammerton, and had robbed me of my badge and effected his escape with it.

How had he got upstairs without being seen? Hammerton gave the staff a hot few minutes in hunting for the answer. What had the fellow in mind to do on the third floor—the important third floor? But, what puzzled me more than anything else, how had he contrived to light on the one possible pass that would let him through the police cordon—my badge?

That he was a cool rogue was proven by his manner of escape. He had flipped his lapel in the face of the solitary policeman stationed at the back door, and whispered that he was hurrying to report to the Inspector from an outside telephone. Whether he answered my description of the wanted man or not it was impossible to determine, since the lane was too dark for details—and my own description too indefinite.

When Flavelle departed with his men, disgruntled and forlorn, and, I imagined, contemptuous of me and my share in the excitement, I remembered Sperring and went up to his room. But he was out. Lacking anything better to do, and hungry for Sperring's moral support, I took a seat in the lobby to await his return. This would be more grist for his mill, more problems for him to worry, more food for those surprising and absorbing deductions of his. Hammerton assured me that Sperring never kept late hours; he was bound to be in soon. "And, hang him," he grumbled, "then it'll be that everlasting typewriter for the rest of the night."

But the first acquaintance of mine to enter the lobby of the Florence Hotel was not Sperring but Gordon Muldrew. Entering unobtrusively, he dropped into the nearest chair and drew a newspaper from his pocket. From my shadowed corner I watched him in none too happy a mood. I wanted badly to see Sperring before I was forced to explain to Muldrew.

If concealment was his aim—he too had chosen the darker side of the door—he failed, for in a very few minutes Hammerton strolled across the lobby and sat down beside him. Throwing aside my own uneasiness, I joined

them. Hammerton was telling the story, angry and protesting, and Muldrew heard him through sympathetically.

At the end he simply said: "There was a murder here, Hammerton."

For once Hammerton was subdued; but he had other troubles. "There's more than that. Anders and Jefferson have skipped out. Jefferson's stuff is still up in his room, and I'm pinching it to hold against his bill. But we never make up for what they owe, these bill-jumpers. . . . And there's still more. This attack on Lillie up in the linen-room disturbs me. Not a thing missing anywhere. I'm beginning to think he was after something else . . . something to do with the Netherwood murder, for instance."

The stealing of my badge had not been mentioned to Hammerton, and I had said nothing about that chuckling laugh, partly because I thought it must be fancy, nerves. Suddenly Hammerton stirred and made a furtive movement with his hand.

"There! Look at that man! Another mystery!"

A tall, well-proportioned man had pushed through the revolving door, and after a lazy glance about the lobby passed on to the elevator and disappeared.

"See that fellow?" Hammerton whispered excitedly. "Now watch. In a minute or two another big fellow will come down in the elevator and go out. They have Room 308. Rather, that one who came in has it—it's registered in his name. The other one is only a friend. Wait."

We didn't have to wait long. Almost as he stopped speaking a second tall man stepped from the elevator and hurried to the street without looking around.

"Well?" Muldrew asked.

"Yeah," Hammerton grumbled, "they look respectable and all that. But one of them is always in the room—and they won't let anyone else in, not even the maids. They keep the door locked. I've sent a maid up twice to-day on one excuse or another, but they just open the door a crack and say they're in need of nothing. I don't like the looks of it."

"Not so very long ago," Muldrew reminded him, "you indignantly objected to any curiosity about the whims of your guests. I notice now—"

"Sure! It's different now. Ever since that murder—and all the things that have happened since—I'm as suspicious as the deuce. But this time—well,

you see, they're on the third floor. That's what makes it so much worse. Anyway, I thought you'd better know."

Muldrew thanked him and sat for a time in deep thought. "If you can give us nothing more substantial than that I'm afraid we can't help you. But, a word of warning, don't do anything more to make them think you're suspicious. Give them all the rope they want; it's the only way to catch these people."

"Well," Hammerton said doubtfully, "as long as you're satisfied—"

"Here's Sperring," I announced, jumping to my feet.

Sperring had just entered. He did not see us, but crossed to the newsstand, and was in the act of purchasing a magazine when I touched him on the shoulder. He welcomed me with the genial smile I had come to expect. At sight of Muldrew it broadened, and the four of us sat for a time talking.

"You look as if your day's work is done," he said to Muldrew, teasing in his gentle way. "I'm sure it's well-earned rest. Any arrests to-day?"

"I'll look up the records if it interests you," Muldrew returned in like tone. "I've made none myself."

"Dear me!" Sperring took the cigarette I offered and wetted the end. "Life must be dull. However, I tell Hammerton that, sooner or later, the world congregates in the rotunda of the Florence Hotel. If we sit long enough here we're bound to see things." He yawned and excused himself. "I don't seem to have slept a wink since night before last. Part of the blame goes to Tiger here: he keeps me thinking. And I find I'm not up to such sustained mental exercise. A writer doesn't need to think. But of course you know that." He grinned modestly. "Anyway, looks as if I'm going to be forced to get away from the atmosphere of murder about this hotel. Sorry, Hammerton," as Hammerton started to protest, "but while I'm at it let's get the grouch off my system. If you persist in stinting the hot water in the early morning—"

"There's hot water, plenty of it, from six o'clock," Hammerton replied sullenly. For some time it had been plain that Sperring and Hammerton didn't quite pull.

"But earlier—earlier," Sperring complained. "There are times when I would shave at five. And that maid on my floor will persist in tucking the blanket so far under the foot of the mattress that it won't reach my chin. I dislike having to remake my bed every night. I mention these things in passing, Hammerton, so you'll be less troubled hereafter by cranks like me."

He looked slyly from face to face. “At the same time I’m prepared to accept any little inconvenience if someone will only explain this gathering of the forces.”

Muldrew looked at me, and I told something of what had happened. It interested Sperring so keenly that he could not keep still. He appealed to Muldrew:

“Can’t you lighten this burden of mystery enough to give me something to get my teeth in? I’ve romped all over the field of fancy, even to absurdity, and arrived nowhere—except in a cloud of confusion. That’s why I can’t sleep. You have some sort of theory—I know you have. Pity an amateur who makes his living by deceiving the public into thinking his characters real. I’m losing my grip.”

Muldrew smiled companionably. “Let *me* have some of *your* fancies, Sperring.” He spoke indifferently, but I knew he was pleading for something to get his own teeth in.

Sperring hesitated, then with an apologetic glance at Hammerton he said: “I’m going to be frank. I believe this hotel is mixed up in it.”

Though I had thought so myself, Hammerton was unprepared for it, and he resented it hotly. Sperring explained.

“It has nothing to do with you personally, Hammerton. I don’t even suggest that the hotel had any other connection except that it has been used for the gang’s head-quarters.”

“What gang?” Hammerton demanded truculently.

It was Muldrew who explained. Sperring had looked at him appealingly, unwilling to reveal what may have been given him in confidence.

Hammerton insisted that it was impossible, that between Netherwood, Anders, and Jefferson there had never been, to his knowledge, more than a dozen words.

But Sperring, with unusual spirit for one whose theories and deductions changed so readily, stuck to his guns. “That’s their cleverness; that’s how they covered their tracks. Of course, I may be wrong, but it certainly would be disarming to use a high-class hotel for their work.”

“What work?” Hammerton demanded. But Sperring only looked troubled.

“Where would Netherwood stand in the gang?” Muldrew queried.

Sperring moved uneasily. “You’ll think I shouldn’t make these charges without more evidence to back them up. Call it a hunch, if you will. You ask what gang, and what, work, Hammerton. They might have various forms of knavery in plan—hold-ups, bootlegging, gambling, confidence tricks—racketeering of a thousand kinds. We know last night’s affair was the work of a gang . . . and I’m as certain it’s part of the Netherwood murder. Anders is in it—somewhere.”

“What about them being the counterfeiters we’ve been after so long?” I ventured.

Sperring seized it eagerly. “Gosh, Tiger, that beats me by a mile, and a dozen times more likely. And what a scoop for you—two birds with the one stone! And great for the police, eh?”

“Too great,” Muldrew sighed. “Things don’t fall our way like that.”

But Sperring had got hold of an entertaining idea, and was reluctant to let it go. “Netherwood could play many rôles—a Government agent, for instance. . . . But you’re more concerned with the who than the why. You want to know who murdered Aaron Netherwood. I want to know why and how.”

“If we knew the why,” Muldrew retorted dryly, “we’d have less trouble with the who. We work from the motive to the culprit.”

“Unless,” Sperring qualified, “you saw a man struck down. Here was a man stabbed in his own room, if not before your eyes before your ears. The occupants of the two adjoining rooms vamoos, and under suspicious circumstances—”

“By the way,” Hammerton broke in, “that couple in 325, the Darlings, they left suddenly this morning. They had planned to remain a few weeks longer, I know, but early this morning they came downstairs all packed up, paid their bill, and went. They seemed in a hurry, too.”

Muldrew was interested now, and made no attempt to conceal it. “Where did they go?” When Hammerton said he didn’t know, Muldrew asked, “Did they have a car?” Hammerton thought they did. They had registered from Montreal, but beyond that Hammerton knew nothing of them. A significant feature of it was that they had come within a day or two of Anders.

Sperring’s mind leaped to every incident we knew in connection with the unattractive couple. “It was they gave Anders such a good reputation—an alibi when the lights went out, wasn’t it? . . . And they hadn’t noticeably

friendly feelings toward Miss Netherwood, I seem to remember. Spiteful old hag she was.”

Muldrew made a few notes in his book.

“Am I wrong, Mr. Muldrew,” Sperring asked, “in thinking that you’d like to lay hands on Jefferson and Anders, and now on the Darlings? If you had them you might easily establish motive. . . . But at the moment, as to the point that Tiger saw one of the gang enter the hotel— —”

“He *thinks* he did,” Muldrew put in.

Sperring came loyally to my defence. “When his badge is stolen and used to make a get-away it looks to me as if he wasn’t far from the right track.” In the story told after Sperring joined us I had inadvertently included the badge.

Hammerton had listened with outward scorn, mingled with irritating indifference, but I knew every word was swallowed with an interest equal to my own.

“The connection of the gang with the murder,” Sperring went on, “is plain enough: they robbed you of your keys, Mr. Muldrew—and not to get into any vault you may have, I take it. . . . The fact is, they’re after Room 322. Am I mad? I think not.” He smiled delightedly at the start Muldrew gave. Muldrew, I saw, was playing a game, but I could only imagine it the mask of a perplexed man. Sperring was talking. “Not just the dream of a writer-man. For some substantial reason the murderer of Aaron Netherwood wants badly to get back into that room.”

Muldrew confessed that it was possible. “In fact,” he said, “it’s what I myself thought. I’m glad you came to the same conclusion, Sperring. And now, Tiger,” rising, “how about a prowling down toward the river? I’d like to run across that place this very night.”

Sperring had risen with us. I could almost read his mind. He longed to suggest that we take him along, but something in Muldrew’s face discouraged it.

“What about a more pleasant evening, friends?” he suggested. “Can’t you knock off for one night and join me in some entertainment? I’ve been told they serve excellent chicken at the Silver Platter, with a fair cabaret afterwards. I suppose you can’t get away, Hammerton?”

A left-handed invitation which Hammerton had sense enough to refuse. Muldrew considered it, while I marvelled that, with so much crowding us,

he could think of mere entertainment—of that nature. With a smile he refused, frankly reluctant; and a glance at me warned me that he expected no less of me.

Sperring, though disappointed, did not persist.

“Very well, I’ll dissipate alone. I’m used to it. And I hope you’re famished by the morning.”

He accompanied us to the corner of Ninth Avenue and left us to proceed along Orchard Street, while he struck north toward Markham Street.

Muldrew was unusually silent. He was, I fancied, impressed with Sperring’s ingenuity and insight, and to the same extent dissatisfied with his own. In silence I jogged at his side.

For a time we followed the course Jefferson and Anders had led us the night before, and the farther we went the more was driven home to me the hopelessness of trying to recognize anything of our course beyond the point where we were attacked. Muldrew seemed to notice nothing.

At Eighteenth Avenue he turned south.

“But,” I protested, “we didn’t turn here last night.”

“Eh—what?” So that all the time he had had no thought of finding the factory; he had even forgotten my existence. “Oh, I’ve changed my mind.” He grinned down on me. “Meandering about the slums wouldn’t be exciting enough for the red-head, would it? Let’s try something with a thrill in it.”

CHAPTER XXXII

ROOM 322 AGAIN

I knew better than to be inquisitive. If Muldrew thought our next move thrilling it would certainly suit me. Within three minutes I knew we were returning to the Florence Hotel.

A thought came to me. “By the way, Gordy, what about those two men in 308 that Hammerton is so worked up about? Anything in that?”

He admitted that there might be. “But not from anything Hammerton told us. Just now he’s in a fine fever about everything that goes on at the hotel—something of a change from what threatened to block us at the time of the murder. Why shouldn’t a man keep his room to himself for a day without a maid poking about? Of course, if it continued— —”

“Yet you had a few things to say about Hammerton’s lack of curiosity about Netherwood when he put a new Yale lock on his door.”

“That’s different,” he returned, and I had sense enough not to ask how.

A moment later he slapped me on the shoulder. “Fact is, Tiger, I’m curious about those two men in 308. I haven’t mentioned it because I’ve been curious about so many features of this case that have disappointed me. We’re on our way right now to take a peep into this worry of Hammerton’s. . . . Great advertisement, isn’t it?” We had rounded back into Orchard Street at Tenth Avenue, and for a moment we stood watching the flashing hotel sign.

“Does it seem to you to be working faster, Gordy, or do my eyes—or my nerves—deceive me?”

Muldrew continued to watch. “It is faster—or perhaps *my* nerves are extra sensitive to-night. Well, let’s take a look at the back entrance again.”

“It does you good to brush up against Sperring,” I teased. “Gives you ideas.”

To my surprise he took no offence. “That’s right. I’m jammed with ideas. Sperring has an enviable imagination—he’d be invaluable to a detective in real life. . . . I’m beginning to believe he strikes nearer the real solution of the mystery than most of us give him credit for . . . or than he himself

suspects. . . . On second thoughts we'll pass up that back entrance for the time being. I want to give the hotel a once-over again from the front."

We established ourselves in the very spot where we had stood the night of the murder, the dark end of the lane from which the victim's cries had sent us running—too late. Before us rose the eight stories of the hotel, the broken rows of lighted windows giving an untidy, disorganized effect. The electric sign threw a dazzling radiance along the street, reaching dimly to where we had taken our stand. Across from the lane, between the thick drawn-back curtains of the hotel rotunda, we could see the crowd inside.

I was intensely interested. The life of the hotel continued as usual, though a murder had taken place in the building only two nights before, a murder still unsolved, and outside, looking in, was the detective assigned to work on the case! Crowds that quickly forgot, that had no suspicion that for months the hotel they favoured had been the head-quarters of a murder-gang!

I worked forward to the mouth of the lane and peered about. For a few seconds the flashing light blinded me. Then I grabbed my friend's arm.

"Look, Gordy, look! Quick! There's someone in Netherwood's room!"

For against the flare of the electric sign I had distinctly caught a glimpse of movement in the dark square that was still the open window of Room 322!

Muldrew had leaned forward—but nothing more. I looked up at him. He was chuckling.

"Oh," I said, disappointed and annoyed, "so you've given the room back to the hotel?"

"Not likely, Tiger." Then I saw that behind the twinkling eyes he was greatly excited. "Far from it. That special Yale lock to which I alone have the key is still on the door and in good working order."

"Then someone has broken in!"

"Think so?" he asked.

"Oh, hell, Gordy, why don't you run for it and nab the fellow? It must be Anders—certainly one of the gang."

"You're right, it must be," he agreed, but almost indifferently. A moment later he partly explained. "Yes, one of the gang. But it's not the gang we're after but the murderer of Aaron Netherwood. Suppose I made a capture in

the room right now. Would it give me the proof I want? But I wouldn't capture anyone—I haven't a chance to nab him. He can get out a dozen times before I'd get there. All he has to do is to spring the Yale lock . . . and I don't think he'll delay doing it."

"But," I puzzled, "you put that lock on for the express purpose of—"

"It has served its purpose, Tiger. Don't worry; it has doubly served its purpose. . . . Did you see enough of the intruder to recognize him?"

Of course I hadn't—no more than a flicker of movement that might well have been dismissed as fancy if Muldrew had taken it in any other way than he did. But it seemed now that nothing about it was unexpected.

"The fellow who man-handled you in the linen-room—did you recognize anything about him?" he inquired, in that aggravatingly teasing voice of his.

"I wish," I returned bitterly, "someone would give *you* the spin and flop you in a pile of dirty bed linen."

"Your wrestler and I are bound to meet," he replied.

"Are you afraid of him that you won't make a rush for him now?"

"Perhaps. . . . Afraid of something. Afraid of missing what there might be to see here. For instance, if he should come to the window again. No, Tiger, I'm not going to do a thing . . . except stand right here—and farther out of sight."

Yet, as the seconds passed, he grew more and more uneasy. Several times he consulted his watch, and the familiar lines of worry massed on his forehead.

Suddenly he seemed to reach a decision. Seizing my arm, he dragged me back into the lane, and we hurried along behind the Orchard Street stores to Ninth Avenue. The light there, as he peered into the street, told me that his worry had become something like alarm. With a gesture to me to follow he strolled across Ninth Avenue, and in a dark doorway close to the corner we took our stand.

It was a carefully-chosen spot. The entire front of the Florence Hotel was within sight, as well as the Ninth Avenue end of the lane that ran behind the hotel and into which the back door of the hotel opened, while we ourselves were in shadow. I remembered, too, that the lane behind the hotel was blind at the other end.

We must have been there fifteen minutes, and Muldrew, though I had experienced many a time the patience with which he could wait, was in a fever only less than my own. Audibly and visibly he fretted, pacing the limits of our shelter, constantly looking at his watch, grumbling incoherently. I said nothing, partly because I knew anything I might say would only add to his irritation, partly because I was busy trying to work out what it was all about.

Of course, I asked no questions. In my relations with Muldrew there had long ago developed a sort of friendly rivalry, more or less good-natured but precluding a co-operation that would have been profitable for me. In a way we had ever worked against each other—or, rather, I against him, seeking for my paper crime details he did not wish the public to have. My successes had over-inflated me, so that my failures had over-depressed me, until I was conscious of a friendly jealousy. Muldrew had never shown any enthusiasm for the assistance I was sometimes able to give him; perhaps he realized that that manner was good for me and succeeded in keeping down, to some extent, my outbreaks in the paper.

Sperring's suggestions he had welcomed more genially, though with the awkwardness of the professional dealing with the tyro. And, I freely admitted, Sperring had advanced his theories in a manner certain to rub a professional the wrong way. Innocently, of course, for Sperring was the soul of geniality and good sense; it was simply that, however familiar he might be with the detective of his own creation, he was unaccustomed to the peculiarities and sensitiveness of the real thing.

And so Muldrew ignored me as he waited, while I silently watched and listened, to drag a glint of light from his mutterings. That he expected something definite, and that it was necessary to his peace of mind as establishing some theory he had formed, was evident enough. If it did not happen I would have my chance to tease.

"Perhaps," he grunted, in the first intelligible phrase, "perhaps we're too late. They'll work quickly—they have to—now. I should have foreseen — —"

And just when I thought I was getting somewhere his strong fingers closed on my shoulder and his body stiffened. Up Ninth Avenue, close to the stores under that side of the hotel, a man was sliding along in the shadow toward the corner!

I blinked. "He wasn't there—a moment ago," I whispered. "Where did he come from?"

“From the lane behind the hotel,” Muldrew replied, but I knew from his tone that he was none too certain.

At the corner the man came under the light, but it did not reach his face. He was roughly dressed, like a workman, with the round-shouldered, shuffling gait of a man ending a weary day. Under one arm he carried a parcel done up in old blue overalls. Probably an electrician, I thought. The width of Orchard Street and a few more feet lay between us, so that nothing of his features was visible in the shadow of an old felt hat.

I concentrated on him, but in no line could I detect a resemblance to any of the gang I had seen during our captivity. Certainly he was not the smallish man with the protruding chin who had held the torch during the fight with Jefferson.

“It’s not he,” I whispered.

Muldrew nodded. The workman turned the corner westward on Orchard Street. We stepped from our dark doorway and prepared to follow.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A DISCOVERY

“Keep him in sight, Tiger.” Muldrew stepped back to the doorway and, tearing from his note-book three pages, scribbled something on each against the glass of the window and handed them to me. “Keep these. I’ll explain as we go along—if we need them.”

With the same shambling gait the workman had continued his way. Nothing about him, in garb or manner, suggested anything but what he professed to be.

“Looks as if we were barking up the wrong tree, Gordy.”

“Looks as if,” he agreed indifferently. “Now about those slips of paper—give them in the order in which you hold them to the first three policemen you meet.”

“Why not give them yourself?” I asked. “We’ll be together, won’t we?”

“Not exactly. And here”—he drew out his key-purse and detached a key—“pass this over with the first slip.”

“Ah, the key to Room 322!”

He nodded. “Now I’m going ahead. Keep me in sight. I’ll be busy keeping in touch with our friend—and avoiding a repetition of last night. Take this whistle and blow for all you’re worth if I’m attacked.”

“That’s a precaution we should have taken last night,” I said.

“I wanted no precautions. I invited capture.” He smiled apologetically at me. “Don’t show any interest in me—and don’t forget those slips of paper. There’ll be a traffic-man at Eighteenth Avenue, at any rate. Now, I’m going ahead. Don’t let them nab you.”

“Gordy,” I protested, “I don’t like this. This time you won’t be let go, if they get you.”

“Keep your eyes on me and your mind on those notes,” he ordered, and strode ahead.

Presently he crossed the street, giving me a signal to remain where I was. At a distance of forty yards I followed. Ahead of us plodded the

workman. I was glad of the night traffic of the streets.

We had luck. The first policeman came in sight at Eleventh Avenue. He was some distance up toward Markham, but I took the chance and ran to him with the first note. Returning to Orchard Street, I was relieved to see that I had not lost my place in the procession.

At Eighteenth I delivered the second note, remembering in time that I had neglected to give the key to the first policeman. The official there, a white-gloved point-man, opened the note and left his place hurriedly. Looking back, I saw that the first policeman was in sight. That first note, I gathered, was instructions to follow, the second to get help.

Muldrew moved steadily ahead, his tall figure easily kept in sight. To the workman I paid no attention.

I was despairing of the third policeman when one loomed directly before Muldrew. We had reached the poorer part of the city, our course still following that pursued by Anders the night before. Muldrew must have spoken to the policeman in passing, for the latter crossed the street and came close to me, his hand within convenient reach. I slid him the last note. When I looked back he was standing beneath a lamp-post looking indifferently about. The first policeman I could dimly see far in the rear.

Muldrew crossed to my side of the street, and a block farther along recrossed. Any plan of attack from dark lanes would thereby surely be frustrated.

In time we reached a point beyond where we had been ambushed, and I began to study my surroundings. It was a warm night, and the streets were anything but deserted, so that our task was simple enough. I was confident that as yet our presence was unsuspected—at intervals I saw the weary workman ahead—but it did not seem possible that we could go much longer undetected.

Muldrew must have thought the same, for with a wave of his hand to go on he turned south at a corner and left us. I was, I gathered, to take Muldrew's place for the time being and keep the workman in sight, thus unsettling any suspicions he might have had of Muldrew.

For four or five blocks we continued. Muldrew had not reappeared, and I was wondering, when someone hurried up behind me. Remembering last night's experience, I crowded to the outside of the side-walk and slowed my pace, so that we would not pass at the end of a lane. I held my muscles tense for action. A man brushed past me—pinched my arm.

It was Muldrew, though but for that pinch I would never have recognized him. In the few minutes of his absence he had altered his appearance unbelievably. I knew he always carried a cap in his pocket for quick disguise, and this he wore dragged over one eye. His clothes, the same he had worn a few minutes before, had been readjusted and disturbed until they resembled cheap ready-mades of a careless dresser, with short sleeves and a line of wrinkles across his shoulders. The trousers were short and baggy, shoes dusty, hair unkempt.

A few steps farther on he stopped to light a cigarette.

Suddenly the man we followed turned a corner. Muldrew did not hurry. Sauntering along, he did not turn the corner, did not even glance up the street our quarry had taken. Instead, he kept straight on, but again the gesture that ordered me to take his place and follow the man myself.

It was a miserable quarter of the city, with factory buildings run down at heels, interspersed with hovels run down from heels to head. A cheap phonograph somewhere was shrieking "Valencia" from a worn record, drowned at times by the shouting of children. Before the doors their parents exchanged gossip and vituperation, and far up the street a drunken man wound his devious way along, singing maudlinly. In the distance, across the ditch of the street, went the traffic of Markham Street. I felt as if I were in another world.

And then I noticed that the workman was not in sight!

I did not know what to do. Muldrew, I knew, would not be far away, but he might as well be ten miles away as out of sight. I slowed down. Something warned me against making inquiries of the groups before the houses. These people clung together for what they considered self-protection. Visitors from the better parts of the city were never welcome, and against them, to back one of their own kind, they would weld to a stubborn, immovable mass. Before a group of men I stopped to ask for a match, and as I lit up I studied the street and tried to form some plan.

My attention was directed to a pair of small children across the street, staring into a dark lane. I sauntered over. As I neared them they separated to let me pass; but they continued to stare into the darkness.

"What's up in there?" I asked idly.

My interest increased their own. One, the younger and least sophisticated, replied, while the other looked uncomfortable: "Cut 'n' run, he did, 'way in there. An' no cop after him, neither." With the precocious

cunning of the street Arab he looked toward the corner from which the workman and I had come.

“Guess he lives up there,” I muttered, and myself passed into the darkness of the lane. Muldrew would pick up my trail.

Once in the darkness I found it was not so intense as it appeared from the lighted street. I could see far enough ahead to pick my way with no unnecessary noise. At the same time I kept to the middle of the passage, or crowded to the side opposite any sunken doorway or hiding-place. I had no wish to be struck down in that place; never before had I realized the number of dark nooks in an ordinary city lane. It was an unusually large block the lane cut through, and a veritable tangle of passages and cross-lanes reaching the factories that opened thereon. My quarry, if he knew we were after him, would surely get well away—or be in a position to ambush us where he would have all the best of it.

For no reason except my uncertainty I turned into a lane branching to the right. Far ahead it led into a semi-circle of comparative brightness, and instantly some urgent thought brought me to a stop. There ahead of me—I knew it as well as if I had visited it by daylight a thousand times—was the very covered passage through which the gang had brought us in cars after our capture!

I slid against the nearest wall and eyed it for a long time, trying to work out how I could possibly recognize it. All about rose the blank, inhospitable walls of small factories, some of which were plainly not in use, deserted. I recalled the distance the car must have come after passing the arch, estimating it at one hundred and thirty yards. I moved nearer, and at the estimated distance came on the rear of a factory flanked on each side by a loading lane. The car had turned to the right—so that this must be the very factory Muldrew sought!

My heart pounded uncomfortably. I began to doubt my convictions. Muldrew would certainly rub it in if I were wrong. There was nothing, of course, definite in my recognition—little more than a feeling. But that feeling, combined with the fact that the workman we had followed had turned into that lane, satisfied me. But would it satisfy Muldrew?

In search of proof I turned into the nearest side-lane. It was completely dark, but as I looked a light came on in a window of the second story straight ahead at the end of the lane. At my right a loading platform had fallen into disrepair. It convinced me that the lighted room had nothing to do with an employee late at his work.

I crept nearer, hugging the wall.

The blind was drawn, the window down; but as I crouched underneath I distinctly heard the rumble of men's voices. On my way I had passed a door in the wall, and to this I returned. But it was locked. If this was the building I sought there must be a door at the other side, for we had entered from the car from the right.

Noiselessly I worked my way around the rear of the building. A momentary sense of rashness attacked me, but I had only to remember Muldrew's indulgent grin to keep to my plan. As I rounded the last corner I noticed that the wall was built in the old-fashioned block design, with squares of buttressing brick protruding an inch or so every foot and a half up the corner. I was familiar with those block corners, having climbed them many a time on my childhood home, to the admiration of young friends.

Following the corner upward with my eyes, I noticed that a cast-iron rain-pipe that rose close to the corner angled off near an upper window toward the eaves.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DEATH!

It took me only a few seconds to reach the pipe where it branched toward the window on my left. I laid a testing hand on it and decided to take a chance. Gritting my teeth, I swung along it until my fingers grasped the window-sill. With the help of the pipe I managed to get my elbows on the sill, and there I rested, my legs wound about the pipe, picturing my chagrin and helplessness should the window be locked. I had not the purchase or strength to force it, and I dare not break the glass. Descent, too, by the same route would be a different matter.

Hanging there, fingers raw, muscles aching, I found it in me to wish I had been less rash. Even if the window was not locked, could I, from the awkward position in which I hung, manage to lift it? Without noise, too? Bracing myself on my left elbow, I lifted with my right hand. With a tingle of satisfaction I felt it give. After another rest I tried again. Again. Again. After each inch or two I pressed hard, to keep it from dropping back. A slight draught wafted in my face.

I wriggled myself about until I got a better purchase on the rain-pipe, so that I was able to shoot my left hand forward over the sill. For a sickening moment I thought I had missed, then my groping fingers curled over the inside edge, and I hung, panting and perspiring but triumphant, letting the window rest on my left arm.

The rest was less difficult. With that hold and leverage, in a couple of minutes I was through the window, crowded back against the wall, listening as I had never listened before.

From the lane outside came dimly the sound of hurrying feet.

I looked about me. It was too dark to distinguish much, but the quality of the light was familiar—exactly as I remembered it through the open door from the dark room where we lay bound the night before. What light there was reached the great room in which I found myself from reflected street lights at my back.

A moment's reflection, and I placed the room we must have been in somewhere to my left; and, though it was darker over there, I knew there

must be a line of separate rooms along that wall, since there was no outside window, and the wall was certainly closer than my memory of the width of the building as I had crept around the rear. Straight ahead the gloom stretched, and everywhere undefined shapes lifted themselves. To one just before me I reached, and found it was metal—some cumbersome piece of machinery. I told myself I had known from the first it was a factory.

Suddenly I became aware of voices. They came from my left, somewhere half down the side, cut off from me by a closed door. Strain as I would I could not make out what was said.

By now I had forgotten Muldrew and the police, and only as an overhanging shadow did even the workman remain. I was uplifted by my luck—I had stumbled on the building myself!

The voices rose and faded. Some sort of argument. I decided to get within hearing. I would work my way along the wall, thus avoiding what light there was, and the danger of stumbling over unseen equipment.

Carefully, scarcely breathing, I set out. A lump of machinery intervened, and I was forced farther into the room. Suddenly I pulled up. Before me yawned a tremendous gap in the floor. The unexpectedness of it, the blind depth, almost unnerved me. As I stared into it, it seemed to drop away to a terrifying distance. I edged away, frightened and uncertain. Then a shaft of dim light shot up at me, and I recognized the reflection of water.

A surge of joy shot through me. This, then, was the vat of water Muldrew had described, the vat that had so puzzled him!

Almost at the same instant I caught sight of a narrow line of light ahead, and I knew it came from beneath a closed door.

A man's voice cried out in terror: "My God, don't do that!"

A shot rang out, almost tumbling me into the vat. The thin line of light vanished, and in the ensuing darkness I heard the door open, letting out the groans of a dying man! I swayed drunkenly, my hands clutched for dear life about the nearest machine. I was thankful for its support, for through the dark room broke that awful, insane, chuckling laugh I had heard so often before, twice in this very building.

The fiend who laughed was there in the room with me, leaving behind, in the room I knew so well, someone foully murdered by his hand! Laughing triumphantly at it! Fifty feet away he moved confidently toward the front of the building, unaware of a spectator. And the man with that laugh might be careful if he knew, but never afraid. I heard him walking steadily forward.

Then, as I clung, wondering what next, a slight noise on my right killed every other sound in the building. I stood as if turned to stone, all my dread gone, consumed by a bewildering curiosity. Someone else was there! Had been there all the time, hidden by the darkness! And the one with the awful laugh had not known it! Even more confusing: the latest unknown must have heard or seen me enter the window! Why had he ignored me? The query answered itself: only the murderer with the laugh counted with him. He waited. We all waited, listening. For what seemed hours, to me a time of suffocating suspense. Not a sound. Even the city outside seemed to be muted—awaiting some dramatic event.

It came then.

A flash slit the darkness from my right, a thundering crash that seemed to burst in my very head. Almost as if the same finger pulled the trigger, an answering shot came from across the room where the man with the laugh must have been. Another shot from my right, farther forward this time—another, farther again. The man there was rashly working his way across the room.

After the fourth shot he must have realized the disadvantage at which he placed himself, for there had been no answering shot but the first. Another long silence fell over the room. Then a ray of light slit the darkness and was sharply cut off. Neither fired. In the uncanny stillness that ensued I could have screamed. I wanted to warn the daring man on my right—of what I did not know, but I trembled at the dire peril in which he stood—fighting terrible odds—rashly.

There was a sharp sound as of lightning movement! A gurgling gasp choked with a rush of—blood! A heavy, stumbling fall! My hair rose. And then again that mad, chuckling laugh! The fiend had won again.

I must have lost my head, for I found myself rushing toward the sound, shouting as I ran. A bullet whistled past my ear, but I kept on. A light stabbed into my eyes, blinding me, and was shut off. I raced toward it. My fingers were curled like talons. To feel them closing on the throat that laughed like that, to end its sneering triumph! Another bullet whistled near. I ran on, growling like an animal.

In the darkness I could hear someone fleeing before me.

Round and round the room we raced. I had no light, and the other used his no more. He knew the room well, while I, stumbling and staggering, bruised and bleeding by now, continued the hopeless chase.

I knew that sooner or later we would come to grips.

With returning sanity I marvelled that he did not shoot, for I made no effort to conceal my whereabouts. I could think of nothing but the man with the laugh and that vat of water. Finally I realized something of my folly. My one hope was to stalk the fiend—crowd him into a corner and jump him. Somehow, somewhere, I had picked up a length of iron pipe. A crushing blow with that! I waved it recklessly. It struck metal.

As if in echo, from downstairs there beat up to me a sharp crash—another and another. My quarry, I heard, stood still. Someone was smashing through the door!

“Gordy!” I shrieked. “Gordy!”

A rush of bounding feet on the stairs. “Tiger! Tiger! Where are you?”

They tell me I laughed, an unpleasant, gloating laugh. “Now we have you! Here, Gordy, here! He can’t escape us now.”

The reply, from somewhere at the rear of the room—that hideous, chuckling laugh! Then a great splash. I stumbled toward the vat just as Muldrew’s torch sent a long ray across the room and he leaped toward me.

“The vat!” I shouted. “He’s in the vat of water!”

I had reached it and fallen on my knees. A splash of water struck me tauntingly in the face, then Muldrew’s torch hit the surface.

I had a glimpse of a human figure distorted by refraction, two feet below the surface, a line of breaking bubbles. Muldrew fired straight at it—uselessly. Then a door opened far down at the side of the vat, and with a great swish water and man vanished.

He had laughed when he could. He had beaten us again—the weary workman!

With the water went a rush of odd bundles that churned and whirled away. Muldrew uttered a cry and leaped in headlong. With a shout of exultation he held one of the brown bundles aloft, the only one that remained. It was covered with thin sheet-rubber. Muldrew’s strong fingers tore the rubber away.

What I saw was a great bundle of ten-dollar bills!

CHAPTER XXXV

GETTING WARM

There have been times in my short but hectic newspaper career when impressions crowd me, when I gladly take temporary refuge in the thought that it is all a dream. It is, I believe, no monopoly of mine. With all our boasted intelligence we possess nothing so reliable, so staunch and stable, as the instinct of the animals.

As Muldrew exultantly held up the roll of banknotes I knew that some of the mystery was solved, though for moments I was too befuddled to reason what it was. But Muldrew knew.

Suddenly I remembered. "Gordy, quick, quick! Back here!"

But as Muldrew, alarmed now, clambered from the vat, a policeman called from across the room, and Muldrew left me. Only then did I recall the shot from the room there, the groan of the fiend's first victim. I ran after Muldrew.

In the very room where we had lain helpless the night before a policeman knelt beside a man, twisted in pain, a river of blood creeping across the floor. The man was dead. The policeman's torch fell full on the face. Muldrew bent forward.

"Anders!" I whispered. "I—I heard the shot. It was cold-blooded, insane murder. And out here, Gordy, out here there's another."

I caught Muldrew's arm and dragged him away. Anders, with his death, had passed from the picture. But this other! I was tremblingly concerned for him, and I had no reason for it except that he had fought the man who had escaped us—had fought him too rashly to hope to win.

At the rear end of the factory the police were clustered about the empty vat, so that Muldrew and I were forced to depend on his torch alone.

"This way." I ran a twisted course through the looming machinery that stood, rusted and forlorn, all over the place. "He came out of that room after shooting Anders. Then they had a fight in the dark—"

"Who had a fight?" Muldrew demanded.

“The other man—the man that lost. That brute who got away always wins. They fired at each other, then— —”

I was stopped by Muldrew suddenly shooting his light toward the stairway. It fell on the apologetic, grinning face of Sperring appearing up the stairs.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he pleaded. “I followed you. I didn’t go to the Silver Platter, because I knew you had something important on to-night, and I wanted worse than anything else to be in on it. May I come up? All this is worth thousands to me.” He wiped a handkerchief across his forehead; he perspired literally in drops, so anxious was he after what must have been a long and difficult pursuit. “If I’m in the way— —”

His humility would have been passport enough anywhere. Muldrew could not refuse him—though I did notice a frown at first.

“All right, come along . . . on condition that you make no use of what you see to-night until I give you leave.”

Sperring promised eagerly.

“We’re looking for another, Conrad,” I whispered, “another murder. It was here somewhere.”

“Murder?” Sperring’s eyes went round and frightened. “Is this the place where they had you last night?”

Muldrew had circled a piece of heavy machinery. “Here, quick! Bring some water.”

Sperring and I ran around to him. Muldrew was bent over a man who lay, partly on his back, his features contorted with pain, his knees drawn tight against his chest as if in the throes of a terrible poison. But the blood flowing from his left side showed how he had died.

Sperring had dropped beside Muldrew and picked up the limp hand. “I know something of medicine. Let me look. Poor fellow! . . . But he isn’t dead.” Only then did he seem to notice the blood, for he shifted his knees so suddenly that he dropped the man’s hand. “My God, Muldrew! Look at this!”

He looked so ghastly that I thought the sight of the blood would be too much for him. But he braced against it.

Gently he started to turn the man over. “Stabbed—stabbed over the heart from behind! Can we have a doctor—there’s still life in him. Don’t move

him any more.” He made a closer examination and lifted his eyes to Muldrew significantly. They were moist with pity. “He can’t live,” he whispered, “not with a wound like that. I know that blood. But he may be able to talk—a little. Might as well let him—it can’t hurt him now.”

I was in a better position than Muldrew to see the weapon still in the victim’s back. Then the torch-light fell more directly on it, and I saw Muldrew’s jaw tighten.

A policeman hurried up with a pail of water, and Sperring gently bathed the stricken face with his own handkerchief. A few drops of the water he dripped between the set teeth.

“No one can do more,” he murmured. His hands moved tenderly over the man, trying to ease his position, gentle as a mother. “It’s another murder for you, Muldrew . . . and it’s one of a serial—with Netherwood’s.”

The wounded man’s face altered before our eyes, the pain ebbed, the ugly lines of agony faded.

Almost together Muldrew and I cried out:

“Jefferson!”

Sperring stared at us and down at the man on the floor. “Jefferson? The man from Room 326? Yes, yes, I see you’re right, of course you are. . . . Then it knocks all my theories on the head,” he ended miserably.

“What theories?” Muldrew asked.

“Why—why, that Jefferson was a member of the gang, with the Florence Hotel its head-quarters. It’s the gang must have murdered him.” He leaned back on his heels, staring about. “This is where they held you last night?”

“I’m sure of it,” I said.

“Then— —”

Jefferson’s eyelids wavered, and we waited for him to speak. Presently his eyes opened full on Muldrew.

“You?” he murmured. “I thought—they had murdered you—as they tried to murder me.”

“And I was sure they had murdered you,” Muldrew told him.

Sperring fidgeted where he knelt. “Ask him—ask him,” he whispered.

Muldrew bent nearer the dying man. “Who did this, Jefferson?”

“The leader. It was a fair fight.”

“Who is the leader? What are you doing here—what is it all about?”

A slight smile crossed Jefferson’s face. “I know I’m done for. But you’ll get them, Muldrew . . . you’ll get them. . . . The counterfeiter!” His eyes closed for a moment, and when he opened them again he was smiling. “Not a detective—I was hi-jacking them. In another day I’d—have had—all they had.”

From the other side Sperring broke in: “Who are they—who’s the leader?”

Jefferson shook his head weakly. Never once, while his eyes were open, had he taken them from Muldrew’s anxious face.

“Netherwood—he was the artist made the drawings,” Jefferson murmured. “Anders—another. . . . The Darlings. The rest—I don’t know. This place—they struck the money here.”

Sperring’s big eyes pleaded of Muldrew to speak, and Muldrew nodded his consent.

“Who killed Netherwood, Jefferson? Was it you?”

“No—not me. And I didn’t short-circuit—the lights. I chloroformed you, Muldrew, last night. Carrying you out—so you wouldn’t know the place again. . . . They jumped me. Threw me in the river. . . . Got free. Houdini, I told you. . . . Almost got the money.” His eyes opened wide on Muldrew. “Get them, Muldrew, get them!”

With a rattling gasp his head rolled to one side and his hand went limp in Muldrew’s. Jefferson had paid.

Muldrew sighed. “So little to tell us . . . even if true! So hard a price to pay!”

Sperring frowned. “I wouldn’t forget what he *did* tell you.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE THIRD DAGGER

Muldrew had no time to waste. Jefferson dead, he waved us away from the body and set a policeman on guard.

I had started toward the front of the factory, curious as to what was in the room where I had seen the light from the lane, when he called me back.

“I must ask you both to stay with me,” he ordered. “Otherwise— —” A motion with his thumb over his shoulder defined the penalty.

“But Mona was in there last night,” I protested. “It was she we heard screaming.”

He looked at me with new interest and smiled. “I can’t be cruel to you, Tiger. Knight-errantry first. Come along.”

A row of doors faced us along the front. The first revealed three beds, all disarranged as if recently slept in, a motley assortment of rough clothing, among which were several pairs of overalls. Sperring pounced on them, but Muldrew hurried us along. The two next rooms were empty, but in the room where I had seen the light were a table and four chairs.

Muldrew quickened the pace at which he carried us along. We started in the rooms along the side wall, but found them empty, and Muldrew called it off before we reached the one in which Anders lay.

“I guess we were mistaken, Tiger,” he muttered, “or else— —”

“They may have— —” I stopped, afraid to face it.

Muldrew understood. “They wouldn’t do that—they wouldn’t—do away with them.”

Sperring wiped his forehead. More and more his pet theories were toppling—unless he thought to save his face by the disappearance of both Mona and Inkerley. But Sperring, I could see, had no thought of compromise, even with his own pride. An inferiority complex weighed on him at that moment, so that I was forced to the conclusion that he had not divulged the theory to which he attached most importance.

Muldrew was grumbling to himself. "I don't mind admitting that I had built something on finding them here. There seems no other way of finding who the leader is. If they've—abused them!" He straightened his broad shoulders and his teeth snapped together.

Sperring nudged me and whispered: "Someone should warn them—the gang, I mean."

I had to confess that Sperring's opinion of Muldrew was not without justification. Indeed, I myself was none too proud of my friend. Never had I seen him so evidently at sea, so uncertain of the next step. The discovery of the head-quarters of the counterfeiters was more than offset by the addition of two savage murders to add to the one still unsolved; and we were no nearer the identity of the leader than before. Once again he had given us the laugh.

Muldrew hurried away toward the vat with some new purpose in mind. I followed, with Sperring crowding behind.

"It's certain he didn't drown, Gordy," I said. "He'd have some arrangement for escape."

"Of course. That fellow had made provision for everything—everything. Getting away that way—it's a new wrinkle, the cleverest I ever saw. We're going to find the outlet for that water—and the man we want. . . . Tiger, we've had brains against us. Even you, Sperring, with all your flights of fancy, never conceived anything like this."

We had to explain to Sperring what had happened, and he listened with dancing eyes.

The vat was five feet deep or more, about fourteen long and six wide. The trap-door was still open, extending to the very bottom with a gradual slope in the floor toward it. Though it was only two feet square, it was plenty large enough for a man to wash through, and its confined size only increased the pressure of the water behind. The fellow had spun himself out from the side, kicked an ingenious fastening, and vanished feet first with the flow.

Muldrew dropped into the tank, and from hands and knees thrust his head into the opening. In there was a smooth chute that disappeared downward at a moderate slope, its floor smooth as glass. Sperring was more intent on the door and its fastening. The edges of the opening and of the door were lined with soft rubber, making them watertight, and the fastening was of the trip variety. Water, notes and all would rush through the instant the trip released the door.

Sperring peered into the chute. “Why don’t we trace that thing down?” he suggested. “He may be downstairs somewhere right now.”

“The man who invented this had no intention of being cornered,” Muldrew returned. “He’ll be a mile away by now.”

Sperring clambered to his feet. “By Jove, I met him! I did—I met him!” He struck a fist into a clenched hand, and his face reddened with confusion. “I was out there in the lane, trying to find where you had disappeared to, and someone ran away under the archway at the end of the lane. I had only a glimpse, and for a moment I thought it was one of your policemen. But I see it all now. Why—yes, I see it now—he was dripping wet! What an ass! Oh, what an ass!”

“What could you have done?” Muldrew asked. “If *we’d* seen him it might have been different.” He climbed from the vat and hurried toward the stairs.

Down on the first floor the chute was visible enough. Here it was twice as large as where it started from the vat, and it ran through the floor toward the basement. There we proceeded. The door at the foot of the stairs was locked, and Muldrew was forced to kick it down. Another locked door in the passage beyond had to be crashed.

We found ourselves in a small room. Through the end wall came the chute, no longer a great pipe, but open at the top and curving gently off until, near the floor, it ran for several feet horizontally before emptying into a sewer outlet at the wall. Looking in, we saw a perpendicular grating, with a thick mattress, now sopping wet, against it. Here the chute had a double floor, the upper a grating of smooth wood through which the water would continue to the sewer, while solids slid along the grating to be stopped without shock by the mattress against the iron grating.

Muldrew scrambled inside and climbed. Presently he slid back, clutching a second roll of ten-dollar notes. Later he discovered that a section of the wooden grating near the mattress would swing downward. He pointed.

“That’s where the rest of the notes went—let through into the sewer—except what the fellow could carry away with him. It was so arranged that everything might be saved, but if too closely pursued all evidence of their work would disappear in the sewer. This factory has been vacant for three years—an old shoe factory that went bankrupt.”

Sperring insisted that the man he saw running through the archway carried nothing of any size with him. “We’ve unearthed the secret of the counterfeit money. . . . But what about Aaron Netherwood’s murderer? I’m more interested in that. Counterfeit money has been overworked in fiction, but murder—new methods of it—that’s what the public wants. Now, who did murder Aaron Netherwood?”

Muldrew shook his head irritably. “Let him be. I’ve enough on my mind for one night.”

As we were mounting the stairs Sperring looked at his watch. “If you’ll promise not to run him down to-night—the murderer, I mean—I’ll trot along and catch up with my sleep. But I’ll sacrifice any amount of sleep before I’ll miss any part of this affair—if you’ll let me come along.”

Muldrew could not withstand the appeal of it. “Run along. Let’s hope you’ll dream to-night . . . dream a solution for us. . . . And I don’t mind saying your theories have helped a lot.”

It was decent of Muldrew, and Sperring grinned delightedly.

“I’ll give you so many theories,” he promised, “you’ll be dizzy with them.”

With four policemen left to guard the factory, Muldrew and I started back to the city.

“Gordy,” I said, “there’s only one lead that I see—those strangers in Room 308 at the hotel.”

Muldrew chuckled. “I have them in my hands already, Tiger. You see, the police force works while you sleep.”

For a long time neither of us spoke. I was hoping he would explain something about those two men who had roused Hammerton’s suspicions. As we reached Markham Street he removed the old cap of his disguise and wiped his forehead.

“Did you see that dagger, Tiger?”

“The one that killed Jefferson? I’d like nothing better than to forget it.”

“And I wouldn’t forget it for the world,” he murmured. “That deer’s-foot handle—it was the third dagger, the third dagger! . . . The fourth will yield us our man!”

CHAPTER XXXVII

A BRUTAL ATTACK

I was ashamed next morning of how soundly I had slept. My mind, I thought, should have been too active, too prying, for sleep. But the fact was that my nerves felt strangely relieved, an inexplicable sense of heavy mystery solved by the events of the night before. It must be, I reflected, the shadow of coming solution. One counterfeiter was dead, and the police had found the plates.

I was surprised by the small figure *The Star* cut in my satisfaction. Here was the biggest scoop of the year, yet it was only at wide intervals that I remembered my paper. The fact was that the only part of my job that concerned me was Jerry Inkerley's whereabouts. That was blanker and blacker than ever, for I had hoped for much from a raid on those rooms. Only now and then, too, did I think of Aaron Netherwood's murder.

At little past my usual hour I snatched a more hurried breakfast than was my wont—thereby stirring kindly Mrs. Altonen almost to tears—and rushed to the office. Sid Newhall was there, lounging proprietorially in Jerry's chair. For my benefit the supercilious twist to his lips increased.

"This morning, Tiger," imitating Jerry's crisp way, "get a hair cut, a manicure, a bath or two, a massage, a facial, and a permanent, and hie to Mrs. Stillman's reception—"

"Where's Jerry?" I snarled.

Sid flung a contemptuous hand and reached for his scented cigarettes. "Where, ah, where? Does it matter? *The Star* at last has come to reason. You and I have often proven to our satisfaction how much better the City Room would be with either of us in charge."

"Rank silliness," I snapped. "All you know of a charge is what your tailor permits. Go to blazes!"

I stamped out. My mind was a blank. I knew that until Jerry was found I was fit for nothing. I decided to pay Muldrew a call; he might be able to fill my day. At any rate, I had no intention of letting him get along without me.

I found him seated before his desk, his feet on another chair, staring at the ceiling. I sat down and waited. Beyond a sidelong glance when I was announced he paid no further attention. Through the half-open door at the side I could hear Inspector Armitage wheezily going about his routine duties in his abrupt way.

Muldrew was miles away, and I knew enough to make no effort to drag him back. As I expected, the very intensity of his absorption crashed out at last:

“I’ll be hanged if I see how!”

“Why not consult a superior intelligence, Gordy?” I inquired. “I’m always ready to pull you from a bog. Spill the dope, Gordy, and give yourself a chance for promotion.”

He turned on me those teasing eyes that always riled me. “You’ve been with me at every stage of the chase. What do you make of it?”

“Make of what?” I asked, playing for time.

He did not deign to answer, but continued to stare at me with those laughing Irish eyes of his.

I bridled. “You’re just as much in the dark as I am, and you know it. I know you by this time—you’re always most cryptic when you’re most befuddled. Any fool can hint. Seems to me the only one with real ideas, and not afraid to mention them, is Conrad Sperring. . . . And all you do is laugh at him.”

“But I don’t laugh at Sperring,” he insisted. “On the contrary, I think Sperring a real find. I admire the fertility of his imagination, the intricacies of his solutions, the profundity of his ingenuity.” By the ponderousness of his language he was trying to be funny. “I agree with you,” he went on more soberly, “that the flashes of inspiration he had forestalled me at times . . . and his weird brain helped a lot. I’m not too small to admit it. . . . I’m going to say more—that Sperring can still help a lot. He was right about that gang. He was right about the Florence Hotel being the gang’s head-quarters in one sense. And, according to Jefferson, he was right in connecting Aaron Netherwood with the gang. . . . In his way Sperring is a genius.”

“You should get him in the police,” I scoffed, “a consultant.”

But Muldrew took me seriously. “We might do a lot worse. . . . I’ve even spoken to the Inspector about him.”

“And you don’t know half his theories,” I told him. “He talked freely to me; he knows you try to belittle him. You don’t know that at one time—and perhaps even yet—he wondered if the Netherwood women aren’t mixed up in the murder. I hope you don’t think the same.”

“At least,” Muldrew replied, “he hasn’t much faith in the disappearance of Mona and Jerry. What does he say about that?”

“He suggests that Jerry was acquainted with them long before the murder. . . . Looking it over, I can’t say it seems so absurd.”

Muldrew dropped his feet from the chair. “Does he think Jerry Inkerley murdered Aaron Netherwood?”

“No-o, not quite as bad as that—at least, he doesn’t specifically accuse him. He was only feeling about for possible explanations. Until we find Mona and Jerry we can’t prove him wrong.”

Muldrew nodded, frowning at the floor. “That’s true. . . . And even if we do find them— —”

“If?” I repeated in a frightened voice.

“When, if you prefer it. *When* we find them. . . . well, we’ll have to take their word for what has happened, won’t we? . . . That theory of Sperring’s is interesting; I’ll have a talk with him about it. Well, Sergeant, what is it?”

The Sergeant had opened the door. “Gentleman to see you. A bit bashed up, too.” He examined a card he held. “Hammerton—Mr. Guy Hammerton—*Mister!* Ha-ha!”

“Show him in.”

In the twenty seconds we waited Muldrew kept his eyes screwed up to the ceiling. “That’s funny. Bashed up, is he? And come to see me about it? Hello, Hammerton, what have they been doing to you? Some peppery guest protested his bill, or are the women turning on you at last?”

Through a large bandage that covered one eye and much of his face Hammerton did his best to glare. Certainly he looked as if he had emerged second from an epic fight. Black showed around the eye below the bandage, the other cheek was bruised, and the cloth on his head, when he removed his hat, was bloody. Such a dressing over his immaculate garb and somewhat effeminate figure and habits was little short of ridiculous, and I found it hard not to smile.

Hammerton sensed our reaction, and was furious. “It may look funny to you, Mr. Muldrew, but it isn’t to me. Lucky I’m alive.” He seated himself gingerly on a chair, though, so far as we could see, only his head had suffered.

Muldrew saw that he had made a mistake. “I’m sorry, Hammerton. But such a beating up isn’t what I connect with your customary immaculateness. Is it something in our line?”

Hammerton looked uncomfortable. “Mr. Sperring says it is.” He had been, he said, at work in the office the night before at a late hour when someone called him up on the telephone.

“Who was it?” Muldrew inquired.

“It—it doesn’t matter, because it wasn’t the person at all. It was just a trap.”

Muldrew nodded. “A woman. I see. Someone who knew you’d respond to a message like that.”

Hammerton glanced at me in an embarrassed way, and I promptly offered to leave the room. Hammerton stiffened—as I knew he would.

“It really doesn’t matter. I’m not ashamed. The message came—it was supposed to come from the brother of a lady friend of mine. I was to meet her at the corner of Twenty-third Avenue and Orchard Street. I wondered at the time, but before I could say anything the man rang off. It’s a bad part of the city, but I thought it was all right.”

“You went,” Muldrew filled in, “and someone waylaid you and beat you up. . . . Sure it wasn’t her brother? Brothers often have uncomfortable ideas about their sisters’—friends.”

Hammerton assured Muldrew the girl’s brother wasn’t in the city. He was holding himself well in control under Muldrew’s annoying manner.

“That,” Muldrew said, “we can easily verify—when we need to. Now, what happened in detail?”

“I was nearing the place when someone leaped on me from a dark doorway with a dagger— —”

Muldrew started. “A dagger, you say?”

“It sure was—a nasty knife affair. I saw it gleam in the light—I’ll never forget it, because I thought I was a goner. But I ducked and it caught me in the sleeve. Then something banged on my head two or three times, and I

was down and out. I'd have been killed if someone hadn't come running at my cries."

"Did you see your assailant?"

"Not more than a vague shadow. It was dark just there, and he was on me before I could look. After that I was trying to get away. . . . There was nothing peculiar about him that I could describe." Still he had not quite lost consciousness.

"Who found you?" Muldrew asked.

"Two chaps on their way home from a pool room."

"What did you tell the doctor who bound you up? They're supposed to report a thing like that to us."

Hammerton dropped his eyes. "I didn't see a doctor—I didn't want it to get in the papers. I have to think of all these things that have happened at the hotel—it's bad enough now, goodness knows—and I—I'm married, you see. It was Mr. Sperring bound me up. I happened to meet him as I was trying to get up to my apartment at the hotel without being seen. It was he sent me down to you; he says it mustn't be allowed to pass. Seems to think it has some connection with the other things—the murder, I mean. But I don't see — —"

"Of course not." Muldrew tapped the desk for a moment. "Can you think of any reason why anyone would wish to murder you?"

Hammerton couldn't. "If it weren't for that fake message I'd say they took me for someone else—or maybe it was just a hold-up."

Suddenly Muldrew inquired: "What about those two men in 308? Are they there still?"

"I hadn't thought of them." Hammerton was startled. "I haven't seen them all day, but they haven't checked out." He let his one open eye rest on me appealingly. "I hope you won't say a word about this in the paper."

Muldrew answered for me. "No danger. . . . Unless it works into the pattern Sperring suggests."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

CLOSING IN

That Muldrew was not taking me completely into his confidence I had more than suspected for some time, and, as usual in my association with him, it annoyed me unduly. But it was proof of the curious texture of that association that these recurring moments of irritation failed to diminish my affection for him. So often it was a battle of wits, with me delighted at any crumb I could squeeze for *The Star*, and Muldrew watching me to see that I never got too large a morsel. I was reasonable enough to know that he thought he had good reason for not divulging all he had uncovered; that his conception of the validity of the reason did not coincide with mine had no bearing on our intimacy.

I was annoyed, not so much at his reticence as from a conviction that I should not need his confidences. I felt that enough clues were as open to me as to him to make me independent of him in forming an opinion of the ultimate explanation of the numerous mysteries that had followed so closely on the Netherwood murder. That I failed was my own weakness.

Making every allowance for his experience, as for the natural reticence of his profession, did not lighten the sting of that weakness. I therefore fell back on the one source of assistance I was free to claim—Conrad Sperring. And now Muldrew himself had acknowledged Sperring's ability.

When I reached the hotel Hammerton was in the office, keeping out of sight. I would have missed him had he not sent a clerk to call me back just as I was entering an elevator. He looked surprisingly humble and apologetic.

“Good friend as you are, Lillie,” he said, “I can't dissociate you with the police. And every policeman I see about the hotel makes me shudder. I hope I have your promise to make nothing of this last affair of mine. It's a devil of a position for me, as you can see. It's bound to do me and the hotel a lot of harm—and it will until the murderer of that man Lightfoot—Netherwood, I mean—is cleared up. I can't understand the indifference of the police, and yet there's always one hanging about—and doing nothing. Surely they can see none of the gang are here now. And they're not likely to be, with so many officials about. Anders gone, and Netherwood, and now Jefferson—

that's all there could be. Mr. Sperring told me what happened last night. It looks as if I was wrong—about them not using the hotel, I mean.”

He touched his bandaged head and winced. “I wouldn't have gone to the police with this thing if it hadn't been for Mr. Sperring, you can gamble on that. The way Muldrew took it. I'm sorry now that I went. I'll be all right in a few days.”

“Sperring,” I said, “showed his good sense. These things can't be let pass, you know. Trust Muldrew to find out if the attack on you had any connection with the murder. He's got something up his sleeve.” In reality I was talking to convince myself more than Hammerton. “Some of these days he'll strike, and strike hard. That's his way.”

Hammerton's one eye brightened. “It's the first promising word I've heard since the murder.” He glanced about the office. “Has he given you any hint?” he whispered.

I told him Muldrew didn't tell even me all he knew; and I hoped Hammerton understood it only as modesty. “But I'm not depending on him—these policemen never tell anything they don't have to. But there's Sperring—he's bound to have an idea—and his guesses have been uncannily near the mark. I'm going to see him now.”

As I neared the door of Sperring's room I could hear the tapping of his typewriter, and when I knocked he called absent-mindedly to me to come in. For a moment or two he stared through me, then, coming to earth, threw his arms about me with boyish delight.

“I was praying for you,” he cried, thrusting the copy he was at in the table drawer. Pushing toward me the cigarettes, he struck a match for me. “I knew you'd come—I'm a great believer in prayer. After what happened to Hammerton you'd have to come, eh? Tiger,” soberly, “it has a funny look, a more than funny look. It adds a complication for which I was unprepared. . . . That is, if it has—as I believe it has—anything to do with the Netherwood murder. Of course, we have to face the fact that Hammerton is amorous—and that means exposure to risks a reasonable man hesitates to face. There's always the jealous lover to contend with, or the indignant relative. . . . But just now if there was an eclipse I'd know it had something to do with that murder.” He began to pace about the room. “And yet I can't, by any flight of imagination, see where Hammerton comes in. I wondered if it might be resentment at the help he gave the police. But, come to think of it, he gave mighty little help, and that only when Muldrew forced it.”

He pulled up before me. “What does Muldrew think of it?”

I told him Muldrew had given no evidence of thinking much of anything about it—just took it in the day’s work.

“That’s too bad,” Sperring lamented. “I’ve faith in Muldrew—more than I’ve let myself show. It was I made Hammerton take the story to him. . . . Tiger, I’ve a hunch that when we land on Hammerton’s assailant we’re not far from the murderer of Aaron Netherwood. And that’s the entire result of another sleepless night. I can see only one spot of light.”

I asked what it was.

“That Hammerton was to be got out of the way. Not killed, you understand, but incapacitated. Wait,” as I interrupted. “The fellow who attacked him had a gun. It was that he banged him with on the head. Now, if he had wished to kill him he could have shot. It’s not enough to say he feared the noise; in that part of the city a get-away would have been simple. No, he carried a gun only to defend himself should Hammerton prove tougher than the fellow thought.”

“It still tells me nothing,” I confessed.

“No? Suppose I’m right—that Hammerton was only to be disabled—what difference would that make—anywhere—to anyone? . . . I believe Muldrew would leap to the answer. It would leave the hotel with no active manager. See the point? No? Then—perhaps they see that Hammerton suspects they’ve been using the hotel, and they’re not prepared to give this place up as a meeting-place. . . . Or perhaps they wish the way clear to break into Room 322. They’ve tried other means. Hammerton is watching that room—I see it myself. The fact that Muldrew wishes to keep the murderer out of that room is enough to convince one that the murderer wishes to get in. Do I make myself clear?”

He stood before me, feet spread, talking with lips and head and hands and shoulders. I could only be surprised that he had struck so deeply into facts as I knew them.

“The one fact that rather discounts your theory, Conrad, is that the murderer did succeed somehow in getting into that room last night. We hadn’t told you that.”

Sperring stared at me. “But how—how could he get in? Muldrew has the keys himself. Did he smash the door? But he couldn’t have done that, because I’ve seen the door to-day.”

“I can’t even guess how he managed it,” I confessed.

“Does Muldrew know?”

I had to admit that I didn't know. “I don't understand Muldrew; he seemed so unconcerned about it. . . . But he said he wouldn't have missed knowing it for worlds.”

Sperring fairly danced. “He said that? . . . Ah—yes. You see what it means? Muldrew has arranged things so the murderer would fail in what he was after.”

“But what could the fellow want? Muldrew and I have been through the room again and again with a fine-toothed comb. Muldrew put a new lock on, of course, but that was merely official procedure—or a dab at more mystery. The police always seal the place where a crime occurs.”

But Sperring would not have it. “Because,” he explained whimsically, “if that's so, every theory of mine goes kiting. I couldn't bear that.”

Someone knocked on the door, and a moment later Muldrew was in the room. They faced each other, a sly smile about the lips of each. They were content to be friendly rivals waiting for a chance to take a fall out of each other.

Sperring bowed low. “So now, with three experts, the mystery is solved. We'll walk right out and pick up the murderer of Aaron Netherwood.”

“Don't hurry me, Sperring.” Muldrew sat down and threw his hat on the table. “Let's be sportsmen. Three against one? It isn't to be thought of. I like to give even a murderer a chance . . . to confess,” he added with a grin.

Sperring, after a wink at me, had taken another chair. “We were just talking about you, Mr. Muldrew. This Hammerton affair crowds him into the picture now. I sent him down to you because I didn't wish to take advantage of you.” He smiled. “Tiger and I have been poking about for an explanation that has an atom of reason. I have to confess we haven't been conspicuously successful. . . . And we've used considerable writer's license about it, too.”

“Reasonable or unreasonable, let's have it—or them,” Muldrew pleaded.

“Well, there were a thousand or two . . . and probably not one would escape your ridicule.”

Muldrew examined his watch. “I'm sorry I can't wait for them all now. And, besides, it seems to me I've accepted a lot and given nothing. Let me give, for a change. Of course, I have ideas of my own, and I believe you'd find them interesting. Then, perhaps, we can get our ideas working together and pick the wheat from the chaff. Tell you what we'd better do: let's get

together to-night somewhere and thresh this thing out. I'll give up the whole evening to it—if you can stand that. Something has to be done and done quickly."

Sperring and I were delighted, and we said so.

Muldrew had an idea. "Why not *all* get together? Say, that looks good to me. The more, the more promising. Never know what light word will put us on the track. What about meeting at the Netherwood place? May I use your telephone?"

He was sweeping us along too fast for us to follow, and before either of us could speak Muldrew was dialing a number. In his oiliest tones he said:

"Is that you, Mrs. Netherwood? . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Not yet, but we're not lying down on the job, trust us for that. By the way, may I bring some friends to your house to-night to talk things over? . . . Just three or four—Mr. Sperring and Mr. Lillie, for instance? They've been working with me on the case. . . . I knew you'd consent—so important to you. You may be able to help us. . . . Thanks, so very good of you. At seven forty-five? Thank you."

With a look of sly satisfaction he hung up. "If you can afford the time now, Tiger, there's a little job we can finish before night. Coming?"

Of course I was. Downstairs he stopped at the office long enough to tell Hammerton what we planned. As an afterthought he invited him to join us, and Hammerton accepted eagerly.

"If only we had Mona and Jerry to complete the thing!" I lamented, as we passed to the street.

Muldrew started when I spoke, as if he had forgotten me. "Ah—yes, Tiger, if we only had them! And now—now I want you to go to your room and lock yourself in and write. I want you to put down everything connected with the case that you remember. . . . I may have forgotten or neglected little clues. There have been so many, and so varied. Bring it to me at Mrs. Netherwood's at half-past seven. That'll give me time to glance over it before the others come. Don't forget a thing—nothing is too unimportant, But I want to impress on you one thing: don't talk to anyone, don't mention the case, don't get in communication with anyone. I want your mind clear for your own impressions only. Do you promise? All right, then to-night at half-past seven. And," he added with a chuckle, "if we don't clear this business up I'll resign and take to selling bonds."

CHAPTER XXXIX

AN UNEXPECTED AUDIENCE

I was knocking at Mrs. Netherwood's door a minute or two before half-past seven, and even then had loafed from the street-car in order not to arrive too early. I was in a fine state of excitement, anticipating an evening of surprising revelation—or depressing failure. I was concerned for Muldrew, and almost equally for Conrad Sperring. Though they both worked to the same end, I sensed something of the same rivalry between them as existed between Muldrew and me. Whatever happened, I knew the result would not make me unqualifiedly happy.

The attitude of Mrs. Netherwood as she let me in only added fuel to the fire that consumed me. No longer was she brusque and unfeeling; all the hardness and grimness connected in my memory with her every word and look had vanished. A tense excitement, equal to my own, burned in her eyes, in her trembling manner; the tight but uncertain line of her thin lips betrayed a suppressed uneasiness. And she would not look at me.

She led me, not to the studio where we had gone before, but direct to a rear room that, I saw at a glance, was the dining-room. And even before I noticed Muldrew I saw that the room had been partially cleared and rearranged for the gathering.

Muldrew sat behind a small table near the other end of the room, at his back the side-board with its top cleared, and beside it, partially concealed by Muldrew's big frame, some other piece of furniture shrouded in a dust-cover. I took it to be one of Netherwood's choice antiques, preserved against the ravages of every-day life. Half a dozen chairs were ranged somewhat formally about the walls, the line broken by a small table before one of them, on which were laid out pencils and a pad of cheap paper. To my right as I entered a low door led, I took it, to a cupboard beneath the stairs rising from the hall outside.

Mrs. Netherwood had not spoken a word, and now she closed the door behind me with the soundlessness of a conspirator, so that a tingle of alarm went through me and I looked curiously about the room.

Muldrew had lifted his face absent-mindedly. The table before him was covered with a cloth that lumped here and there with the outline of objects

beneath. Recognition showed in his eyes.

“Well, Tiger, this is fine. A few seconds early, aren’t you?”

“To the dot—now,” I said, turning my wrist-watch toward him. “Anyway, you’re here, and there’s a deuce of a lot for you to read. And I don’t believe I have it all down even now. It sure was a job.”

He continued to regard me, but the focus of his eyes was through me. It angered me.

“So like the opening of the third act!” I scoffed.

He laughed. “That’s commendation from an expert. Thanks. I’m hoping it *is* the third act. If the rest of our audience sees it that way. As a producer, I’m inexperienced. Can you suggest anything—any improvement?”

I threw on the table the bundle that was my story, fifteen typewritten foolscap pages, single spaced. I had, I thought, made a good job of it—and not a superfluous word. And in my best journalese. A carbon copy reposed at home in a drawer for later use in *The Star* when the time came. “You’ll have your hands full getting through all that before the others come. Fifteen minutes— —”

Muldrew had picked the bundle up casually, frowning at it as if he failed to understand. “Oh—ah—yes, your inventory. Good.” He thumbed the pages over. “Hm-m-m! . . . This is entirely from your own head, Tiger, no assistance?”

I told him I had done as he said—seen no one since morning, talked to no one; there wasn’t time, as a matter of fact. Even my meals I had snatched at a near-by lunch-counter to avoid the tumult of the boarding-house. “Twelve thousand words doesn’t leave much time for gossip, Gordy.”

He uttered another indifferent “Good!” and tossed the bundle on the side-board behind him. “The others,” he said, “will be here in a few minutes.”

I closed my teeth against the anger that surged within me. A whole day riveted to the task he had set me, seeing no one, snatching my meals, cudgelling my brain for everything that had the remotest bearing on the murder of Aaron Netherwood—and then to have it tossed aside as if it were the imposition of a ruthless teacher on a naughty pupil! “Five hundred words after school.”

Behind me in the hall I could hear Mrs. Netherwood creeping about, uneasy, mysterious. From upstairs I imagined the sound of low voices

reached me, and then Mrs. Netherwood ran up and I distinctly heard a low “Hush!” The whole affair began to get on my nerves. Either it was cheap melodrama or—— I went nearer to Muldrew and pointed to the shrouded object at his back.

“Is that part of the stage property, Gordy?” I asked.

He turned and stared at the bulky sheet. “It belongs to them——” Before he could say more the knocker sounded loudly outside and we forgot everything else. Muldrew pointed in suppressed excitement to the nearest chair.

“Sit there, Tiger—there!”

And in that deliberate arrangement I read further mystery.

The door opened, and Mrs. Netherwood ushered in Conrad Sperring. He entered with his usual friendly smile, but his round face shone with expectation and, as I had done, he stared curiously about the room. Mrs. Netherwood had retired as silently and suggestively as before.

“I know I’m a bit ahead of time,” Sperring said apologetically, “but I couldn’t wait any longer. It’s starting to rain, too.”

Muldrew had risen, his smiling welcome more cordial than I expected. I could see how much he counted on Sperring’s assistance, and it increased my respect for him that he made no attempt to conceal it.

“I’m glad you’re early,” he said. He pointed to the chair before which was set the small table, with pencils and paper. “You’d better take that chair, Sperring. I had it prepared for you. Later on the notes you make may be valuable. And might I ask that you make a pretty close record of things?”

Sperring responded with frank but flushing pride. Muldrew’s recognition was unexpected but welcome. Perhaps a trifle pompously he seated himself and looked the pencils over.

We talked in a desultory, jerky fashion, plainly filling in time, and anxious for the others to arrive. Muldrew was uneasy, for again and again he referred to his watch.

“Hammerton is late,” he muttered. “I’ll warrant he’s more prompt about his own business. I want to get started. I must go at eight-forty, and we’re going to be crowded for time, I’m afraid. Did you see Hammerton, Sperring?”

Sperring made a face. "Not I. Nor likely to. I've given the office notice that I'm leaving to-morrow. No, not the city; I'm not likely to do that till this case is cleared up. But I'm fed up with Hammerton's grouches about my typewriter. The Florence Hotel, in spite of its swell face, is not the place to hold me if I can't have a free hand with my work. . . . Hammerton and I don't click, that's all."

Muldrew was frankly surprised. "I don't have any great affection for him myself, but he seems such a lightweight—I wouldn't make him think he was important enough to drive me away. He's egotist enough now —"

The knocker—and Hammerton then. He rushed in, thrusting Mrs. Netherwood aside.

As he entered I rose involuntarily from my chair, staring at him. Inside me something seemed to snap with the suddenness of an electric shock. Hammerton had pulled up just inside the door, glaring from one to another of us with his single eye. Mrs. Netherwood stood behind him, facing Muldrew. She had not left the room this time; instead, she closed the door behind her and waited.

"Sorry—awfully sorry if I'm late," Hammerton stammered. "Damned nuisance, too, getting here at all—just at our busiest hour. I never was more needed at the hotel—I told you, Mr. Muldrew, there'd be trouble." He flopped into the chair Muldrew indicated, and leaned forward on his knees, sullen and resentful.

"What sort of trouble now?" Muldrew inquired.

"I warned you about those fellows in 308. They've skipped out!"

Muldrew looked puzzled. "I don't see what I could have done about it. You made no charge —"

"I told you there was something crooked there," Hammerton broke in angrily. "They had something to conceal in that room—that's why they wouldn't let anyone in. Say, can't we get started? I've got to get back to the hotel."

Mrs. Netherwood had come softly to the chair beside me and seated herself, prim and silent, her hands gripped in her lap, lips compressed. Outside in the hall there was a furtive rustle of movement, then the door opened sharply and Mona Netherwood and Jerry Inkerley walked in!

CHAPTER XL

THE FOURTH DAGGER!

I stared. Sperring stared. Even Hammerton, though only remotely interested, and knowing next to nothing about their disappearance, noticed our surprise, and looked startled and expectant. Mrs. Netherwood and Muldrew simply sat and looked about. Mrs. Netherwood was holding herself, against what I could not guess. Muldrew was completely calm, even smiling.

Sperring was first to recover. Springing to his feet, he rushed to Jerry and seized his hand.

“By Jove, Inkerley, it’s good to see you—you and Miss Netherwood. And,” with an apologetic grin, “I don’t care a hoot if it knocks over another silly theory of mine. I was distressed about you—and I guess I tried to ease my distress by imagining absurd things about you both. I even had you both murdered at the last.”

Jerry surprised me; he was not only not grateful, but even, I thought, surly at such a welcome. But I was ready to forgive him when I remembered his foolish jealousy, and the uncomfortable experiences he and Mona must have been through during the past couple of days.

Sperring turned to me with his deprecatory smile. “Tiger, forget all my postulates and deductions. I’ve been a fool. From this moment I start all over again. Sorry, Muldrew, but it doesn’t look as if I’m going to be much use to-night—after this. It never did need much to make an ass of me. I’m only a writer-man. Inkerley, I publicly apologize. . . . But this ought to clear the way for a sound and reasonable discussion. Go on, Muldrew, get started and cover my shame.”

He bowed stiffly to Mona—he had not mistaken the origin of Jerry’s surly manner—and returned to his chair behind the table, fussily arranging pad and pencils.

Hammerton looked bewildered and uncomfortable, and not a little anxious at being out of things. Once I caught him eyeing Sperring in a troubled way. Jerry and Mona had taken chairs across the room from Mrs. Netherwood and me. Sperring and Hammerton sat at the end, one on each

side of the door leading to the cupboard under the stairs. The two newcomers had not spoken a word. A tense stillness filled the room.

Muldrew cleared his throat. He smiled at Sperring.

“My little surprise, Sperring. At any rate, I’ve interested you—even if my theories, like some of yours, fall to the ground. Let me say, however, that, from what evidence I have, you’ve never been far astray—certainly not so far as your modesty claims. Miss Netherwood and Inkerley are simply explained. Last night they turned up at Inspector Armitage’s. They were waiting for me when I came from the counterfeiters’ head-quarters. They offered me a chance to add punch to our little gathering this evening. I was in debt to you all for co-operating with me. My one regret is that they have so little to tell.”

Mrs. Netherwood’s eyes had never left Mona since she entered the room. Such love, such devotion were there that I wondered if the impression I had of her was not my own fault—seeing her the first time through the cloud of a terrible crime. Jerry, I could see, was maudlin over the girl—he seemed unconscious of anyone else. I sighed. My infatuation was over. I was not unaccustomed to the sudden fading of love’s young dream; in fact, I had learned the wisdom of the fading, as much as the thrill of the dream. My surrender now was hastened by the promise of a less irascible city editor—for Mona would soon tame him.

Muldrew was speaking:

“I brought you here for a purpose more definite—perhaps I should say a hope more definite—than I probably showed. I feel quite certain that from the patchwork of clues and information in our possession we may produce a solution of the mystery surrounding the murder of Aaron Netherwood. First of all, let’s forget the counterfeiters and concentrate on the greater crime. Let’s even forget our suspicion—our conviction—that the counterfeiters had anything to do with the murder.”

He examined his watch. His opening words had drawn my attention from Jerry and Mona; now I returned to Hammerton, my brain tumbling dizzily. For some time I had tried to catch Muldrew’s eye, but he refused to look at me, until I began to think it deliberate. And all the time all I craved was help. I began to think that the strain of the long day had unsettled my wits.

“I promised,” Muldrew continued, “to give as well as take, in other words, to give you my own theories. . . . Of course, we know Netherwood was connected in some way with the counterfeiters. We can take Jefferson’s

word for that, as well as what that connection was. How he became associated with them we have no way of knowing, but a mysterious visitor frequently came to this house after night to see him, a visitor Netherwood was anxious to hide even from his family. This visitor must have been one of the gang, probably the leader himself, and in time he prevailed on Netherwood to undertake the drawings for the plates they required. My opinion is that Netherwood resisted the lure for a long time, and then it got him; that when at last he yielded he left home and settled at the Florence Hotel. Criminal as he turned out to be, he was unwilling to involve his family in his crime. I am satisfied that he kept in that cabinet in his bathroom the tools of his new task.”

“I thought,” Sperring murmured, “you were eliminating the counterfeiters for the time being and concentrating on the murder.”

Muldrew moved uncomfortably. “Yes—yes. But these thoughts were in my mind—they provide a foundation for what happened.”

“How,” I asked, “was that cabinet emptied before we reached the room?”

Muldrew smiled. “The murderer did it—before he left the room.”

“He hadn’t time. We haven’t yet worked out how he had time even to escape, let alone clean out the room.”

“It’s that point,” Muldrew declared, “we’ve come here to discuss . . . perhaps the main point. We’ll leave it for the time being for something simpler. Let me unfold my fancies. The reason for Netherwood’s murder may be explained in several ways. Sperring has suggested some of them. If we discredit Jefferson’s story, then we may blame the murder on him. He was an acknowledged hi-jacker, a thief from thieves, the most dangerous task in the world, the rashest. Jefferson we know to have been without fear and with few qualms. He may have murdered Netherwood to get possession of the plates, or Netherwood may have been custodian of the false notes—though I can’t believe that. . . . The fact is, I don’t bother about that course of reasoning—I believe Jefferson spoke the truth.”

Sperring said: “Isn’t it possible Jefferson himself was one of a gang?”

“You mean of another gang, a rival one? Of course, that may be so—except that hi-jacking is in essence a one-man game, and Jefferson was essentially a one-man operator. We have had no evidence of a confederate.”

“There are the Darlings,” I suggested. “Don’t forget them.”

Muldrew said he was not forgetting them.

“I still think,” Sperring insisted, “that Netherwood was killed by one of his own gang.”

“I was coming to that,” Muldrew said. “He may have threatened to give up the work. I’m convinced that his wife and daughter were much more to him than they thought—there’s that soiled photograph to prove it. Nothing is more likely than that his conscience regained control. He was a sensitive man, at heart a family man, I believe. If he dropped out, where might his conscience lead him? Possibly to exposure of the whole affair—or even probably.”

He stopped once more to consult his watch. His interest in the watch fascinated me as it bewildered me.

Sperring put in: “There’s another possibility. Having the plates, the gang had no further use for Netherwood, and murdered him to get rid of a danger—and of one with whom they had to share profits. They’d be utterly ruthless, that gang.”

Muldrew was interested. “I’m glad you thought of that. I’ve had it in mind. At any rate, we can accept it that Aaron Netherwood was murdered by one of the counterfeiters’ gang, of which he himself was a member.”

“It’s plain enough who did it,” I urged. “It was Anders. He had the next room. Only he could get out of 322 and into his own room without being seen.”

“But,” Sperring puzzled, “he himself was murdered later. And don’t forget that awful cackle in the darkness. That wasn’t Anders.”

“Anders was murdered by the leader, of course,” I said. “I can vouch for that. But the leader was neither Anders nor Jefferson, and no one else could have escaped from 322.”

“One other thing we know,” Muldrew continued, “that the Florence Hotel was one of their head-quarters—”

“You can’t prove that,” Hammerton protested. “That’s only guessing. Besides, what if it was?”

“That’s so,” Sperring agreed. “It really doesn’t concern the hotel. Isn’t it possible Jefferson, too, was a member of the gang, murdered, like the others, by the leader—this man of the awful laugh—to get all the money in his own hands and wipe out any possibility of exposure? Jefferson may have had ambitions to become leader—or to get control of the money.”

Hammerton was listening eagerly, his hands caught between his knees. "That sounds most reasonable to me." Anything that drew the discussion from his beloved hotel he was prepared to support.

"To me, too," Muldrew admitted, but he looked none too happy about it.

Sperring made a grimace. "But where does that land us?"

"It tightens the mystery," Muldrew declared, "to a single angle."

For a time no one spoke. We were absorbed in the various theories advanced, and struggling for new ones of our own, I suppose. I know I was. It seemed to me that I had contributed little of value. Sperring bit savagely at a pencil.

"I'm still hazy, Muldrew, about parts of that first night in the factory. You followed someone. Was it— — But Anders was ahead. Have you no idea who it was?"

Muldrew explained that it was Jefferson, but the information failed to clear the haze for Sperring.

"It certainly proves he was not in the gang—at that time," he said. . . . "Anders must have known he was being followed."

"Of course. And I knew he knew. It was my one hope of finding out things. I've taken that chance before. What they wished, of course, was the key to Room 322. I guessed it in time to throw away the one I carried. The other was in my desk at the office."

Sperring's admiration showed in his face. "Clever, that." He turned to Jerry. "Couldn't we get your story, Inkerley? Muldrew has it already, of course. We're at a disadvantage. I can only guess—and I may guess wrong."

It was Muldrew replied. "What they can tell won't help. Their experience was unpleasant but unenlightening. At least, it doesn't tell me anything of value. By a carefully-laid plot they were inveigled away— —"

"Exactly what happened to me," Hammerton exclaimed.

Strangely enough none of us seemed to have thought of the coincidence.

"Inkerley's car," Muldrew went on, "was waylaid and the two were taken captive and held in that factory where later the gang took Tiger and me. It was Miss Netherwood we heard screaming while we were helpless. . . . That's all. They never saw anyone without a mask."

Sperring groaned. "Are we never to get behind this cloud?"

Muldrew was speaking again. “Somehow Jefferson escaped. He was thrown off the bridge, apparently helpless, but he managed to get away and find his way back to the factory last night. It was he released the pair—Miss Netherwood and Inkerley. I don’t think it was all pity for them—or for me when he released me—but the satisfaction of getting ahead of the gang he was trying to hi-jack. Inkerley thinks he did recognize Anders, but he isn’t sure—and it doesn’t matter now.”

“So all we get from them,” Sperring sighed, “is a character for a hijacker who failed before he died to throw much light on anything! But why were they captured at all? I can’t see what they — —”

“My impression is that the murderer wished to lead the police up a blind lane, to throw suspicion on them until he could get clear away with the money. And he killed Anders for the same reason that he killed Netherwood—or because he suspected him of releasing Miss Netherwood and Inkerley. But to return to the murder.” Again he looked at his watch, and an eager whisper went around the room.

Sperring shuffled his papers, placing one carefully before him, ready for notes. “May I ask a few questions? How was the murder committed?”

“With the dagger we found on the table, of course.”

It seemed unworthy of Muldrew, but Sperring concealed his scorn. “Yes, of course, but — —”

With a swift movement Muldrew swept from the table the white cover. Three daggers lay there, the three that had figured so intimately in the case. For several moments we stared.

Sperring raised himself slightly to see. “Ah, yes. I wish someone would explain those daggers to me.”

“As you know,” Muldrew said, “Mrs. Netherwood sent them at her husband’s request. It was the part of his collection he regretted leaving behind. He had made a fad of old knives and daggers. . . . And, who knows, perhaps he saw in them some protection against the dangers to which his work exposed him. There never could have been any real friendliness between the gang and a man like Netherwood.”

Sperring was satisfied. “But how was the murder committed so the murderer could clear out the room in time to escape?”

Muldrew appeared not to hear. He lifted the Japanese dagger with the carved ivory handle. The ugly stain of Aaron Netherwood’s life-blood was

on it. “You’ve all seen this. This one,” taking up the stiletto, “was almost the end of one of the policemen—Jameson.”

“The policeman who slept on the couch when he was set to guard that room?” Sperring asked. “I *said* the murderer must be anxious to get in there again. Something he wanted—a clue to destroy.”

“Of course.” Muldrew laid the stiletto down. “A clue to destroy. The open window, for instance—he may have thought we failed to notice that.”

But Sperring shook his head. “There’s more to it than that.”

Muldrew took up the dagger with the deer’s-foot handle. “This one did for Jefferson.” He threw a furtive glance at his watch. “There’s another dagger—the fourth. Mrs. Netherwood sent four to her husband at the hotel. The fourth. . . . We’ll find it—on the murderer of Aaron Netherwood!”

A touch of drama, I thought, and little else. We regarded one another questioningly, and I fancied Sperring tried to hide a smile.

“And when you find it,” he said, “it may be to the accompaniment of that awful laugh.”

“I hope to God not!” I cried, remembering that it was always a triumphant laugh. “I’m still all at sea about what was done in that room after Mr. Netherwood’s murder—the dagger laid neatly on the table, the hands folded across his chest— —”

“A murderer with a sense of decency,” Muldrew reflected. . . . “A murderer who knew he had lots of time. . . . Lots of time,” he repeated. “Not only did he rifle the cabinet and the desk, but he even went through the dead man’s pockets. It was all carefully arranged. . . . What the murderer could not arrange was the condition of the blood. One can’t prevent blood coagulating in time. There was unmistakable coagulation, proving that the murder had not been committed less than half an hour before we found the body.”

“But, Gordy,” I protested, “we heard the cries!”

“Certainly . . . the cries. . . . And therein another proof of the carelessness of the most cunning murderer. Netherwood’s lips plainly showed they had been held too tightly for him to cry out. Yet we heard him!” Again that look at his watch. “You wonder?”

He turned and thrust a hand through a slit in the cloth that covered the mysterious object behind him. There was a click—a dull thud—a droning. Then swiftly—a shriek:

“Help! Help! He’s killing me! Oh-h-h, my Go-od!”

I gripped the arms of my chair, dizzy to faintness. The two women had leaped to their feet and stood with clasped hands and bulging eyes, their faces white and drawn. Incredulous, horrified, Jerry Inkerley stared at Mona Netherwood. Hammerton too had risen and backed into a corner.

Muldrew swept the cover off and revealed the radio that had stood in Netherwood’s room, the radio in which Muldrew had been so interested.

On Sperring the effect was startling. As the cry rang out he surged forward, and as the radio came into view he made a quick movement with his right hand.

We were all so intent on the scene before us that we failed to notice that the door of the cupboard beneath the stairs had opened. As Sperring moved someone leaped on him from behind, and a pair of powerful arms held him helpless.

I had turned at the sound. Sperring’s captor was one of the men from Room 308, one of the men who had roused Hammerton’s suspicions!

Hammerton too recognized them, for with an oath he dashed for the door. But a second man sprang from the cupboard and tripped him up, falling on him and pinioning him. Hammerton—the smallish man with the protruding chin, who had carried the torch that night in the room where Jefferson fought so hopelessly!

I stared at Muldrew. He stood behind the table, gun in hand, a stiff smile on his face. Coming out now, he caught Sperring’s hand and wrenched from it—a jack-knife dagger that worked with a spring! One edge of the blade was saw-toothed!

He held it up. “The fourth dagger!” he announced.

CHAPTER XLI

DISCLOSURE

I blinked. Muldrew turned to me with an indulgent smile. Then, running his hands over Sperring's pockets, he produced my reporter's badge and handed it to me.

"The case is over," he said.

To me it was something worse than a nightmare. Sperring, my author friend, famous almost the world over for his detective stories, a murderer, a double murderer, the maniac of the awful laugh . . . leader of a gang of counterfeiters—fiend incarnate! To the others it meant little but the end of the mystery. Mona was in Jerry's arms, and Mrs. Netherwood looked on hungrily, biting her lip.

Sperring had ceased to resist. He was smiling.

"You laugh last, Muldrew. I underestimated you." He turned those bland eyes on me. "I'm sorry, Tiger; I had grown to like you. But you won't forget me—you won't forget. And try to remember that I could have killed you, as I did the others. It was I released you the night we held you in the factory. I let you off last night in the same place when I might have shot you—or used the fourth dagger. I was keeping it for Muldrew if he came too close. That's all. I pass from the picture."

Hammerton struggled madly. "Yes, you brute. It was you waylaid me last night—you thought to get rid of me as you did the rest of the gang. I'll tell all I know."

Sperring's lip curled. "You would." He turned to Muldrew. "He never was a gangster—never had the guts. The worst you can do to him is ten years or so—and he hasn't earned it. Oh, what a plot! What a plot for a story! Should I laugh once more for you?" He grinned in our faces.

The handcuffs were on both and Muldrew waved them away. The rest of us sat numbed in our chairs, the first spasm over. Muldrew sank back, wiping his face. He sighed.

"Not all bad—he isn't all bad, Sperring isn't," he said. . . . "That's the sad part of my job—there are no gradations to murder. Sperring will pay the

penalty, the utmost penalty.”

I reached out to him an appealing hand. “What’s the story, Gordy? I’m dazed.”

“Sperring,” he said, “is not Conrad Sperring, the author. Several things about him, the first time we met, made me suspicious, and I wired a magazine. Conrad Sperring, I was told, is in Europe—has been there for a month. After that it was easy. . . . Where Sperring—I’ll continue to call him that—where he failed was in detail—mostly detail over which he had no control. The blood gave the thing away, but it took me a long time to reconcile its condition with the time that had elapsed since we heard those cries. It was the open window convinced me first that everything was planned. Netherwood’s cries were intended to be heard. Why? Why but to mislead? Take that in conjunction with the coagulated blood and I reasoned that it must be to mislead in the time the murder was committed. But how was that possible?

“At first I clung to the belief that it was not Netherwood we heard. But Miss Netherwood’s complete assurance blocked that line. There’s the explanation.” He pointed to the radio. “It’s very simple. They were his cries, all right, but they came by electrical transcription, which is nothing but a record broadcast from some station. By the number to which the dial was turned I knew the name of the station, and I discovered that it had been broadcasting at the very hour of Netherwood’s death one of a series of crime stories. Of course, it was easy then to trace back to Netherwood the part of one actor in these stories. So that it was really his voice we heard, but only by electrical transcription, that is, ground from a record at a broadcast station. I arranged with a local station to secure that record, and to put the same cries on the wire at a designated moment to-night. Sperring, you see, knew of those records, and took advantage of this one to murder Netherwood not long before it was to be broadcast, so that he could be far from the scene of the murder, a perfect alibi, when the cries for help seemed to place the crime at a time later than it really occurred.

“But,” I queried, “how could that be done? He was in his room on the floor above when the cries came over the air. And they came from the machine in Netherwood’s room, yet when we entered immediately afterwards we found the machine disconnected, the wires cut.”

Muldrew smiled. “That was the cunning of it. It was also one of the clues he could not destroy. Here is how it was done—with Sperring safe on the floor above after the murder: the electrical connection that manipulated

the machine was not the socket in the baseboard in Netherwood's room. Sperring had cut the connection there and tacked the socket end of the wire to the machine so that it would not be noticed. The end of the wire working the radio was lightly spliced to another wire that ran along the baseboard of Netherwood's room into his bathroom and from there up through the ceiling beside the water pipes to Sperring's bathroom on the floor above. That was the real energy connection.

"Just before the broadcast hour Sperring went to Netherwood's room, murdered him, made the connection, cleaned away every bit of evidence of the counterfeiting, and, raising the window so that Netherwood's cries would be heard on the street, retired to his own room and turned on the radio at the proper time by screwing it into his own light socket. That we were in the street, and Miss Netherwood in the hall, at the time of the cries played into his hands better than he had hoped.

"The cries for help over, all Sperring had to do was to drag loose from his bathroom the light connection he had made downstairs with the radio wire. Next instant he was leaning from his window in full view of the street, the perfect alibi. You may remember that the first time I called on Sperring in his room—you were there at the time, Tiger—I made an excuse to get into his bathroom, and there I saw a small hole drilled down through the floor against a water pipe. Through that the wire had come."

"But we saw someone in the room last night, Gordy. How did he manage it?"

"That was Sperring. He climbed down the electric sign from his own room. You may recall we noticed the flashing was more rapid. Hammerton had arranged that to make it more blinding from the street. There was small chance of Sperring being seen, and if he was he would be taken for an electrician making repairs. Some of the bulbs were dead. . . . Hammerton was helping Sperring, thinking Sperring was anxious to get in to destroy evidence against the gang, not because he knew who had murdered Netherwood. That murder was Sperring's private game to corner the profit of the counterfeiting, and to remove the risk of terrified or disloyal comrades. What he was really after in the room was to reconnect the radio to the socket in the wall and to turn the dial from a revealing number. . . . Anders, Netherwood, Hammerton, and, I believe, the Darlings, as well as a few less important ones who have escaped us, were members of the gang."

"But how did you come to suspect Sperring, Gordy?" I asked.

“I noticed how he edged about the room, always working toward the radio. I was interested even before that because he alone, of all those lighted windows in the front of the hotel, lifted his window at the cries. The alibi was too obvious. Then, it was Sperring short-circuited the wires. When we found those raw ends I understood. You remember he dropped his pencil just before the lights went out. When he stooped to pick it up he touched the two raw ends together. Of course, it blew the fuse instantly.

“All the time he tried through you, Tiger, to keep in touch with what I was doing, what I knew or suspected. That was why I kept some things from you, but gave you a free hand with the rest—enough to deceive you. In fact, all I did conceal was the impersonation.”

“It was Hammerton,” I said, “I saw enter the hotel last night, and thought the police would be able to arrest. What a fool I’ve been! And Sperring, with a guilty conscience, thought it might be he I was after. Hammerton telephoned him a warning from the office when Flavelle and I were waiting to go through the rooms, and Sperring waylaid me, as arranged, in the linen-room and got my badge.”

“That first night you followed me, Tiger,” Muldrew said, “I was on my way to the hotel. We had had it under observation for some time, since we had traced many of the counterfeit bills there. We purposely hid our suspicions. I must say Sperring and Hammerton have managed everything with a skill that, but for accident, might have defeated us. They even went so far as to seem to dislike each other.”

“But why,” Mrs. Netherwood inquired, “did they kill Aaron?”

“Because, I’m firmly convinced, he was insisting on his share of the profits. That’s why he could send you nothing before.”

There was still much to clear up; I knew parts of it would bother me for weeks. “But Sperring—he showed up at the factory last night only a few minutes after he got away in that vat of water?”

“I noticed that—a different suit of clothes from what he wore when he left us to go to the Silver Platter. He must have had a change somewhere near the factory. You remember how wet his hair was—you thought it perspiration. Even under pressure he was so clever that there were times when he almost convinced me. Oh, about those men in 308. I had them take that room, and in the night they moved the radio in there from 322. Then early this morning they let it down from the window and it was brought here. Is it all clear now?” he asked.

“Clear as mud,” I growled. “The only thing clear about it is that I’m going to have to ask for a rise to get a wedding present for Jerry. And the bigger the rise, the better the present.”

I grinned at Jerry, and, by Jove, he grinned back!

TORONTO,
CANADA.

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.

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[The end of *The Fourth Dagger* by Luke Allan]