



DESIGN FOR MURDER

Percival Wilde

1887-1953

RANDOM HOUSE • NEW YORK
1941

Contents

1: I, Priscilla Evans	5
2: I, Bert Carter	35
3: I, Kathleen Logan	63
4: I, Terry Morrison	92
Epilogue	110

HERE, then, are the "Overlook" papers.

They no longer exist.

They have been ashes these many months: they have returned to the nothingness from which they came.

But, as the astute reader will observe, I have resurrected them, allowing them to be read over my shoulder, as it were, and at the same time I have edited them, substituting for the real names of the individuals involved, who had more publicity than they desired for the doings here chronicled, other names; and for that liberty I apologize to sundry Ashtons, Carters, Densmores, Evanses, Logans, and Morrisons, none of whom I had in mind, but whose cognomena I borrowed because they are borne by so many worthy people.

Various angles in the oddly told tale which follows have intrigued me. Not a single person, of the ten who matter most, is described well enough to permit a positive identification to be made. Two, according to the narratives, are of less, and one appears to be of more than average height; but such indispensable details as the color of hair and eyes, the regularity or irregularity of features, and the peculiarities which distinguish one physiognomy from another are not even mentioned. On the contrary, we are told at the outset, "We are all alike as peas in a pod."

Yet the statement, it seems to me, is speedily disproved. We should not recognize the host, Carter, for instance, if we met him in the street; but we know the man, for when he thinks, when he speaks, and above all, when he writes, he describes himself in no uncertain terms. A thousand words set on paper may be intended to deal with another subject, but inevitably they reflect the mental stature, the thought processes, the personality of the man who wrote them. These ten persons were old friends: therefore their exteriors did not matter: therefore they wasted no time in discussing them. But consciously or unconsciously they depicted themselves and each other from the inside outward, painting psychological portraits, which, if rarely flattering, are nevertheless more revealing than would be the most accurate external likenesses. It is a curious fact that the more exact a description, the less it tells us: a string of numbers and letters identifies a fingerprint so completely that the person whose sign manual it is can infallibly be singled out of a million: yet the owner of that finger may be a man or a woman, an adult or a child, even alive or dead. How much more revealing is the process which lays thought upon thought, reaction upon reaction, and which builds characters that actually live!

In a previous venture, Inquest, I encountered persons who came from various social levels. A clear majority of them could not speak sound grammatical English, expressing themselves in rural dialects; yet from the

interplay of those diverse men and women action was born, and carried itself through to a conclusion.

Here the approach is psychological. We deal with a single stratum. It is obvious that the ten persons we first meet have had every so-called advantage that money, background, and education can give them. While they are willing, some of them, to commit crime, they are unwilling to split infinitives, and it is with some amusement that I note how critical they are of the quality of their own writing. They begin, habitually, with the statement, "Of course I don't know how to write," and they immediately disprove it. That, it seems to me, makes their psychologies even clearer. They are never naïve. Except when deeply moved, they are not un-self-conscious. They are thinking, nearly always, of the impressions they are making, and in so doing they characterize both themselves and their friends. We never learn, therefore, whether Cynthia and Sue and Mary and Priss and Kathleen are blonde or brunette; but it could be only a careless reader who would confuse one with another. I like to think that we learn to know them as we know characters in stage plays: externally they vary as do the actors who take the parts: internally they remain true to the basic laws of their beings.

I have noted, with some interest, the jittery, schoolgirlish, almost disarming beginning, and how quickly it mounts to a pitch of growing terror. For me it greatly increases the power of the narrative, for it is incongruous that such an introduction should lead to slaying, and death, and horror. The more incongruous it is, the more paralyzing is the dramatic effect. Precisely as the friction of characters leads to clash and conflict, so here the friction of psychologies leads to the most violent action, for after all, character is psychology, and psychology is character.

Sharon, Connecticut.

Miami Beach, Florida.

1

I, Priscilla Evans

I, PRISCILLA EVANS, am telling this story. When Jim Halsey had The Idea, and Cynthia Carter said that we ought to have a historian, Pete Logan said that there wasn't one of us that couldn't write up what happened— or was going to happen— better than the average mystery-story writer; so we didn't put any particular marble in the bag for him— or for her— if that's clear, which I'm afraid it isn't.

Pete said, "Any one of us could write it. I've had stories rejected by three regular magazines, and Priss had any number of pieces published by her college literary paper, and I don't know which is worse. And Hilary once got into trouble by writing too many letters to a girl he had no intention of marrying—"

"It cost me ten thousand," Hilary Densmore said.

"—and was cheap at that," said Pete. "I saw the girl."

"Come, come," said Hilary, "she wasn't as bad as that. Of course the detectives didn't find out until it was too late that she had at least one husband living, and couldn't have married me even if I had been willing to go through with it; but sometimes I get positively homesick for her. Snappy black eyes; snappy figure; snappy dresser—"

"—and a snappy lawyer, who made you look like a cold, calculating villain when he put you on the witness-stand and had you identify the letters you'd sent her. We are not interested, Hilary, in learning how you discovered the facts of life. We know you can write. At any rate, somebody made a lot of money out of your writing, which is more than can be said for the rest of us."

"Don't forget Terry," I said.

"My apologies, Terry," said Pete. "Do you hanker for the job? No, I didn't think you did. If not, who else admits he can write?"

"I had a book published once," said Bert Carter.

"A real book?" said Kathleen Logan.

"The Cruise of the '*Sea Spray*': that's the name of my yacht."

"Of course!" said Kathleen. "We've all been aboard her often enough."

"I read the book," said Hilary Densmore.

"Hilary," said Bert, "you are a scholar and a gentleman."

"You gave it to me," said Hilary.

"Ouch!" said Bert.

"—and I thought it was beautifully bound."

"Touché!" said Sue Halsey.

"It sounds like 'Information, Please,' " said Mary Ashton, who got a Phi Beta Kappa key at the end of her junior year, got married and divorced during the summer vacation, and went back to college to graduate at the head of her class. "Yes, Mr. Fadiman, I know who Touché was: he was prefect of police under Napoleon."

"You lose twenty-five dollars and a set of the Encyclopedia Britannica—"

"The name is frequently confused," Mary went on, "with that of a chawming little watering place on Lac Léman, where schoolgirls invariably go when they elope from schools in Lausanne."

"Will you shut up, Mary?" Pete said. "We all know that you're so bright that you don't need headlights after dark, and that you know the difference between 'touché,' 'Fouché,' and 'Ouchy' better than ordinary morons whose educations stopped with a couple of degrees. Now, there are ten of us here. Is there anybody who admits he can't write? If so, will he—"

"Or she—"

"—kindly hold up his hand?"

Terry Morrison's hand went up timidly.

Pete exploded. "You, Terry? But you're an author!"

"No, I'm not."

"Publishers pay you money for your books!"

Bert Carter cut in. "When my book was published, I had to pay the publisher to print it."

"That's no news to us," said Pete. "But Terry's the real thing. He's written stacks of novels. Once he wrote a best-seller—"

"That's why I'm sure I can't write," said Terry plaintively.

But this is getting terribly confused, and perhaps I'd better go back to the beginning again, if you'll just remember that we didn't put any particular marble in the bag for the historian, or the recording angel, as Mary Ashton called him. Pete said, "We can all write— well enough— so anybody who feels the urge can go to it."

"I have just elected myself," said Kathleen Logan.

"Do I hear unanimous consent?" said Hilary.

"You don't!" I said.

"Not by a long shot," said Bert Carter. "Here I've got a chance to write something that's going to be read. Do you think I'll pass it up?"

"Cacoethes something or other," said Mary Ashton. I mean I didn't understand the second word, and I intended to ask her what it was and how to spell it, but I forgot. Not to say that I understood the first, either.

"We haven't heard a word from Jim yet," Cynthia Carter said. "After all, Jim had The Idea."

Jim Halsey is tall and good looking. He's a slow thinker, but he's an accurate thinker. Perhaps that's why he's the only one of us who made his pile for himself, instead of inheriting it, or marrying it, like the rest. "It's easy enough to start something," said Jim slowly, "but it takes real guts to finish it. It's my guess that most of us will get writer's cramp somewhere on page three—"

"Exactly," said Sue Halsey, who always agrees with him on everything.

"—and the rest will tear up what they have written before they reach page five. I'm not going to write—"

"Nor I," said Sue.

"Why not?" said Kathleen Logan.

"Who knows?" said Jim. "I may draw the black marble—"

"—or the red one."

"And it wouldn't be fair to ask either of them to be literary."

"We won't settle it now," said Mary Ashton.

"Go as you please—"

"Free for all, and the devil take the hindermost," said Hilary.

So that's why we didn't put any green marble in the bag.

I'M STUCK.

Not on page three, as Jim Halsey predicted, but on page four.

Page three page four page three page four page three page four now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of a lady in distress.

I don't know how to begin.

I've tried to remember how Van Dine begins his stories, and it doesn't help; and Agatha Christie always starts by describing a funny little Frenchman who turns out to be Hercule Poirot, and that won't do any good; and once I read a mystery-story by Percival Wilde which began with a preface disguised as a regular chapter, after which he just went on. But he had made me so angry, I mean, making me read a preface by giving it a blood-curdling title, that after I had finished the book, I went right back to the beginning and read it through again, skipping the preface, which I would have done in the first place if he had been decent and had called it a preface to begin with.

I've read over what I've just written.

I can't help it if I've used the word "preface" four times—this makes five—and "begin—began—beginning" five times—this makes eight. I could find a thesaurus in the library—Bert's got a real library, full of books, because a

library without books looks undressed and chilly—and I could find "preface," "introduction," "foreword," "prologue," "prelude," and "hors d'oeuvres" as well as a lot of others; but when I want to use a word, I use it; and if I mean the same thing again, I repeat the word, because it means just what it did the first time, and not even English B, which I ought to have flunked but didn't, taught me to get away from that. If Ernest Hemingway wants to repeat a word, he does it; and if he does it, it ought to be all right.

So I'm going to repeat all I want.

And be literary.

Like Ernest Hemingway.

The importance of being Ernest.

Ernest or Earnest.

And I'm stuck.

Stuck.

Stuck!

Again.

Or yet.

I couldn't possibly begin by telling you about "Overlook." If you read the Sunday magazine sections, you'll know it's Bert and Cynthia Carter's shanty on the Housatonic River; forty rooms, real gold lay-plates; a swimming pool because the river is sometimes colder than 68°; a pipe organ; acres of Persian rugs; bathtubs in all the colors of the rainbow, and indoor tennis court.

It's homey: like the Place de la Concorde.

Or the Parthenon.

All it needs is an oyster bar.

And an information booth in the center.

There's room for them.

You probably know more about it than I do, though I've been here before, and I'm going to sleep here tonight—if I don't drop a shoe while undressing and the echo doesn't wake me up by returning from the wall of my bedroom half an hour later.

Or if I don't get lost in the hallways.

I've told Bert he ought to publish a guidebook and tell the guests the names of the avenues on which they live.

Because there have been unfortunate accidents.

Oh, you know!

Like the night that—well, I won't mention names—tapped at a door at three o'clock in the morning, and it was opened very gently, and it was the wrong door—and the girl in the room kept him there practically the whole week-end.

How do I know?

Well, I know he was expected to rap at somebody else's door.

No, not mine!

As a matter of fact, I was in Newport when it happened.

Or at Bar Harbor.

It doesn't matter where I was, so long as it was somewhere else. I mean I have an alibi, though I don't remember which.

Any alibi is a good one in a storm.

Who started the subject, anyhow?

It slipped in.

Now it's going to slip out.

That's the nice thing about writing; if you get into a jam, you forget it and go on to the next.

But I've told you about "Overlook"—if you're so uninformed that you never heard of it.

Once I asked Terry Morrison how to write, and he said it was a question of paper, typewriter, and patience. If one of the three didn't give out, that made you an author.

Well, there's lots of paper; and I can work a typewriter because Father made me take a secretarial course right after the market took one of its nosedives, even though he was a bear, and the newspapers said he made a killing out of it; and it was a toss-up whether I was to be named "Priscilla" or "Patience," so I guess I've got all three, and I'm off.

I mean I'm going to begin.

Having given you an accurate description of this shack, which is the humble abode of Herbert Pompton Carter (railroads) and his spouse, Cynthia Carter (née Wheaton, railroad-supplies—how natural they should marry!—though she married Bill Laird first, and Bert married Nancy Upshaw, and they didn't get around to marrying each other until they had both been to Reno—and then the railroads took that slump, and stopped buying railroad-supplies—and Cynthia says she's going back to Reno if they don't buy something pretty soon)—I shall now proceed.

On, Lochinvar!

Up and at 'em!

I SHALL begin, gentle reader, if you're still gentle, and if you haven't quit me cold, by giving you the low-down on Us.

I mean Kathleen and Mary and Pete and Terry and Hilary and Cynthia and Jim and Bert.

Gosh, that makes only eight!

I forgot Sue, but she's Jim's ditto-mark, so it doesn't matter.

That makes nine.

Who did I forget?

My error.

Whom did I forget? ("Watch those m's," they used to say in English B.)

One—two—three—four—

Why, me!

I, Priscilla Evans.

Terry says that when he starts writing, he forgets himself.

I must be a natural-born writer, because I began by doing that.

Me and the rest makes ten—if you don't count fourteen or eighteen servants.

And I'll make it easy for you to know which is which, gentle reader, by telling you that we're all alike as peas in a pod.

That helps, doesn't it?

Except the servants, I mean.

I don't know what the servants are like because you never see the same one twice, and I probably made a mistake when I said there were fourteen or eighteen. That was just a rough estimate. Nobody will know exactly until they take the next census, and long before then nature will have taken its course.

But the rest, we haute monde, are just chips off the same old block.

As Terry says, born Republicans, Episcopalians, and millionaires.

Jim Halsey is the exception, so he's a good one to begin with. He worked his way through college, they say—he's the typical poor boy who made good—and it was a little college nobody ever heard of in the Middle West. He waited on table to pay his tuition, they say: if you did, you won't be offended when you read this, Jim, and if you didn't, I know you won't mind either; and today he has a seat on the Stock Exchange, and an office in one of those tall buildings where it's easy to jump out of a fortieth-story window if you guess the market wrong; and if you want to see him you have to make an appointment in advance or they'll turn you over to some nice boy just out of Harvard or Princeton.

He's a broker, I mean, and a mystery-story fan, like all good brokers, and he's a bit of a mystery himself.

Why didn't you marry Sue the first time she proposed to you, Jim?

She told us all she was going to keep on proposing until you said, "Yes."

Why be prejudiced against the rich?

She had it—oodles—but she said she'd marry you and live over a garage with you if she had to.

And you said, "No."

And she had to wait.

And she said that if some other girl even spoke to you, she'd kill her!

Gosh, I believe she would have done it.

So Jim Halsey made his million, or perhaps it was just the first hundred thousand, and he said, "Yes," and she dragged him to her cave before he could change his mind.

A clear case of kidnapping.

But they lived happily ever after.

Isn't this a queer way to begin a story: "They lived happily ever after?"

How does anybody know?

They've been married only eight years, and she's at least ten years older than Jim.

I guess I'm going to scratch this out before Jim sees it.

Jim comes to parties like this one because it's good business.

You don't need the business, I know, Jim; but when Bert Carter gives you those nice thousand-share orders, and Cynthia has you invest her surplus income, and when we're your bread and butter, you just can't turn down an invitation like this. We talk to each frankly, Jim, and I hope you won't mind if I treat you as I treat the rest.

If you've got something to say, say it, and don't pull your punches!

The truth never hurts, they say, but if it does, just grin and bear it!

If I don't take a scissors and a glue pot, and make this politer before anybody else reads it . . .

So that's Jim, and if he isn't like the rest of us, maybe you'll understand why.

And it was Jim who had The Idea: The Idea that we could put on a little mystery—and solve it—and show the authors where they got off.

YOU won't mind if I stop describing the rest of us for just a moment, and tell you something about The Idea?

We're going to try it out after dinner, and it's late in the afternoon now; and if I don't tell you something about it in a hurry, I don't know when I'll get around to it. There may be forty rooms in this house, but there's only one portable typewriter, and it's here where nobody else can get at it; and I'm sitting in my drawing room with the doors locked and pretending I don't hear

when Pete or Kathleen or Hilary raps at the door and asks if I won't quit before I wear out the ribbon.

This is how it started:

We couldn't go out-of-doors because it was raining—one of those Connecticut passing showers that starts, and having started, does a thorough job before it stops—and we were sitting in the library after luncheon, sipping highballs, and Mary Ashton said, "Did any of you ever read Conan Doyle's story, 'The Adventure of the Empty House'?"

"What reminded you of it?" said Bert. "This house isn't empty."

"I'm serious," Mary said. "Do you know the story?"

"I know it," said Jim Halsey.

"We've probably all read it," said Kathleen Logan. "We've read all of the Sherlock Holmes stories."

"I have," Terry said.

Hilary said, "What's it about? Tell us how it begins, and we'll recognize it."

"It's the first story in The Return of Sherlock Holmes. He's escaped Professor Moriarty, and Colonel Moran is after him now—"

Three or four of us said, "I remember," though I didn't.

"Holmes has had a wax bust made of himself—"

Then we all remembered, and said so.

"A swell story," said Hilary.

"Great!" said I.

"One of his very best," said Kathleen Logan.

"Wait!" said Mary Ashton. "He had a wax bust made of himself. It was on a pedestal in his rooms in Baker Street—"

"And there was a lamp behind it—"

"And Holmes' dressing-gown around it—"

"And Mrs. Hudson went to it on her knees, and turned it every now and then—"

"And it threw a shadow on the shade. Here are the very words," said Pete Logan, who had found the book on the shelves not far from where I was sitting. " 'There was no mistaking the poise of the head, the squareness of the shoulders, the sharpness of the features...' "

"Wait! Wait!" said Mary. "The lamp threw the shadow of the bust on the shade, and a man standing on the other side of the street—"

"Colonel Moran—"

"—fired at the shadow."

"Beautiful bit of description," said Terry, looking over Pete's shoulder: " 'I heard a little sigh of satisfaction as he cuddled the butt into his shoulder, and saw that amazing target, the black man on the yellow ground—' "

"He fired," said Mary, "and the bullet passed right through the head of the bust and flattened itself on the wall. I reread it this morning. Is that word for word, Pete?"

"Near enough."

"Good old Sherlock Holmes!" said somebody. "He set a trap for a killer, and the Colonel walked into it!"

"Ah, but he didn't!" said Mary. She was wearing her quizzical look: the look that goes with Phi Beta Kappa at the end of the junior year, and I knew something was coming.

"He didn't?" said Pete. "Why, it says here—"

"I know what it says there, Pete. He did— in the story; but never in real life. That's the trouble with authors: like criminals, they try to concoct perfect crimes; but they overlook some little detail, and usually the public overlooks it, too. When the criminal is careless, he hangs for it, and the story ends happily; but when the author is careless, nobody knows the difference, and the book goes into extra editions."

"Are you suggesting, Mary," said Jim Halsey, "that Doyle was careless?"

"I'm not suggesting it, Jim: I'm proving it."

"I've read the story, and I found no error in it."

"It's there, anyhow," said Mary. "Colonel Moran fired from the ground floor of a house on Baker Street. Pete, you've got the book in your hand: stop me if I don't give Doyle a fair deal. The Colonel fired at a shadow on the blind of a window in a second story opposite. That it's a second story there's no possible doubt: we go up to it with Holmes and Watson, and I remember the feet of the Baker Street irregulars scampering up and down the stairs. Now, Baker Street is fairly wide, and we might call it an avenue here; but even so, a man firing such a shot would be pointing his rifle upward at an angle of say thirty degrees."

"Forty degrees might be nearer right," said Bert. Bert takes his yachting seriously, and has studied navigation. Give him a sextant, a chronometer, and a big book of tables, and he'll take you out in his car on a dark night, squint at the stars, and calculate within ten miles how far it is to the nearest night club. I know, because I was with him one night when he turned into a dark country lane, and I thought the perfume I had dabbed under my left ear was beginning to work. But it wasn't anything so usual. He started talking about the altitude of Polaris, and when I snuggled closer, he asked me to quit because I was jiggling his arm.

What a man!

The next month he got his divorce and married Cynthia Wheaton.

But Mary was still talking. "Thirty degrees is enough for me," she said, "though as little as five degrees would do at a pinch. According to the story, the bullet passed through the shadow, then through the center of the head, and finally struck the wall at the other end of the room."

"Whew!" said Jim Halsey softly, "I see it!"

But the rest of us didn't catch on so quickly. Hilary said, "I don't get the point."

Kathleen Logan said, "Change the subject if you're going to talk trigonometry. I'm going to make a pun, people: I don't believe in sines."

"All right," said Mary, "no trig. But if the bullet passed through the shadow, traveling at thirty degrees to the horizontal, it would have gone clear over the head. That's all that's wrong with the story: that, and that Colonel Moran, being a clever man, wouldn't have risked a shot which couldn't possibly hit the target."

It was Cynthia's turn. "Say that again," she said, "and say it slowly."

Hilary said, "Maybe he made an allowance—"

"Right. Let's say that instead of aiming at the shadow, he sighted under it. Let's even say that instead of shooting through the window shade, he fired through the brickwork below it, and that that didn't deflect the bullet. Then it might have passed through the bust, but it couldn't possibly have struck the wall at the end of the room. It would have continued upward into the ceiling—bringing down large chunks of London plaster."

"Whew!" said Jim again and, after a pause, repeated: "Whew!"

"Of course I can figure it by trig," said Mary, "if that's what you want. Taking the tangent of thirty degrees—"

"I warned you," said Kathleen.

"And skipping the low mathematical details, we can estimate that the ceiling had to be about twenty feet high if the bullet was to miss it and hit the far wall. London ceilings are high— we all know that— but I don't think that the flat Mrs. Hudson rented to lodgers in a none too swanky neighborhood had such noble proportions."

"There's another point you might have made," said Jim Halsey. "It didn't occur to me when I read the story, but it follows absolutely from what you said. The lamp— the bust— the shadow: the three were in a straight line."

"Quite."

"The rifle— the shadow— the bust: another straight line— according to the story. Now, if the bullet passed through the shadow and the bust, it should also have passed through the lamp—"

"Elementary, my dear Watson," said somebody.

"And it didn't," said Mary. "From the Colonel's rifle to the shadow, the bullet went straight enough. Then it went into a nose-dive to drill the bust, took a hop, skip, and jump over the lamp, and dropped again to flatten against the opposite wall. Well, bullets do queer things when authors control them."

We talked that over for at least fifteen minutes. You see, all of us are well up on detective stories, and we'd all read this one and hadn't seen the flaw until Mary caught it. Cynthia said, "The bust might have been smack up against the shade," but it didn't need Mary to tell us that when a man reads, he sits nearer the lamp, where the light comes from, and not nearer the dark window.

Hilary said, "Moran could have pulled the trick if he'd fired from a second story window— from a window at exactly the same level, across the street."

"That's the only way he could have done it," said Mary.

"Why didn't he?"

"Moran— and Doyle— didn't think of it," she said.

Then Pete asked, "Can you do the same thing with the other Sherlock Holmes stories, Mary?"

"Terry can. That's what started me off."

"Well, Terry?"

Terry Morrison nodded almost reluctantly. "There's 'The Adventure of the Speckled Band.' "

"No!" said Jim Halsey.

"His greatest story," I said. "I remember the first time I read it. It gave me the creeps: I couldn't sleep because there was a transom over my door and I couldn't close it."

"You remember the snake—"

" 'The Speckled Band' which gave its name to the story—"

"Which wriggled down the bell-rope, bit the girl, and wriggled up the rope again? 'The Speckled Band' is Russell's Viper—the daboia—and it's big, and ugly, and muscular, and one of the most dangerous snakes in the world—but it couldn't have climbed that bell-rope."

"Snakes climb," said Hilary, "all snakes."

"We know that; but have you ever watched them climb? I have. They twine themselves around something. They brace their muscles against that something. That's how they get a grip."

"That's no news."

"I've seen them do it on branches. I've seen them do it on lianas—"

"Yes, Mr. Fadiman," said Mary. "A liana is a vine. By the way, folks, has it ever struck you that Mr. Fadiman must be the world's worst pupil? Week after week four bright people give him the right answers—and the next week he's asking them questions again."

But Terry didn't let her interrupt him. "A snake can climb a branch or a vine— because it's solid, like the brass pole down which a fireman can slide without using his hands. You can always brace your muscles against something solid. But how is a snake, or any other creature, for that matter, going to brace itself against a bell-rope which is fastened at one end only, and which gives if it tries to press its body against it?"

We let that soak in.

Kathleen said, "It was fastened at both ends, of course."

"No, it wasn't," said Terry, taking the book out of Pete's hand: " 'The bell-rope hung down beside the bed, the tassel actually lying on the pillow.' That's clear enough, isn't it? Well, the snake might have started down the rope: the weight of any rope keeps it taut near the top, where it's fastened; but it would have fallen off in a foot or so—"

"It would have landed on the bed, just where he wanted it."

"Right. It might even have bitten the girl. But without a resistance against which it could brace its muscles, it could never have climbed up again, and according to the story, it did that any number of times."

"Maybe— maybe," said Cynthia Carter at length, "it was a heavy bell-rope: a very heavy one."

"Not too heavy to be hung from a hook just above the ventilator. Go ahead."

"And the snake could have been a young one: a teeny weeny one—"

"Boyish-form, and all that sort of thing," said Hilary.

"If it had been young and slim," Terry said, "Sherlock Holmes would have broken its back when he hit it with his cane: a slim snake's back is easily broken; but it was neither young nor slim. It was the same snake that killed the other girl two years earlier, and whatever it was then, it must have been in its prime— or beyond it— a big, heavy reptile, as thick as a man's arm, at the time of the story."

"A man," somebody said, "can climb a slack rope because he can grab it with his hands."

"Exactly."

"But snakes—"

"They don't have hands," said Terry.

THIS IS a good place to make a new division, or whatever it's called.

I write "5," and it means that I've crossed my legs the other way, my left foot being asleep, and I'm off again.

If I were a real author, this would have been the place to put in, "The pause was so thick that you could have cut it with a knife," or something literary, like that. You see, we'd all believed in that snake— as we used to believe in ghosts, and the bogey man, and the stork; and to be told that it couldn't have existed, except in Doyle's imagination, reminded me too much of the day that another girl whispered to me at school, "You know, there really isn't any kiss-proof lipstick." The human mind is a funny thing: whether illusions are pleasant or unpleasant, it hates to have them taken away.

But I'm trying to explain how Jim Halsey had The Idea, and it's taking me a long time to get there.

Such things happen on rainy days.

People aren't themselves on rainy days.

They tell each other the truth— or elope— or write anonymous letters— or spank the baby—or discharge the cook— or rob the bank— or commit murders.

You see, we'd started talking about mystery stories: between us we must have read every one that ever came out; and we started finding flaws, and believe it or not, there were few that went through the ordeal without having holes punched right and left in them. We began with Sherlock Holmes, and we went back to Dupin and The Murders in the Rue Morgue, which must have seemed a masterpiece of deduction when it was first published, but which wouldn't look like one today; and then we returned to civilization via Gaboriau, Anna Katherine Green, Chesterton, and the moderns; but it was Mary who summed up what we were all thinking: "Invent a detective. Give him all the breaks. Forget logic, because the reader will forget it, too, and overlook what you please, because if the story's interesting, nobody cares. What's going to happen? Your detective is going to spot the guilty man every time, not because he's clever, which he may or may not be, but because he's got an author watching out for him and giving him a hand whenever he needs it. But in real life—"

It was then that Jim Halsey said in that quiet, thoughtful voice of his, "Why don't you try it in real life?"

Mary said, "What do you mean?"

"Cook up a little mystery of our own, and see how easy it is to solve."

"It mightn't be easy at all. It might be impossible. Where there's a mystery, there's a crime."

"Invent a crime."

"Where there's a crime, there's a motive."

"Invent a motive."

"Where there's a motive, there's a clue."

"Invent a clue. Agree in advance that the criminal is to leave a clue."

"Jim," said Bert Carter, "what in hell are you driving at?"

Jim went on in the nice, easy-going voice he uses when he's trying to sell a block of bonds to a customer who'd rather build a country house. "There are ten of us here. Pick one at random. That's the victim. Pick another the same way. That's the criminal. Let them stage a fake crime."

"Does it have to be a murder?"

"Let the two decide what it's to be. Of course only they know they're elected."

"And how are you going to work that?"

"A detail: we can handle it in any one of a dozen ways. It'll be easy enough when we put our minds on it. Let the two who are picked go into another room— alone. Let them settle what's to be done and how it's to be done. The criminal must leave a clue; a fair clue."

"Who's going to settle what's fair?"

"We will," said Mary, "after it's all over."

"Meaning that if we solve the mystery, the clue was fair," Kathleen said, "while if we don't solve it, it wasn't."

Jim Halsey shook his head. "There's a simpler way than that. The logical person to decide if the clue is fair is the victim. The criminal and the victim will be given plenty of time to talk things over. Between them, they'll decide on the clue."

"I know," said Bert, "a monogrammed handkerchief."

"His footprints— in mud," somebody said.

"Why not his fingerprints?"

"Fingerprints are out: it takes a police department to make them visible."

"Couldn't the victim tell us when we are getting warm?"

"Oh, no! The victim mustn't say a word!"

Jim Halsey cut in. "There will be two people. We'll leave everything to them."

"They'll pick the crime, eh, Jim?" said Pete Logan.

"That's part of the idea."

"Why does it have to be murder? If I'm the criminal, and the victim is the lady I hope," Pete said, "I'm going to make passes at her."

Kathleen Logan looked at him from head to foot. "Why not something else for a change, Pete?"

I thought it was time for me to take a hand. We all know that Pete's on the loose, but Kathleen could divorce him for it if she felt like it without making dirty cracks. Kathleen, if you ever read this, I'm making no apologies for telling you the truth. You've been married five years, you won't have a baby because

you're afraid of what it might do to your figure, and you've got plenty of money. You're grown up, and so is Pete. If you aren't satisfied with him as he is, and I think he's a chump to stick to you, there's always Reno, and Pete will have no trouble finding another wife. Don't beef: that's all I ask.

But I said, "The idea is childish. It's like paying Western Union to sing, 'Happy birthday to you,' over the telephone—"

"It is childish," Jim said.

"We're in a childish mood," said Mary.

"I have no use for grown men and women," somebody put in, "who can't act like kids once in a while."

"Anyhow it's raining," said Bert, "and it's better than playing charades, or bridge, or Chinese checkers!"

"Chinese checkers!" said Jim Halsey. "That's it!"

"What's it?"

"To do the selecting for us. Ten marbles. One black: that's the victim. One red: that's the criminal. Eight whites."

"One yellow marble for the detective," said Mary Ashton, "though a green one might be better."

"No, you don't!" said Bert. "We're all going to be detectives!"

"Then one green for the recording angel: the Doctor Watson—"

"The historian—"

Well, that's where I started, and now I'm back at the beginning again. I've used up a lot of paper, and like Alice, who had to run as fast as she could just to stay where she was, I haven't gained an inch.

I said the idea was childish, and I repeat it. Ten men and women shouldn't find it impossible to amuse themselves like adults even if it is raining. There's a chromium-plated bar somewhere in this hovel, and quite a number of us could be happy for hours making little experiments on both sides of it; and if Hilary gets drunk, as he generally does, there's the swimming pool into which we could pitch him to sober him up. There's the indoor tennis court, and Mary Ashton used to be a ranking player— she's got a smash that simply pulverizes anything it hits— not to mention Pete Logan, whose backhand drive would beat the champions if it would only drop before it goes over the base-line. And there's bridge, which I like, even if Bert doesn't, and backgammon, and a library; and if there's nothing else to do, we can always talk scandal, which is easy, because most of us are usually mixed up in something we shouldn't be, and the rest of us suspect it. We're no saints, and we admit it; and our private lives are interesting enough even when Walter Winchell doesn't dish out the latest dirt about us in his column. And if we ever get tired of talking scandal, we can always think up something scandalous to do— like the time a crowd of

us went swimming in the pool at 3.30 A.M. without stopping to put on bathing suits. It was a revelation to me: I mean I had had no idea that nearly everybody I knew had an appendicitis scar.

But the idea of the made-to-order mystery appealed to the others so much that they discussed the details, with the rain beating against the window panes, until my brain began to whirl.

Were there plenty of the marbles that go with Chinese checkers? They saw to that right off. Would they put the marbles in a vase, or in an urn, or in a bag? They debated that just as seriously as if it really mattered.

Terry said, "Why not use cards? There's Robert Louis Stevenson's yarn, *The New Arabian Nights*, and the chap who draws the ace of spades is murdered by the man who—"

I interrupted. "What's to prevent all the men from tucking cards up their sleeves?"

"We wouldn't cheat," said Terry.

"Ah, but we would, if we could," Jim Halsey said. "What is crime if it isn't cheating? In this game cheating is perfectly in order. Let's have cards by all means."

But the women wouldn't agree, because a man can hide a card almost anywhere, and a woman can't.

Somebody said, "Marbles are cheat-proof."

That seemed obvious.

"Let's start right away."

They vetoed that.

"Wait till after dinner," Kathleen Logan said. "We'll have a good meal and a few drinks; and we'll make ourselves comfortable, and then we'll have a spot of murder. Until then, we can do some thinking."

Mary Ashton said, "I don't have to think—"

Kathleen cut her short. "Then take pity on us dimwits who do. If I were ordered to murder Pete this instant, I'd strangle him with my bare hands."

"You could, darling," Pete said.

"I know it," said Kathleen. We all know it. She's proud of her figure, but it isn't small, and it's put together with steel springs. She hugged me once, when I came back from a European trip, and I thought she was going to break three or four of my ribs. "No," said Kathleen, "I'm going to think of something subtler than that: something Mikadoish, and lingering. I may be the criminal, and if I am, I'm going to give the crowd their money's worth. A foul crime, a fair clue—"

"Atta girl!" somebody said.

"—and no favors asked."

"It just occurred to me," Pete began suddenly.

"What?"

"After the crime, the criminal joins the rest of us."

"Naturally."

"He'll do his best to confuse us," Pete said.

"He does that in all mystery stories."

"Exactly. So if I start to tell you what I think, don't believe a word, because I'm probably trying to steer you wrong."

"In other words, listen to nobody, and follow your own judgment—"

"Because one of us will be sprinkling false clues—"

"But that one may be innocent," Mary said. "More harm can be done by one honest blunderer than by a dozen real dyed-in-the-wool villains."

"So far as I'm concerned," Bert said, "nobody's going to be innocent except the feller who draws the black marble."

"The victim—"

"But he may be obliging. He may commit suicide," said somebody.

"Now, that's an idea!" drawled Bert.

Idea for idiots and morons!

Suicide? Laugh at it! Nonsense!

Many are reluctant, yes.

Dinner is due: it's time.

Peaceful refreshment is somehow soothing.

6

I AM years, centuries older than I was this afternoon.

I looked at my face in a mirror: I was a fright. I looked at the others, and they're gray, and lined, and haggard. The women are ashy under their rouge. The men have changed. I can't describe how they've changed, but they've changed.

I'm sitting in a corner of the huge living room.

All of us are here, together.

All of us, that is, with one exception.

We won't be bothered by the servants, because Bert sent word they could go to bed. Some of them had already gone to the movies, driving through the rain in the station-wagon that is set aside for their use. When they return, they will go to their own wing in this huge shack, and we won't even see them.

Nine men and women in two big rooms with all of the doors that lead to the outside world locked tight: we are as alone as if we were on a desert island.

The typewriter is on a little table in front of me, and I'm hammering away at it because if I don't, I shall go stark, staring mad.

It's the one thing that hasn't altered in a place where suddenly everything else has altered.

For one of us is a murderer.

I look at these words on the paper, and I would shudder if there were a shudder left in me.

There isn't.

Bert insisted I must finish what I have written.

The others are talking in small groups, keeping away from me.

When they look my way, they try to smile, ingratiating themselves; but they have hangdog expressions, no matter how innocent they may try to appear. They know that something in the pages I have written— something in the page which I am actually writing— may mean exposure and punishment for one of them.

That's why they glance at me as if I were about to put on a black cap and speak the words that go with it.

They look guilty.

They all look guilty.

To think that one of them could have done such an awful thing!

But seven of the eight are innocent, and I know it.

I've got to pull myself together.

They heard me typing in the afternoon.

They joshed me about it when I came down to dinner. "The recording angel," Mary said when she saw me.

Now they agree that I must go on recording: bring the story right down to this instant.

Well, why not?

I've got to do that or scream; and if I scream, I'll touch off hysterics, like one firecracker touching off all of them.

And this happened because Jim Halsey had The Idea!

If he had only known!

I started writing about it.

I suppose it's my job to carry on.

I went to my room at about four-thirty.

It may have been later: I'm not sure.

I wrote.

I wrote anything: I never expected anybody to read it.

I dressed.

I came down for dinner.

Dinner is always served at eight, and Bert likes everybody to be prompt. I got there just before the big grandfather's clock in the hall struck the hour.

It was a very gay dinner.

The ten of us can never sit down to another like it.

They were all talking about The Idea: the silly, childish, idiotic game we were going to play.

They had no suspicion how it was going to turn out— though one of them, it is perfectly clear now, must have had murder in his heart. That person, whoever it was, man or woman, laughed and joked with me an hour ago! That person is in the room this minute, but he— or she— isn't laughing and joking.

Jim Halsey was my supper partner. "If you draw the red marble, Priscilla, and I draw the black, what are you going to do to me?" he asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I said.

Sue Halsey caught my eye across the table. "If you kill him, Priss," she said, "you'll have to find me a second husband."

Hilary Densmore nudged her. "What's the matter with me?"

"You're not a second husband. You're a second-hand husband."

I was about to write that Kathleen said that, but I'm not sure; and it has suddenly struck me that I must be perfectly sure of whatever I write now. Perhaps Cynthia said it; perhaps Mary or Sue said it; perhaps I said it myself. I would have said it if I had thought of it. It's just what a woman would say, and we all know how often each one of us has been married and divorced.

"I hope Terry doesn't draw the red marble," said Bert Carter.

"Why not?"

"It's his business making up plots. He'd probably make up one that's much too good."

Terry shook his head. "I'd just as lief stay at the ringside," he said, "not because the crime I'd commit would be too mysterious, but because I'd rather try to solve the other fellow's. Writing isn't so much a matter of putting things together as of taking them apart. Once you've analyzed them correctly, your synthesis is bound to be logical."

I'm sure Terry said that: quite sure.

"But if you draw the red marble," Bert said, "you won't back out."

"Never fear," said Terry. "We've made an agreement, and I'll go through with my part of it."

I've read over what I've just written.

I don't like it.

It's idiotic to write one page to describe what happened at a dinner which must have lasted nearly an hour. Everybody talked, and if a stenographer could

have taken down every word that was said, I suppose it would fill dozens of pages.

But honest, that's all I can remember.

If things had turned out some other way, I'd be able to write more: a scrap of conversation from here; another from there. Put them together, add a bit of your own, and you've got something. But what has happened since has made me careful of what I say: every word I set down is evidence, and I don't want to make a mistake which might cost a life.

After dinner, coffee and liqueurs were served in the library. It's a long room, with paneled walls between bookcases, and windows on three sides.

There's a door to the dining room. Bert locked it and put the key in his pocket. "I've told the servants they can have the evening off," he said. He was just as excited as a child with a new toy.

There's another door to the huge living room. "This door stays open while we draw. After the drawing's over, eight of us will go into the living room."

"Eight?" I said. "Do you really think that one of the eight won't notice which two are left behind?"

But they'd argued about the details while I was writing, and this was one which they had settled. "After the drawing is over we put out the lights," Hilary said. "There won't be a glimmer of light in either room. We all know where the door is. We all can find it in the dark."

"Take bearings on it from wherever you're sitting," said Bert. He never misses a chance to talk navigation. "Do it now, while the lights are on, and do it again after the drawing is finished and before they go out."

"And then?" I asked.

"Those of us who draw white marbles will go through the door without stopping. The radio will be playing in the next room. It will be turned on so loudly that it will drown out all the little sounds, and we're going to allow two or three minutes for eight people to walk into the living room. Don't drop into the first chair you find there— keep going. If somebody happens to be sitting in the chair you pick out, don't say a word, because that would be a dead give-away. It's all right for the criminal to cheat: it would spoil our fun if we cheated. Find another chair— or a sofa— or sit on the rug. After three minutes are up—"

"How will we know when three minutes are up?"

"By listening to the radio. We'll tune in to something musical, and almost any song takes three minutes."

"There's an ad every three minutes. Just wait for two ads," said Mary Ashton.

"When eight of us have left the room, the two who stay will close the door and turn on the library lights. They'll need lights for whatever they're going to do."

"And we'll all see the streak of light under the door," I said, "and when our eyes get used to it, we'll recognize each other, and we'll know which two are missing."

Bert shook his head. "It's a sliding door. When it's closed, it's light-tight."

"You've thought of everything," I said.

"We tried to. The two who remain can talk to each other and we won't hear them: the radio will be making plenty of noise. The eight who go will have half an hour of music."

"And then?"

"We've settled everything," said Bert. "Watch and see what happens."

7

"ONE," said Mary. She held up a white marble, and dropped it into a green flannel bag.

"One," we all counted with her.

"Two."

"Two."

"Three."

"Three."

We counted with her until she had dropped in eight whites.

"The red marble: whoever draws it is the criminal."

She held it up and dropped it in.

"The black marble: whoever draws it is the victim."

She dropped it in and shook up the bag.

It had started as a game, but it was serious enough by now.

"Where shall I put the bag?" said Mary.

"On the mantel."

"Hold it."

"Put it on a table."

Those who voted for the table had it by a wide margin, and she put it there, flanked by flower vases on either side.

"And now, somebody's got to draw first," Hilary said.

Did Hilary say it?

I think so.

I know it's not important who said it, but I'm trying to make no mistakes. Lots of things that seemed unimportant then have become terribly important now.

But nobody moved: of that I'm certain.

Nobody moved.

"Well, somebody's got to start."

Jim Halsey said that. I'm positive.

"If nobody else will start, I will."

Jim Halsey, again.

And then there was a yell!

That's the only way to describe it: a yell and a laugh.

Somebody had noticed a clothes hamper in a corner of the room.

Whatever was in the hamper had been covered by a big bath-towel. And that somebody— I think it was Kathleen Logan— had pulled off the towel.

Well, Bert had been more than liberal in supplying us with implements of destruction.

He had collected, and he had placed in that hamper, the most varied collection of weapons that I had ever seen. There was a shotgun; there was a rifle; there was a revolver. "They're unloaded," said Bert. "I'll guarantee that." There was an old cavalry sabre, a rapier with a button on it, a Japanese two-handed sword, and an assortment of daggers, poniards, and plain paper-cutters. There was a lariat with a hangman's noose already made in it. There was an iron object like a small pineapple which Bert explained was a Mills bomb with the explosive removed. There was a neat hypodermic kit, and an empty phial labeled "Cocaine." "That's for Sherlock Holmes," Bert said. "He can give himself a shot if he thinks he needs it." There was a coil of wire picture-cord, and a sash-weight and a hammer. There was a butcher's cleaver, and a hatchet, and a meat saw. There was a mask— Bert must have saved it from a dance— and a little ladder, and a collection of odds and ends.

Bert is a wonder for practical jokes, and he must have had a great time gathering the junk together. "Murder *à la carte*," he said, grinning while we went through the contents of the hamper. "The feller that draws the lucky number can choose his own weapons."

I wouldn't have minded anything else if the portable typewriter— the machine on which I am writing this moment— hadn't been in the pile.

"Why?" I said, picking it up.

Bert took it out of my hands. "Who knows?" he said. "The murderer may want to write threatening letters— or the murderee may want to dash off a final note. Have you never noticed how seldom there's a good murder without

a mysterious bit of writing figuring in it somehow? Give 'em a typewriter, I say: it's easier than trying to disguise somebody's natural hand."

Then Terry said, and I'm sure it was he who said it, "In the meantime, nobody has drawn," and somebody said, "Oh yes, I've drawn," and somebody else piped up, "So have I."

I realize that it would help if I could say positively who spoke, but for the life of me I can't do it. We were all gathered in little groups, handling the weapons, laughing over them, and the only thing I can swear to is that I didn't say it.

Bert said, "Well, anybody who hasn't drawn, take a marble, and hurry up about it."

The ice was broken, and no more urging was necessary. They sauntered up to the table one at a time, two at a time.

I drew.

I opened my hand enough to see the color of the marble.

Thank Heavens, it was white.

I slipped it into my evening bag.

It is still there.

Hilary said to me, "What did you draw?"

At least, I think it was Hilary.

I said, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

He said, "I wouldn't be afraid of you if your typewriter weren't here. It's a kind of mechanical poison-pen. Some day you'll kill somebody with it."

I said, "Did you draw the black marble?"

He didn't answer.

Bert went up to the table and felt the bag. "There's still one marble left in it," he said. "Who didn't draw?"

Mary Ashton came hurrying up. "I guess it's mine," she said.

I watched her, trying to see what she got, but she didn't take the ball out. She looked into the bag. "I know what it is," she said, "but nobody else will."

She was wearing a very low-cut gown. She wears them on the least provocation: she has a nice neck, and nice shoulders, and a two-stranded necklace of graduated pearls that puts even Cynthia Carter's jewels into the shade; and she likes to display all three.

She picked up the bag and slipped it into her bosom. "Only one marble left in it," she said. "It's mine."

I have read over these pages.

I know that it might be helpful if I could remember who drew first, who drew next, and so on.

I can't.

As a matter of fact, at least two of us drew while nobody else was looking. I know that it might be helpful if I could remember every word that was spoken, but I can't do that, either. We had gathered around the clothes hamper, laughing and joking, and there probably was never a moment that three of us were not talking at once.

Bert took command. "I've looked up what's on the radio tonight. *Scheherezade* will be beginning in less than five minutes. It lasts a good half-hour."

Hilary said, "Scheherezade is the kind of music I like: not highbrow and not lowbrow. Er, will I be able to hear it in here as well as in the next room?"

I will swear he said that.

I know he may have been joking.

Bert said, "If you don't hear it well enough, Hilary, there's another radio right here." He had already been into the living room, and had turned off every light in it. "Now, are we all ready?"

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" I said. "Later on, when one of the two people who stay behind wants to join the others in the living room, how is he going to do it without being caught right off? Even in pitch darkness I can sense it if somebody comes into a room; and sometimes I can even guess who it is."

Kathleen Logan got in a dirty dig. "A pure young girl like you, Priss, should always know who comes into her darkened room at night—"

Bert interrupted. "She won't know this time. When the criminal is ready to join us, he'll signal."

"How?"

"He'll tune the radio here to a station which isn't playing *Scheherezade*, and he'll turn it on deafeningly."

"And then?"

"Then the people in the next room will get up and start walking around—"

"In the dark?"

"In the dark. And while they're doing that, one more person will join them. Are there any other questions? Remember, no crowding at the door!"

He turned off the lights.

8

IN THE darkness I could hear chuckles, and then a "Sssh!"

In the darkness some man kissed me on my bare shoulder.

I think I know who it was, but it's so hard to tell.

I walked toward the door.

Somebody stepped on my dress and remembered not to apologize.

I think I know who that was, too.

I got through the door and down the three steps on the other side.

Both radios were playing *Scheherezade*, and it sounded queer. I mean, it sounded queer to walk away from it in one room and toward it in the other.

The living room is simply tremendous: it must be eighty feet long.

I walked straight ahead.

I mean, I think I walked straight ahead. It was pitch dark, and I couldn't be sure.

I walked into a chair at the far end of the room.

It was empty, and I sat in it.

I pulled out a cigarette and my pocket lighter, and was going to light the cigarette when it struck me that my face would be seen.

I needed a cigarette to quiet my nerves. The music, and the darkness, and the knowledge that seven other people were in the room with me—and that two others were committing a crime in the next room—even if it was only a make-believe crime—were having an effect on me, even if it was all a game.

I wanted a drink, and one nice thing about Bert's house is that there's always a bottle of something almost everywhere. I got up. I tiptoed to a table. I found it by bumping into it, but there wasn't a bottle on it.

I tried to find my chair again.

I don't know if I was walking in the right direction. At any rate, somebody was in the chair which I found, and I sat in the somebody's lap.

It was a man, and he hugged me.

After a while he let me go, and I found a sofa.

I sat on it, listening to *Scheherezade*, which I detest, and I wondered when time would be up.

A half-hour: the longest half-hour I ever spent in my life.

I couldn't smoke; I couldn't drink; I couldn't talk. And it was dark, with not even a glimmer from the radio; somebody had thought of the light behind the dial, and had thrown something over it.

I thought about what was going on in the next room, and I wondered how long it would take Terry to solve it. If the clue was fair, he would do it in record time. Or Mary Ashton would do it almost as well. She's more than bright: she's intuitive. She leaps to the last step first, and fills in the others later.

Fourth movement.

Fifth movement.

Scheherezade has only three movements— or is it four?— and now I was hearing the fifth.

I had lost count.

Sometimes a half-hour seems like a half-minute; but this half-hour seemed like a week.

I walked to the table again.

It must have been a different table, because there was a bottle on it.

I found a glass.

I started to pour, and realized I couldn't do it in the dark. I raised the bottle to my lips, and tried to drink out of it: anything would have tasted good just then.

The bottle was empty.

There had been Scotch in it, but there wasn't any left: not a drop.

Suddenly I heard a brass band strike up from the radio in the library.

It was so loud that I could hear it over Scheherezade, and I knew it was the signal.

I started to walk.

I bumped into somebody.

I kept on walking.

I bumped into somebody else.

Even in that big room we were bumping into each other.

Scheherezade was over, or somebody had turned it off; but that horrible brass band kept right on playing from the library.

Bert Carter's voice said, "Let's have some lights."

They flashed up suddenly on nine of us, all blinking and rubbing our eyes.

I said, "Thank God, I can light a cigarette."

Jim Halsey flipped open his case and offered me one.

I said, "No. I don't like Turkish."

I lighted one of my own.

I remember unimportant things like that, though there must be lots of important ones that I've forgotten.

I remember how good that first whiff of smoke tasted when I drew it into my lungs.

Somebody said, "Who's missing?"

We counted noses.

Somebody said, "It's Hilary— Hilary Densmore!" and Bert Carter said, "It's Hilary and somebody else. There are only eight of us here."

But Hilary got up from a big armchair. "I'm not missing," he said. "I've been having a snooze— that's all. Music always puts me to sleep."

I suppose I ought to put in that he was sitting in the chair nearest the library door, and that he yawned twice when one yawn would have been plenty.

"It's Priss that's missing: Priss Evans!"

But I wasn't, as they saw right off.

Jim Halsey said suddenly, "Where's Mary Ashton? I've looked over all of us, and I don't see Mary."

He was right, and there was no doubt about it.

Terry Morrison shook his head. "Heaven help us," he said, "if Mary had anything to do with cooking up the plot! She's altogether too good at that kind of thing!"

It was Bert who opened the library door and pressed the switch which turned on the lights. The march which had been blaring out from the radio had stopped, and we were now being advised to give a thorough trial to somebody or other's brand of dog food.

Bert stepped into the room and turned off the radio.

Kathleen Logan started to follow.

"Oh, my God!" she screamed.

Something had hit her in the face.

It was swinging back and forth over the doorway: half of an imitation Hawaiian lei, dangling and twisting on the end of a long string. A typed card was pinned to the lei, and I read it aloud: "This is a Speckled Band."

Terry Morrison pushed it to one side. "A clue, straight out of Conan Doyle. This is the snake that climbed down the rope and bit the girl. It ran out of gas on the return trip, just as I said it would. Let's see what else there is."

We all pushed into the room.

"Don't touch anything!" somebody said. "There may be more clues."

There were.

We could all see Mary lying on a sofa next to a library table in the middle of the room. A newspaper was spread over her face, and we could imagine her laughing at us under it.

"Look!" said somebody.

There was a bust near a window: a Greek bust which should have been in a museum.

There was a typed card on the pedestal: "There is a bullethole through the head of the bust. Would have marked the holes, but was afraid ink would hurt the marble."

"A most considerate murderer," Cynthia said.

"Another Doyle clue," Terry said, "but this time it's a real one. Who would think first of marking the bust with ink, but would then decide against it, because ink would hurt the marble? A man, of course, because men carry fountain pens. A woman would think of her lipstick."

"You mean," said Bert, "that the criminal must be a man?"

"Definitely," Terry said. "You— Hilary— Pete— Jim—"

"Or you."

"Or me," said Terry.

I looked at the newspaper over Mary's face, and I thought I could see it heaving with laughter; but I couldn't be sure.

"Colonel Moran fired the bullet from the other side of Baker Street," said Pete. "There ought to be a hole in the window shade, and another in the glass."

We didn't have to look: there was a cold draft, and we could see that the French window was open.

Pete closed it.

"But the bullet should be here," said Terry. "The bullet that went through the bust, did a pole-vault over the lamp, and dropped in time to flatten itself against the far wall."

It was there: a poker chip on a card on which was neatly typed, "Flattened Bullet. Very Much Flattened."

"The work of a man," said Bert. "Only a man would think of a poker chip."

"What did I say?" said Terry.

Kathleen Logan snorted. "I would have thought of a poker chip!"

But we couldn't complain that there were too few clues. On the floor was the shotgun. It was ticketed, "One Barrel Discharged." Nearby was the revolver with a card: "One Chamber Fired." The cavalry saber was on the floor. There was a red smudge and a neat label: "Blood." A fine old Italian poniard had a reddened point and another card: "Blood."

"What's the coloring material?" said Jim Halsey. "I mean the stuff that looks like blood?"

Sue Halsey touched it gingerly. "Lipstick," she said.

"The criminal," said Jim, "was clearly a woman."

"Of course," said Sue.

"But the criminal," said Terry, "might have used the victim's lipstick! In fact, the criminal, if a man, would have had no lipstick of his own to use. Look at the shade, Sue. Is this what Mary favors?"

We all looked, and there was no mistaking the orchid shade which we had seen on Mary's lips so often.

We glanced at each other. Not another woman in the room wore that color.

"It proves," Terry began.

"Nothing," Jim finished.

"The further we go," said Cynthia, "the less we find out."

"It's perfectly clear to me," said Pete Logan. "Mary was shot, stabbed, and bitten by a snake."

Kathleen Logan had found still more evidence. The cork had been removed from the phial marked "Cocaine," and into the neck was thrust a folded card with the inscription, "Half Empty." "Poor thing," said Kathleen. "Shot, stabbed, and bitten, but she had strength enough left to take poison."

The sash-weight was lying near Mary. I didn't bother to examine it. I knew what I'd find on it. The butcher's cleaver and the meat saw and the hatchet were there, too, all of them ticketed. And the clothes hamper, in which I could see still more things that hadn't been used, wasn't empty.

"Look!" said Hilary, "just look! There's a suicide note!"

It was still in the typewriter, which was on a table, and it read, "I have decided to end it all. Mary."

Jim Halsey said, "There are plenty of clues, but there isn't a single one that I'd call fair."

"You forget," said Terry, "that in the course of planting all these false clues, the criminal has unintentionally left dozens of real ones."

"A suicide note," said Hilary. "What more could you want?"

"But we know it wasn't suicide," said Jim. "According to the agreement, two people were in this room, and the note is just a blind."

"Meaning that she was stabbed, bitten, shot, and poisoned," I said, "but in spite of it she committed suicide?"

"Not in spite of it," said Jim: "because of it. She put herself out of her agony. So would anybody in her place."

I said, "It seems to me that the first thing to do is to gather all the clues together. Most of them are blinds. Let's begin by throwing out the obvious ones."

"I'd rather begin," said Pete, "by examining the body."

Kathleen gave him a look.

"Discreetly!" said Pete. "Oh, very discreetly!" He lifted the newspaper which covered Mary's face.

I'd known Mary for many years, and I know I never saw her looking prettier. She was lying on her back in a black moire off-the-shoulder gown with the bag which had contained the marbles still thrust into her bosom. Her lips were half parted and smiling. Around her throat was the pearl necklace which everybody knows about— it's worth a fortune, and it takes two insurance companies to keep it protected— and it never looked better than against the background of Mary's exquisite throat and shoulders.

Her eyes were closed, but her cheeks were flushed— as if she was enjoying the joke.

Pete stared at her. "I don't see any wound," he said.

Jim said, "It's probably on the other side of her head: a round spot of lipstick."

Pete turned her head. "No wound," he said.

"She drank poison," somebody said, "or she was forced to drink poison. If the clue is fair, there should be an odor of something on her lips."

Pete leaned over her. "The only odor is Chanel."

Kathleen gave Mary what I thought an unnecessarily violent dig in the stomach. "Come on, Mary," she said. "Tell us where the wound is before Pete loses his self-control."

Mary didn't answer, and Pete straightened up with a funny expression. "I smell Chanel, all right," he said. "I ought to know it because Kathleen uses it, too. But I had my nose within an inch of hers, and I don't think I detected her breath."

"What?"

I think all of us said it at once.

Pete moved away a little. "There's something queer here," he said, and his voice was altogether different. "There's something damned queer!"

"Mary, sit up!" Kathleen shook her roughly. "Sit up and stop frightening us!"

Mary didn't move.

She lay there with that smile on her lips, and her eyes closed.

Jim Halsey said, "If she's playing 'possum, she's doing it terribly well."

Bert said, "Let me feel her pulse."

There was a long wait while he touched her wrist with his big, gentle fingers. He dropped her hand, and moved his fingers to her throat, behind the angle of the jaw, where there's an artery, or a vein, or something.

"Well?"

Bert's face, usually ruddy, had become absolutely gray. "I don't seem to feel a pulse," he said.

Kathleen Logan said, "I know something about medicine. Let me examine her."

She pushed up Mary's eyelids and looked.

I think we all knew what had happened even before Kathleen gave a low moan and fainted. At any rate, she claimed she fainted.

2

I, Bert Carter

I, BERT CARTER, am carrying on.

However painful, it is my job. These things are taking place in my house, and I am in command as much as I would be on the bridge of my yacht.

I have been struck with the value of the white-heat observations that Priss has made. They are going to be useful, whatever is to come next.

I add my own observations.

I like to tell stories.

I wrote one book, though I had to pay a publisher to print it.

I know how a story grows in the telling, and I know how it grows when time separates the fact and the story.

There was that storm we ran into off the Marquesas a few years ago. It wasn't much of a storm, I knew at the time, since I had gone through worse right off Hatteras, and we would not have thought anything of it if the steering engine had not gone out of commission just when we needed it most. We steered with the hand gear, of course, and the men got the steering engine to working again before the wind began to blow beyond force 7 on the Beaufort scale.

I've told the story a good many times, and as my first wife liked to mention, and as Cynthia is too polite to point out, every time I have told it the storm has been a worse one. My friends twit me about it, and there is no reason why I should not admit it. While the waves were certainly high, they became no lower when I described them.

When we anchored off Adam Island not forty-eight hours later, we realized that we had been through a bit of a blow; but it was not a week until I was remembering it as a man-sized storm, and when I came to write about it in *The Cruise of the "Sea Spray"* the following summer, I pictured it as one of the worst typhoons which had ever struck the Pacific Ocean. According to the weather reports, a typhoon did strike— a good many miles from our position— and we caught only the tail end of it. By the process of remembering what just was not so, and forgetting what was, I am afraid I placed the *Sea Spray* right where she would have caught it worst.

I am not a good story teller, possibly because I try to be one.

I know the book would have been better if I had hired a ghost to write it for me, instead of hammering it out myself with two fingers and a pocket dictionary in which I looked up spellings. But the instinct of even a bad story

teller is to make his yarn a more thrilling one, and "typhoon" is a meatier mouthful than "storm."

That is why Priss's story, which we have all read, passing the sheets from hand to hand, has its points. It has not had time to grow beyond the truth. She was telling what had taken place only a few minutes after it had taken place. She did not stop to think how the story could be improved. She told facts, and she did not make them bigger or smaller; and if, incidentally, she managed to insult nearly everybody here, she was thinking, when she began, that she was going to tear up the sheets before anybody else saw them. I stopped her from doing that when I gathered them up myself, when she had left her room just before supper. I had gone there to get the typewriter. As things have turned out, it was very lucky.

Her writing is honest, if unpleasant reporting. According to her, Jim Halsey is deep, shrewd, unaccountable, and given to idiocies. He had what she always refers to in capital letters as "The Idea," and she has not forgiven him for it. Perhaps she is right.

Sue Halsey, his wife, is pictured as a potential murderess. She would kill, Priscilla thinks, if a woman came between her and Jim. That is putting it a bit strongly.

Pete Logan is shown as a libertine, and Kathleen as a scheming, inordinately jealous woman. Priscilla even doubts if her faint was genuine, though Cynthia and I have compared notes, and we are sure that it was.

Hilary Densmore is spoken of as "a second-hand husband." I suppose that is literally true of any man who has been divorced, and is therefore true of me, too; but it is not kind for a friend to speak of any man in such a manner, and I rather resented Priss's attributing the remark to Cynthia, who may divorce me one of these days, but who would do so without insulting me into the bargain.

Terry Morrison comes off pretty well: that may be because he had less to do with The Idea than anybody else. It may also be because Terry is dark, and handsome, and an author, and unmarried. Women consider Terry, with his quiet ways, his pipe, his low-pitched voice, and his five foot nine of good looks, a glamorous person. He probably is.

But I am described more or less as a rich waster, addicted to the milder lunacies, such as navigation, a beautiful science which Priss does not understand; and Cynthia, I gather from Priss's writing, is a light-weight. Even poor Mary, whose body is lying on the sofa in the library, is shown as a brilliant but outrageously conceited woman.

We don't mind plain speaking: not one of us. But Priss, even though she has known the entire crowd for years, would not have written so frankly if she had had time to think. According to her, Hilary referred to her typewriter—my

typewriter, by the way, on which I am writing now— as a mechanical poison-pen, and said that she might kill somebody with it one day. Hilary was right, bearing in mind what she wrote with it; but he would not have been right if she had waited just a little longer before spilling her thoughts on paper. She would have remembered the good times she has had with the Halseys— and with us— and Kathleen Logan's box at the opera— and the attention she has always accepted from Hilary— and one thing or another. She might have thought badly of us, but she would not have written so mercilessly. There would have been inhibitions, which are just another name for the politenesses which act as shock absorbers when human beings bump into each other. But having begun speaking her mind, at a time when she was writing for herself alone, she kept on in the same strain, and that is one reason why her story is valuable. It may be unpalatable, but it is completely honest.

Some of Priss's reactions, it seems to me, are due to her own great handicap. She is just a little thing, weighing less than a hundred pounds, and she would give ten years of her life to be taller, stronger, and heavier. I believe she envies every other woman here, and it sticks out in her writing. She mentioned that Kathleen was "put together with steel springs," and that poor Mary had been a ranking tennis player. With more time at her disposal she would have written that Cynthia, my wife, is a magnificent figure of a woman, lean, well-proportioned, and a fine rider, and that Sue Halsey, even today, thinks nothing of hiking ten miles before breakfast. If Priss ever tried to walk such a distance, she would finish her stroll on a stretcher, and she knows it; but it is only natural for her to resent the fact that the other women have what she wants.

Just as Priss expects, we will forgive her for her insults, because we know she likes us anyhow; and her facts, made a matter of record while they were still fresh, are going to be so helpful that I see no reason why, now that we have decided to thrash out this dreadful business among ourselves, we should not keep a log, just as we would on shipboard.

Priss brought her story down to the terrible moment when we found out that Mary was dead.

I have inherited her job: I carry on.

2

WHAT a lot of utter drivel I have written!

It is because I am trying to calm myself, because I tremble with horror when I think of what happened in this house tonight.

It does not matter what I type so long as I type something: just as Priss wrote, the typewriter is the one thing that has not altered in a place where everything else has suddenly altered.

If I were one of those writer fellows, like Terry, maybe I could put down the cascade of words which would approximate, though they could not possibly describe, what we all have been through, and what we are still going through. But if I could put words like that on paper, I think they would explode in my face. When ten people start playing what they think is a game, and when one of them turns it into murder, it isn't easy to sit down at a machine and reduce that fact to cold-blooded writing. After all, this is my house; these people are my best friends and my guests; and if the newspapers had an inkling of what has happened here, the name of the place, "Overlook," would scream at the world from every first page in the country.

When we realized that Mary, brilliant, self-confident, fun-loving Mary, whose only fault was that she did superbly well whatever she did at all, was dead, we were simply stunned. The game which Priscilla had characterized as idiotic had turned earnest; but my first and my only reaction, as I knelt at the side of poor Mary's body, was one of sorrow and of nothing else. I looked at her, and I thought how dreadful it was that she had died. She was young: twenty-nine last April. She was beautiful. She was athletic, and I don't think she had ever known a day of sickness. She had so much money that she could afford never to think of money. She had a legion of friends, and if she had wanted to try marriage again, she had only to choose among a dozen men. With everything to live for, she was dead; and the fact was as pitiable as when a child, playing with its ball, is killed by an automobile. It was more pitiable, for instead of being an unknown name in a newspaper, she was a friend.

Kathleen had fainted. Priss, who seems ashamed to write of any decent action, even if it is her own, had flopped into a chair, and was crying. Cynthia, my wife, had come around to the head of the sofa, and was opening and closing her mouth, saying nothing. She tottered, and I went to her quickly, and took her into my arms.

Sue Halsey, always quiet but always efficient, pulled out a mirror and held it under Mary's nose. Then she dropped to her knees, laid her ear over Mary's heart—and I think all of our hearts stopped beating in sympathy while she listened. I had already felt for her pulse, and had failed to find it. Kathleen had looked at Mary's eyes. We knew this would be a final test.

It seemed ages before Jim said, "Well, Sue?"

Sue got up slowly. "There's absolutely no question about it: she's dead."

Hilary gasped, "Bert, quick! Send for a doctor!"

Sue looked at him quietly. "Why?"

"Send for a doctor!"

"What can a doctor do now?"

"Send for a doctor— and the police!"

"The police?"

"You have to do that!"

I was glad to see Sue shake her head. "There's no hurry about a doctor: he can't bring her back to life. As for the police, Hilary, aren't we playing a game? Why not go on with the game? What makes you believe that the police will be better at it than we?"

"But you must send for them!"

" 'Must?' 'Must?' I never liked that word. When something goes wrong, the only 'must' I know is to use your head. How about it, Bert?"

I nodded.

Pete Logan was trying to make Kathleen drink a swallow of brandy. Jim Halsey had come around to my side. Terry Morrison had not spoken a word.

Sue turned to him. "Don't you agree with me, Terry, that we are likely to find out more than the average policeman?"

Terry's voice was hardly louder than a whisper. It was easy to see that he was hard hit. "I've lost one of my best friends. I can't think about anything else just now."

Sue said, "You're not answering my question."

It was then that I took command. "Sue, I don't want a scandal. Nobody wants a scandal."

"Exactly."

"I can wait about sending for the police if I please."

"What do you mean?" Hilary asked. " 'If I please?' "

"This is a little village, and justice is nothing if not personal. I call all the constables by their first names. When they get married, they usually pick their wives from among my servants, and I come through with wedding presents. If I can show I have a reason, nothing that I do— or don't do— will ever be criticized."

Hilary was sputtering. "But— but if one of us killed her?"

"All the more important to find out the truth here and now, privately, and to leave the police completely out of it until I can turn over the guilty person to them."

Jim Halsey agreed quickly. "We were saying, weren't we, that we were a brainier lot than the mystery-story writers? If that's true, Bert is right. Knowing each other as intimately as we do, knowing the facts, and what led to this situation, we can do better without help. Has it occurred to you that it would take hours for us to tell an outsider what we nine know already?"

Cynthia was herself again. "Think what the newspapers will print tomorrow if we call in the police now!"

"Think of the questioning, with every one of us being grilled. 'Grilled' is the correct term, isn't it?"

"All of our names in the papers: 'Murder at "Overlook." ' ' "

"The reporters—"

"The photographers— with their flash-bulbs—"

"Mary's body— photographed—"

"All of us photographed—"

"—with police everywhere!"

"After a sleepless night, all of us will be held without bail."

"In jail—"

"And what headlines! Long articles on every one of us!"

"An article about Mary—"

"A long article about you, Hilary—"

Sue was relentless. "You're the most divorced man here, aren't you, Hilary? And you were the star in at least one breach-of-promise suit? How will you like it when they reprint the letters they read aloud at the trial?"

Hilary cut in hoarsely, "You win."

"What do you say, Terry?"

Beads of sweat were standing out on his forehead. "I think— in common decency I think— we ought to go into another room before we start talking about such things."

It struck me that it was strange that Terry, who had been so alert at picking up clues— real ones, not the fakes— when we first came in here, should have changed so completely. He must have cared more for Mary than any of us had suspected. But I only said, "Terry, you're right, and I apologize. Come."

Sue stopped to replace the newspaper which had covered Mary's face.

Then she led the way back to the living room.

The others followed—with the ridiculous imitation snake over the door swinging from side to side as one of them set it in motion and the others tried to avoid it.

I picked up the typewriter with the suicide note still in it.

I had a particular reason for doing so.

"Come, Priss," I said.

She had not budged from her chair, and her eyes were red with weeping.

The snake, a crinkled paper lei on the end of a long string, swished across my face as we walked through the door. I gave it a yank, and it came down easily enough.

THE FIRST THING I did was to try all the doors in the living room. Except for the door through which we had just entered, and one other leading to a lavatory with no other exit, they were locked.

I had locked them myself, and I had the keys in the pocket of my dinner-jacket.

I felt, and they were still there.

I put the typewriter on a table, took out the one typed sheet in it, and called Priss over. "You started acting as historian: go on."

"What do you mean, Bert?"

"I have your manuscript in my inside pocket—"

"You took it out of my room?"

"I took it out of your room."

"You had no right to do that!"

"I did it, anyhow. I was curious to see what you had written."

"Bert, I said things I don't want the others to see!"

"That may be; but they're going to see them."

"Bert!"

"When you started writing, it was just in fun. It's deadly serious now, and whatever you have said is not going to be changed."

I had not read the sheets at the time, and had no idea what was in them.

"Bert, I've written uncomplimentary things about Kathleen—"

"She can stand them."

"And Sue— and Jim— and Hilary— and you—"

"We'll make allowances."

"Bert, give me the sheets!"

"Priss, sit down at that machine, and bring your story down to this minute."

"Bert, I couldn't!"

"Here's a chair. Here's fresh paper."

"Bert, really, I couldn't. I'm all unstrung."

"It will help you to pull yourself together. Sit. Write. If it's hard, just say to yourself that it's just as hard for the rest of us."

She sat, whimpering a little. "Bert, I look like hell, don't I?"

"You do."

"I must fix up first—"

"You're no worse than the others."

"Bert, have you really got my manuscript?"

I pulled the first page out of my pocket. I had folded the sheets once only, and they went into the pocket easily. I read aloud: "I, Priscilla Evans, am telling this story—"

"Oh!" she gasped.

"Now go on."

"Bert!"

"Yes?"

"May I have a drink?"

I placed a bottle and a glass near her.

"And a cigarette? My case is empty.... Bert, is it— is it absolutely positive she's dead? She's such a clever girl that it's possible she's just holding her breath, or something."

I said gently, "She could hold her breath, but she could not stop her heart."

"How do you know?"

"It can't be done."

"I've heard of people doing it. Oh, Bert, wouldn't it be wonderful if the door opened, and Mary walked in, grinning! What a laugh she'd have on all of us!"

We both looked toward the library door, as if that might happen.

It did not.

"Priss," I said, "you were her friend, weren't you?"

She gulped. "I loved her."

"You would help her, dead or alive?"

She nodded.

"Then write. Write honestly. That is what Mary would want you to do. Priss, you're not going to be a quitter?"

She shook her head.

"Good girl, Priss."

I walked away.

I watched her out of the corner of my eye.

First she fished out a tiny handkerchief, and I could see her shoulders heaving as she wept into it. Then she looked at herself in her mirror, and dabbed powder on her nose. Then she pulled herself together—a real brick—and pushed a sheet of paper into the machine.

She looked at it a minute, pulled it out, crumpled it up into a ball, and threw it away.

Then she cried some more— and put in another sheet.

I knew she would write.

So did the others, who had formed little groups here and there.

I heard the machine begin to click slowly.

It stopped.

She poured herself a drink and lighted a cigarette.
Then it began to click more rapidly.

4

I RETURNED to the center of the room.

They gathered around me.

I said, "Let's sit down and make ourselves comfortable. We're going to be here a long time."

Pete Logan gave me a funny look. "What do you mean, Bert, 'a long time'?"

"Just what I say." When I am on the bridge of my yacht, I make decisions quickly and I stick to them. I was captain of the ship now.

"But suppose Kathleen and I have decided to go home?"

"You can't."

" 'Can't'?"

"I want you to stay until this thing is threshed out."

"But if we don't want to stay?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to, anyhow."

" 'Have to'? 'Have to'?" Pete's voice was silky smooth, but we all could hear the threat in it.

"On account of the rest of us, Pete," Jim Halsey put in.

"Kathleen isn't feeling well. Kathleen wants to go to bed: in her own bed, in our own home."

"It can't be done," I said emphatically.

Pete's voice was more silky than ever. "I saw you lock the doors, Bert, and put the keys in your pocket; but that isn't going to stop us. We'll open one of the windows, get our car out of the garage—"

"Pete, I hate to play trumps—"

"Well, what are they?"

"The garage is locked. I had hoped to keep the servants out of this, but all I have to do is to order the chauffeur not to unlock it until I say the word."

"He wouldn't dare stop me from taking my own car!"

"Yes, he would. He knows that if he follows instructions, I take the blame. But that isn't all, Pete. I presented the police department with a car, so that it can enforce traffic regulations. Even if you drove off, you wouldn't get very far without being arrested. All I have to do is to lift the telephone and ask to have you brought back—"

"Bert! You're not serious!" Kathleen exploded.

"If it's a bluff I'm putting up, Kathleen, I hope for your own sake that you won't call it."

"Look here," Pete said earnestly, "the papers have been hinting that Kathleen and I were going to split up. We're not splitting— that right, Kathleen?— and the one thing we don't want now is to be mixed up in a mess."

Jim Halsey came to my aid. "You are mixed up in it, Pete, for better or for worse. We're all in it already— up to our eyes. Your best chance to keep out of the papers is to let Bert handle it his own way. Try to run away, and you'll only make it worse. Stick with us—"

"And what then?"

"We may be able to pull ourselves out of the hole— together. We'll find out which one of us is responsible for what happened— if one of us is responsible. Come to think of it, didn't I hear you say this afternoon that you considered yourself brighter than any detective?"

"I said that about him," Kathleen Logan said, putting her arm through Pete's. "Pete is smart, and I've always known it."

Jim Halsey gave me a wink. "Then don't deprive the rest of us of the benefit of his superior intelligence, Kathleen. The evening's young, and we'll need all the help we can get. That right, Hilary?"

Hilary was mixing himself a drink: his third or fourth in ten minutes. "Okay with me," he said shortly.

"Terry?"

"I'm anxious to hear more of your plans."

"Cynthia?"

"Cynthia agrees with me in everything," I said emphatically. "Don't you, dear?"

"Yes, darling," she murmured.

"And Sue goes along with me— or I go along with her— which is the same thing," Jim concluded.

He glanced toward the corner where Priss was clicking away steadily.

"Don't bother her," I told him. "She'll be staying."

"Then it's all set, Bert. Go ahead."

"Right." It is the job of the man in command to give orders, and I rose to the occasion. "Expecting this to be a game— just a game— I told the servants they could go to bed. Some of them have gone to the movies. When they come home, they'll turn in without bothering us. I told them to. We'll be alone until tomorrow morning. If we get hungry or thirsty, there is plenty of liquor around, and Cynthia had sandwiches and cheese prepared in advance so that we shouldn't be interrupted. As Jim Halsey said, the evening's young. The doors are locked— except to the library and to the lavatory. We're going to stay in these rooms, all of us, until we find a solution."

"And how long do you think that will take?" Kathleen asked.

"Why go into that, Kathleen?" Jim put in gently. "We have plenty of time."

"Do you mean we'll be here all night?"

"And the next day?"

"And the day after?"

"Unless the guilty person speaks up. He's bound to be found out sooner or later, and if he confesses now, he'll save us a lot of trouble."

The clicking from the corner stopped. "I didn't do it," Priss wailed.

"I know you didn't, Priss. I know you couldn't have," I assured her. "I didn't do it, either."

"Nor I," said Cynthia.

"Well, we didn't do it," said Sue, "and I'm speaking for Jim and myself."

"Hilary?"

He was mixing himself still another drink, and he was gradually becoming more genial. "It's only metaphorically," he said, "that I'm a lady-killer."

"That leaves Pete and me," Kathleen said angrily. "It's exactly what I predicted! Well, I have an alibi for both of us. During the time that the lights were out, I sat on Pete's lap."

"Pardon me, dear," said Priss, stopping her typing for an instant, "I sat on Pete's lap."

"Did she?" Kathleen asked indignantly.

"Somebody sat on my lap," Pete admitted, "but it wasn't for long."

"One somebody or two somebodies?" Kathleen demanded, eyes flashing. "And who was it? You ought to know, because I weigh more than Priss."

"I can't be sure, sweetheart," said Pete miserably.

"If it was just one somebody, whose lap did I sit on? If it was two, who was the other sitter?"

"I was one of them," Priss insisted.

"In the dark—" Pete began.

But Kathleen would not let him finish. "In the dark you thought you had a chance to play post-office! I should have expected it!"

To my amazement, Cynthia spoke up. "In the dark, I believe I sat in somebody's lap, and I haven't the faintest idea whose it was. Does it matter?"

"Certainly not, darling," I said quickly.

"And now," said Jim, "if the guilty person will kindly confess—"

"Speak up, and all that," Hilary chimed in.

"Confession is good for the soul."

"The murderer has no chance with eight minds working against him."

"Eight such minds as ours—"

"There would be no scandal—"

"Or only a little scandal—"

"At any rate, less scandal—"

"Perhaps it could be hushed up."

"That's what I'm hoping: that the guilty man will confess."

"Or the guilty woman."

"We're all good friends. It's better for the man who did it to admit it and take his punishment than to ruin the reputations of the rest of us."

"That's what I say."

Except for Terry, they had all spoken; and some of them had spoken oftener than once.

"Terry?" I challenged.

"I thought we were all to be detectives," he said slowly. "Now, who ever heard of detectives starting off by asking for a confession?"

There was no answer to that.

"Take it from another angle," he went on. "One of us is a murderer. We're intimate friends, and know each other. Do we believe that anybody in our group could be guilty?"

"No."

They spoke up as a single person— and yet they knew that Mary's body was lying motionless in the library.

"You catch the point?" said Terry. "Then why, at this stage of the game, would the criminal speak up?"

They nodded— as if they understood perfectly— but I did not.

I looked at my watch.

More than an hour had passed.

5

HILARY downed another drink: his ninth or tenth. I had lost count.

Cynthia and Jim Halsey were whispering in a corner.

Sue and Pete were talking in another.

Priss was still writing busily.

Kathleen Logan and I had been comparing notes— and getting nowhere. Kathleen had been drinking one Scotch and water after another, and was more than slightly befuddled.

Terry, smoking his pipe, came over to us.

"Terry," Kathleen begged, "say you've found the solution."

He shook his head.

"It is possible," she said, "that Mary died a natural death."

He shook his head again.

"I don't see why not," Kathleen insisted. "I've heard of people getting excited and dropping dead of heart-failure—"

I had been thinking of that, looking upon it as a distinct probability.

"No," said Terry shortly.

"But why not? It would explain everything. In the excitement of preparing a dozen false clues— and one real clue, as we agreed before we started—"

"Do you believe the murderer's style would have been cramped by previous agreements?"

"I'm not talking about the murderer," Kathleen said, "because there isn't any. Mary planned what was to be a sham crime—"

"No."

"She lay down on the sofa for a moment, thrilling at the thought of what was going to happen—"

"No."

"—and her heart just stopped beating."

Terry raised his eyebrows. "Can you imagine that happening to Mary, the girl who could play three sets of championship singles any time, and never feel it? Mary, who was an all-around athlete from the day she was born?"

"Athlete's heart—" Kathleen began.

"I knew her well. So did we all— and she never showed a symptom. In the second place," Terry went on quietly, "what of the other person in the room? Mary wasn't alone: remember that. If she had dropped dead, the other person would not have continued with the game. I wouldn't have; would you? I would have opened the door. I would have called for help and a doctor."

"I didn't think of that," I admitted.

"Games go just so far. They all stop at a certain point."

"But," Kathleen persisted, "after the person— the other person— left the library, and before we lifted the newspaper which covered Mary's face: anything might have happened. There was an interval of at least ten minutes. It might have been twenty. If— if— she had died suddenly during that time—"

"The other person would have spoken up at once."

"The other person wasn't in the room."

"When we all came back, I mean, and found what had taken place. The other person would have spoken then."

"Do you think so?" Kathleen asked. "If I had been the other person, I would have been paralyzed! I would have been too frightened to open my mouth!"

"Frightened of what?"

"The evidence— the clues—"

"Frightened? With a death from natural causes? If one of us was in the library with Mary when that happened— or after that happened— he or she

has only to tell us about it. The doctors will examine the— the body— sooner or later, and what they find will exonerate the other person."

He had raised his voice, and everybody had heard him.

They stood silent, waiting for somebody to speak.

"I want to make it perfectly clear," Terry went on. "If poor Mary died naturally— and one of us would be quite certain of it—all the silly clues in the library will mean nothing, and whoever remained with her when the lights went out will be as innocent as those who walked into this room. If that's what took place, we'd like to hear about it. Speak up, one of you! For God's sake, speak!"

There was no answer as he looked around hopefully, and I could see his shoulders sag— but I made a mental note that a man as bright as that would bear watching. I had come to conclusions, and he had convinced me they were ridiculous. And he had done it easily, because he was sure of his ground.

Jim Halsey came to me and whispered into my ear.

I said, "Yes! Yes, of course!"

He had suggested something so simple that it had occurred to nobody else; yet it could not have been more logical.

"We'll begin," he explained, "by gathering around this big table: the nine suspects. Priss, come here."

The clicking had stopped a few minutes ago.

Priss rose from the typewriter and joined us. "Here," she said, and gave me the sheets she had written. "I won't put down another word— not another syllable."

I folded the sheets, and put them with the others, unread.

"We'll space ourselves around the table," Jim went on, "just as far as possible from each other. No, Sue: don't sit down. Now, we all saw Mary drop ten Chinese checkers into a bag."

"Of course!"

A gasp went up.

They saw what was coming.

"She dropped in one red for the murderer, one black for the victim, and eight whites for the innocent bystanders."

Cynthia shook her head. "She put in the eight whites first. I was watching."

"Correct," said Priss. "The whites were first: that's what I've written."

"The order is unimportant," said Jim. "What matters now is that there were only eight white marbles. Each of us drew a marble and kept it."

"Mary took the last one," I mentioned. "I felt the bag, and there was just one left in it. She looked into the bag, and kept the bag and the marble."

"Right," Jim agreed. "We all know now that the Chinese checker Mary took was black. She thought it was going to be a lark, poor girl, and she found out it wasn't. But there are nine other checkers to be accounted for, and one of them must be red. Ladies and gentlemen, keep your distances, and ante up one at a time." He placed a big, empty ashtray in the center of the table. He thrust a thumb and finger into his vest pocket. "This is my contribution."

He dropped it into the tray.

It was white.

I followed suit.

"White," I announced.

Sue added her marble—white.

Priss said, "I left my bag at the typewriter." She fetched it, and emptied its entire contents on the table: a compact; a cigarette case; a lighter; a handkerchief; a tiny diary; a marble, which bounced as it struck the wood.

It was white.

Cynthia produced her marble unobtrusively.

"White," she said.

Terry found his marble and dropped it into the dish.

"White."

Pete lifted his high above the table where we all could see that it was white.

"What am I offered for this valuable piece of pottery?" he asked. "It's not for sale at any price."

He placed it solemnly in the center of the growing pile.

"Well, Kathleen?"

Only Kathleen and Hilary had failed to contribute, and there were seven marbles in the ashtray.

"There's only one more white left!" Cynthia gasped to me.

"Well, Kathleen?"

"Picking on me again? I expected that." She looked through her evening bag, while we all watched impatiently. "I can't find it."

"Let me help you look, darling," Pete said.

Jim's voice cracked out like a whiplash. "Don't help her!"

"Why shouldn't he help me if he wants to?" asked Kathleen querulously. "He's my husband even if every other woman here has sat on his lap." She investigated the bag thoroughly, removing the articles it contained one by one. "I suppose you'll all think awful things about me if it turns out to be red."

I was so shocked I could not speak.

Terry remarked, "I would describe that as a miracle of understatement."

"Well—" drawled Jim Halsey.

"I can't find it, and that's all there is to it."

"Darling," said Pete, "your handkerchief."

"It's on the table," she snapped. "What's the matter with it? Is it dirty?"

"You always carry a second handkerchief."

"Of course!" She reached down into her bosom and pulled out a tightly rolled handkerchief.

She felt it. "There's something hard in it," she announced brightly, "something like a marble."

"Yes, darling," said Pete encouragingly. "Show it to us."

"Why should I show it to you?" she asked petulantly. "If it's a marble, I want to keep it for a souvenir."

Her voice was none too steady, and I thought of the quantity of liquor she had taken.

"Kathleen!" Jim said sharply.

"All right! All right! I'm going to show it to you, but I want it back after you've all seen it."

She unrolled the handkerchief with maddening slowness, picking it open delicately. "Now, if it's red—" she said.

But it was not.

It lay in the center of the opened handkerchief, and it was white.

I counted aloud, while the others watched me.

There were seven white marbles in the ashtray, and an eighth white in the handkerchief. I picked up the eighth myself, and added it to the others.

"You're disappointed, aren't you?" said Kathleen. "If it had been red, you would have been pleased, you Sherlock Holmes! I want my marble back!"

But we had all turned to the one person present who had made no move to prove his innocence. It was Hilary, and he stood, tottering slightly, with still another highball at his lips.

"Hilary!"

"To think that Hilary could have done it!"

"Hilary, why did you do it?"

"Heaven knows why!"

"Maybe he proposed to her and she turned him down. Maybe—"

"I don't believe Hilary did it," Priss put in.

"But he must have done it!"

"Don't judge him in advance," said Jim. "Hilary, old man, show us your marble."

"Uh?"

"Your marble."

"Which marble?"

"The marble you drew out of the bag in the library. The Chinese checker. Don't you remember?"

Hilary shook his head solemnly. "Your Honor," he said thickly, "I was doing thirty-nine miles an hour exactly—"

Jim turned to me. "I'm pretty sure he has it in one of his pockets— it stands to reason he didn't swallow it— but I don't want anybody at this table to touch anybody else. Hilary, don't you understand? We're all playing marbles. Marbles! Marbles! We're all playing marbles, and you can't come in if you don't find your marble!"

"Oh! Uh? Why didn't you say that in the first place?" From one trousers pocket he drew a large roll of bills. "There's my stake," he announced.

"Good," Jim said. "But we won't let you play without your marble. Come on, Hilary, you're delaying the game. Find it!"

"Mustn't hurry me! Mustn't hurry me!" From another trousers pocket he fished out a handful of change, and gravely picked out a half dollar, which he handed to Terry Morrison across the table. "Here, boy."

"Thank you, sir," said Terry, without cracking a smile.

"And now the marble," Jim said.

"Oh, yes! The marble! You know," he grinned foolishly, "it's years since I've played marbles but I used to be a whiz at it."

Like the rest of us, he put a thumb and a finger into a vest pocket and scooped out a marble; and like the rest of the marbles, it was white!

I heard a gasp run around the table, like the hiss of fire around a pinwheel before it starts to spin, and I heard three or four voices counting aloud.

"Nine!" Cynthia exclaimed.

"Nine," I agreed.

"Nine?" Hilary asked. "Is that my point? Nona from Bologna? Well, nine isn't easy, but I've got a twenty-dollar bill that says— hic!— I can roll it again. Who'll fade me?"

"Nine whites— and there were only eight at the start!"

"I wonder," Kathleen put in bitterly, "I wonder what was the color of the marble Mary kept for herself."

We gasped again— all of us.

"I'd like to know," said Jim.

"Why? It can't tell us anything."

"I'd like to find out anyhow, and there's no reason we shouldn't find out. This little game of marbles means life or death for one of us, and if there's a chance of learning something, I mean to learn it."

"So do I," Terry agreed.

We trooped back into the library again, all of us, I think, except Hilary, who was busy trying to throw a nine with the marbles which remained in the ashtray.

I could not help thinking how we had left the library out of respect for a dead body— and how we had returned to it because the safety of our own living bodies meant far more to us.

Mary was where we had left her.

I removed the newspaper which covered not only the face but the bosom, and I could see the green flannel bag which Mary had thrust under her dress.

I looked around among the women.

"Priss, will you take out that bag?"

She was weeping again, but she steeled herself. "Watch me, everybody! There'll be no trickery with me!"

Priss has long, tapering fingers, and she drew out the bag with the very tips of them.

"Even money that the marble is black," said Pete.

"Red, you mean," Kathleen corrected.

Priss placed the green flannel bag on the rug, took hold of it at the bottom very daintily, and lifted it slowly.

A marble rolled out.

It was white.

6

IT WAS a full minute, I think, before anybody spoke; and it was one of the longest minutes that I have ever lived through.

"That proves it," Jim said at last.

"Proves what?" I asked.

"That one of us is a murderer! One of us nine! Good God, I'm afraid to stay in the same room with myself!"

"It proves nothing of the kind," Kathleen broke in venomously. "I see it now. What a fool I was not to see it long ago!"

Drink shows up differences in people. When Hilary drinks, he becomes silent; when Kathleen drinks, she becomes talkative, and her inhibitions fly out at the window.

"What do you see now, Kathleen?" I asked gently.

"Mary planned to play a trick on us. She's so damned clever that she would think of something as fiendish as that! There were ten white marbles in the bag!"

"I saw her put in a red and a black."

"So did I," said Terry quickly.

"So did I," Kathleen admitted, "but she didn't, and we know it now."

Jim shook his head. "I don't agree with you at all; but assuming that she could have done it, what was her object in putting in ten whites?"

"Can't you see it, Jim? Can't everybody see it? We would all leave the room— nine of us. In the dark, how could we know if eight— or if nine— went through that door? When we were in the living room, we knew there were others there— but who can swear how many others? That left Mary alone here, with half an hour to work. She planted the false clues— any number of them— and one real one—"

"Which was?" Terry interrupted.

"The suicide note, of course. How did it read? 'I'm going to end it all, Mary,' or something like that. She left it in the typewriter, where we'd find it first thing. Then we'd fume and fuss, suspecting each other, and getting nowhere; and when we finally admitted we were licked, Mary would have the laugh on us. She's just mean enough to think of something like that."

Priss was at Kathleen, beating wildly at her with tiny fists. "Kathleen, you're lying!" she screamed. "Mary never had a mean thought in her life, and you know it!"

We separated them quickly, though Kathleen needed no help. She had caught Priscilla's wrists in her powerful grip, and had held her at arm's length, squirming and helpless.

"The laugh— if any— isn't on us now," Terry said icily. "If it's all the same to you, Kathleen, we'll leave Mary's character out of the discussion."

"But it isn't all the same to me!" she retorted.

"Then we'll leave it out, anyhow."

Jim laid a hand on Terry's shoulder. "Let her speak her piece, Terry, no matter whom it hurts. If she has any ideas, we want to hear them."

Kathleen glared about defiantly. "Thanks, Jim. Bert, you heard what I said. Well, I meant it. Mary set the stage. She wrote the note first of all. She smeared the weapons with her lipstick. She lay down on the couch. She pulled a newspaper over her face. She began to chuckle with joy at the thought of the nasty prank she was going to play on the rest of us, and then—"

"Then?"

"Do you remember that book of Dickens in which the old man dies of spontaneous combustion? He's so mean he just burns up inside? Something like that happened."

"Kathleen!"

"She lay there, bubbling over with admiration of her own damned cleverness—"

"Kathleen!"

It was Pete this time, but Terry shut him up.

"Telling herself what a wonderful, brilliant girl she was—"

"And then?" I asked, trying to keep my temper.

"She got so excited admiring herself that her heart stopped beating."

"Heart-failure, as you suggested before?"

"No," she snapped, "she died of conceit!"

Priss had wrenched herself free of Jim, who had been trying to quiet her. "I always knew you hated her, Kathleen! I knew it! You killed her yourself, and you're trying to make us think you didn't!"

As before, I assumed command. "Quiet, both of you! Quiet! I admit it would be the best of all solutions—"

"What would?"

"If Mary had arranged things to make all nine of us leave the room; if Mary had remained here alone; if she had planned to trick us; if— if she had passed away naturally while she was quite alone—"

"A girl who had never been sick a day?"

"It might have happened."

"Never!" said Priss. "Never!"

Kathleen snorted. "Telephone for a doctor, and have her examined. He'll tell you I'm right."

I looked at my watch. It was just after midnight. "If we are agreed on it, I can telephone for a doctor."

"Well, why don't you?"

"Because you may be wrong, Kathleen." She started to talk, but I cut her short. "The chances of a healthy young woman dropping dead under such circumstances— and at the precise moment which would make things most awkward for everybody— are not one in a billion."

"Even one chance is enough."

"If the doctor finds you are right, Kathleen— if he does— the cloud of suspicion which rests on every one of us will vanish."

"Well, does anybody object to that?"

"It will have been a terrible coincidence— nothing more. But if you should happen to be wrong—"

"I'm not wrong."

"If you were, it would mean taking one more person into our confidence; and while I think I know a doctor who can be bought, I'm not anxious to do it now."

"Why not?"

I was about to say something about the impossibility of smuggling a newcomer into the house without the knowledge of the servants, and of the publicity which would be sure to follow if they learned what had been going on, as they would if they saw the library in its present condition, when Priss interrupted again.

"If she was killed, Bert, you want to find out first who did it?"

"If it is possible, yes."

"Well, I'll stick with you. As Mary's best friend, I know that is what she would want. She would hate a scandal. She would want everything to be done quietly— as quietly as we can manage it."

Cynthia had been staring intently at Mary's face. She raised her voice ever so slightly. "Bert, come here!"

"Yes?"

"Look at her lips closely. She always used orchid lipstick. Look at her under lip— a little to the left—"

There was a small spot, somewhat lighter than it should have been.

I drew out my handkerchief and touched it.

It was a tiny disc of bright arterial blood. It had clotted, but there was enough moisture left to color the corner of the handkerchief.

"She had a hemorrhage," said Kathleen.

Remembering how she had fainted at the first discovery of Mary's death, I was amazed at her self-possession.

"Not enough blood for that," said Jim gravely.

"More than enough," Kathleen contradicted. "The rest of it went—inside. It was a natural death."

Jim raised his eyebrows. "A natural death— after which she lay down peacefully on her back, and pulled a newspaper over her face? I don't think so."

Priss, with heaving breast, glared at Kathleen as if she would have liked to kill her. "Trapped!" she said triumphantly. "You were clever, Kathleen, but not so clever as Mary, and you're trapped! Trapped!"

She became hysterical, and Sue and Cynthia half led, half carried her out of the room.

IT IS quarter of two, and the ten of us are still here. When I say ten, I mean ten, for Mary's body is on the sofa where we first found it, and we nine are in the living room at the moment, though every one of us has been in and out of the library— accompanied— many times. I emphasize "accompanied," for it

was one of the orders I gave. I said, "If there are any real clues, they must not be disturbed. There is no reason why we should not go from room to room and find out whatever we can; but nobody is ever to be in either room alone."

They agreed at once, and they saw to it themselves that no party of less than three persons ever passed through the library door.

When I began writing these notes, I handed the sheets which Priss had typed to Jim Halsey. I said, "Jim, everybody has a right to read them. Let the rest look over your shoulder; or read them aloud, just as you prefer."

Jim sat in a big armchair, with three others leaning over the back, or perching on the arms, and reading with him; and he passed the sheets to Cynthia, who sat in another chair, as he finished with them. Kathleen snatched at part of the manuscript, but Pete grabbed her before she could tear it up.

Only Hilary and Priss took no part in what was going on. Priss lay on a couch, looking like a wreck. She knew what she had written, and I saw no reason to disturb her. Hilary sat at a table at the other end of the room, and he was interested only in the liquor at his elbow. I saw that a bottle of Scotch was empty; I half-filled it with water from a tap in the lavatory, and he was so far gone that I knew he would drink it without discovering the difference when I brought it back to him.

And I sat by myself, at the typewriter which has already figured so prominently in the night's proceedings, and set down what was taking place while every detail was fresh and vivid in my mind.

My story is nearly complete.

I come now to the most terrible moment of all.

When I began I wrote that ten people had started playing a game, idiotic if you want to call it that, and that one of them had turned it into murder. Now I must state how we all know this to be a fact. As I have written, the possibility of natural death was discussed at length and was thrown out, the ten white marbles proved nothing, and our investigation of the mass of clues in the library led us nowhere.

It occurred to Priss, when she had quieted down, that we should examine the ashtrays in that room.

I asked her why.

"If the butts have red stains, there were two women; if half of them are white, Mary was killed by a man."

We investigated, with Pete Logan accompanying us, and watching us solemnly; but there were many ashtrays and many butts. We could identify the cigarettes which Mary herself had smoked, for as we all knew, she habitually used an orchid-colored lipstick. But such cigarettes were to be found everywhere, and no conclusions could be drawn.

Jim Halsey had suggested investigating the cupboard where the games are stowed, and we did that. There were four Chinese checker games, and there were more marbles than would have been required by five or six.

"The criminal," said Jim, "could have put the red and black checkers back where they came from, and he could have taken out two more whites. That is what he must have done. Now, which of your guests knew where the games are kept? Only those would come under suspicion."

I threw up my hands. I am not given to making friends hastily, and every person in the house had been my guest before. "They all knew."

Jim studied the front of the cupboard, faced with carved paneling, and opened by a knob in the center. "There should be fingerprints here."

I agreed. "Mine: I just opened it."

"There should be more interesting fingerprints."

I shook my head. "A murderer who was clever enough to make the exchange of marbles after the murder, was clever enough to see to it that there would be no awkward fingerprints anywhere. It's easy to wipe them away with a handkerchief."

"The cards on the weapons: there may be prints on them."

"Yes: we've all handled them."

"The weapons themselves—"

"Everybody's prints or none."

"How can you be so sure?" Jim asked suddenly.

"Surely you're not suspecting me, old man?" I countered. "Even if I were going to commit a murder, I would not begin with a guest under my own roof."

He smiled wryly. "I suppose The Book of Etiquette says it isn't done in the best society; but I'd give a guess that Mrs. Post also disapproves of murder anywhere."

"I think she is right," I said emphatically.

Cynthia had had an idea: a lie detector, she was positive, would prove all of us, except one, innocent. I vetoed the suggestion at once. While a man skilled in the use of such an instrument could doubtless be brought here by Monday, Mary's death could not be kept secret so long. We would be found out when a maid brought breakfast to her bedside in the morning and saw that her room was empty; and to call in any stranger would force me to call in the police as well.

I had expected the best suggestions to come from Terry. He has an analytical mind, and I was sure he would see clearly where the rest of us floundered; but the only thought that came from him did not help. He reminded me that a window had been open when we had first entered the library. Somebody or something, he insisted, had passed through that window.

We investigated, though I knew in advance that it would be useless, and Jim Halsey, who accompanied us, agreed. The window opened on a flagged terrace, and on that the rain was still pelting hard. If any person had left by that route, he would have been soaked to the skin in a few minutes; and as I proved to Terry, it would have been impossible for him to return after we had closed and fastened the window. As a matter of fact, there were no absentees at that moment.

"It is possible," Terry said, "that some stranger— not one of us— went in and out this way."

I doubted it, as I still doubt it. "He would have left tracks. There would have been mud on his shoes."

"He might have brought in nothing but water," Terry insisted. "Look, there's a puddle at the window."

"Rain which blew in," said Jim Halsey. "If any outsider had walked through it, he would have made marks on the rugs."

"And are you sure there were none?"

"I didn't see any."

"They would have dried by now."

"I think Cynthia would have noticed them," I said. "That's one of our rarest rugs: the price we paid for it set some kind of a record at the auction." I went down on my hands and knees and felt it carefully. "It is dry."

But Terry was not satisfied. "Why was the window open?"

"To make the clue about the bust on the pedestal more convincing." I took up the card and read it aloud: " 'There is a bullethole through the head of the bust. Would have marked the holes, but was afraid ink would hurt the marble.' "

"A poor reason to account for the window," Terry persisted. "A man so considerate that he wouldn't put an ink mark on a valuable piece of statuary wouldn't open a window and let rain blow in, to the possible damage of obviously expensive rugs. The two don't go together."

"You believe—?"

"A man's acts are an index to his character. One person typed out the card; another opened the window. Yes."

"Are you sure it was a man?"

"I wish I were."

I have mentioned these details because they indicate what thoughts were in our minds, even if they did nothing to clear up the situation.

It was Kathleen Logan, however, who made a suggestion which brought us much more light than we had hoped for. She came up to me, arms akimbo,

expression truculent, reeking of liquor. "So you don't want to call in a doctor?" she began.

"Not yet. I have told you why not."

"All right. But if Mary was killed, there should be a wound. I know something about medicine. Let me examine the body."

Priss was on her feet in an instant. "No!"

"Why not?" Kathleen was surprisingly calm.

"You hated her! Let you examine her? Why, I wouldn't trust—"

Kathleen interrupted. "Sue will help. So will Cynthia— if she has the nerve."

I did not like the sneer. "Cynthia has the nerve— but let me make it clear that if there is to be an examination, all of us have a right to be there, men and women. If there is a wound, we all want to see it."

Jim Halsey agreed at once. "It's life or death to one of us."

Pete chimed in. "I want to be there."

"You would," Kathleen sneered.

Terry did not say a word.

Hilary, with his head on the table, was apparently asleep.

I led the way back into the library.

Except for Hilary, they all followed.

8

WE GATHERED about the sofa.

"If there is a wound," Jim said, "it should have stained her dress."

"Logical enough," Kathleen agreed. "I don't see any stain. Let's turn her over."

She grasped Mary's shoulders, and Sue and Cynthia took hold of the body lower down. I was amazed to see the coolness with which the three women, one of whom had actually fainted earlier in the evening, applied themselves to the task. But, as I have written before, an individual's own living body is more important to him than the dead body of even a good friend.

They turned Mary over.

The back of her dress— what there was of it— was as spotless as the front. From the skirt emerged her legs, in silk stockings. She was wearing high-heeled red slippers.

Terry was at my side, actually touching me, and I could feel him quiver. "There's no wound. That ought to be enough," he said.

Kathleen shook her head. "Not when our lives are at stake, Terry. We're going to take off her dress."

"I forbid it!" Priss gasped.

Kathleen stared at her coolly. "Didn't you write about the nude swimming party right in this house in which both of you were mixed up?"

Priss bowed her face into her hands and wept. "When I wrote that, I didn't expect you to read it."

"But you went on the party, anyhow?"

Sue put an end to the debate. "Kathleen is right. We're not children, and this is a deadly serious business for us. If we have to, we'll take off every stitch she's wearing."

Cynthia undid a fastening.

Sue pulled open a zipper.

Kathleen seized the sides of the dress and pulled down with what seemed to me wholly unnecessary violence.

Underneath Mary had been wearing no undergarment. Except for her famous double-stranded pearl necklace, which she wore at all times, because she believed that pearls lost luster if locked up in a vault, her body lay before us nude to the waist.

It is no part of my duty to describe what I saw.

It would take the pen of a professional writer like Terry to do justice to the beauty of Mary's figure: the hips, strangely narrow for a woman; the stomach, flat, with no superfluous flesh; the torso, lovely, with its exquisite contours gleaming in the light. It was the body of an athlete, and at the same time it was the body of a beautiful woman.

I said, in all reverence, "What a wonderful model she would have been for any sculptor!"

"Marvelous!" Terry agreed.

Kathleen said viciously, "With a body like that, I can see why she went in for nude swimming parties. Well, I don't see any wound. Let's take off the rest of her things."

"Don't! Please don't!" wailed Priss.

It was high time for me to take a hand. "Kathleen, if there's a wound, it must be above the waist—"

"How do you know?" she snapped.

"There was a drop of bright, arterial blood on her lips. That came from her lungs."

"How do you know?" Kathleen repeated.

But Cynthia had had quite enough. "Bert is right," she managed to say, clutching at me for support. "If there is a wound, it should be above the waist, and I don't see any."

"Nor I," said Sue.

"Nor I," Jim agreed.

Pete said nothing, but he nodded.

Kathleen shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, well—"

From behind us came a strangulated gasp.

Hilary, tenderly carrying an empty glass, had joined us unnoticed.

He stared.

He flushed, the color mounting visibly from his chin to his hair.

"I beg your pardon, madam," he sputtered with alcoholic dignity. "I didn't know— hic!— that you weren't dressed to receive callers. My mistake."

He bowed, turned, and stumbled gravely out of the room, pausing only to leave his empty glass on a table and appropriate a half-filled one which he found there.

"If there's no wound," said Terry in a choking voice, "cover her up."

But Kathleen was merciless. "I'd like to turn her over again first. I want to see every inch of her: every inch."

She grasped the body by the shoulders—and Priss screamed, not loudly, but amply loud enough to be horribly startling to the little group gathered about the sofa.

"There!" screamed Priss, pointing. "There! There!"

"Where?"

"Take off the necklace! Take off the necklace!"

Kathleen lifted the head, and Sue, efficient as ever, undid the complicated clasp. The double strand of pearls slid across the bosom of the sleek body to fall, glowing, into the upholstery of the couch by its side. But one large pearl, round, glistening, remained at the spot where the lovely line of the throat merged into the fainter one of the collarbone.

The women saw what I, at first, did not. They detected, at a glance, that the one pearl which remained was not part of the famous string which had fallen.

I said, stupidly, "One of the pearls broke out of the necklace."

"No," said Cynthia, "this is a cheap imitation. The pearls in the necklace are real."

She tried to brush the fake pearl away.

It did not move.

"See! See!" screamed Priss.

Cynthia grasped the pearl firmly and tugged. "It seems—it seems to be fixed in the flesh," she said in a small voice. "I can't— I can't loosen it. If I try it again, I'll faint: I know I'll faint."

I put my arms about Cynthia quickly.

Jim Halsey's fingers replaced hers.

Cynthia, kneeling at the side of the body, had tried to pull the pearl toward herself and had failed. Jim, standing at Mary's head, pulled upward, and it came away quite easily: a big, imitation pearl, with what seemed to be an interminable length of stout bronze hatpin fastened to it.

It had been driven in up to the head.

It came out— as a sword comes out of a long scabbard— and only a tiny hole remained to show where it had been so deeply sunk in.

Jim Halsey held up the hatpin. It had emerged from the flesh so cleanly that not even a drop of blood clung to it. "Anybody ever see this thing before?" he asked quietly.

"They aren't worn these days," said Kathleen.

"Obvious, isn't it," said Jim, "that one of us had this hidden on his or her person when we sat down to dinner? Obvious that the murderer had the crime planned out in detail several hours in advance?"

"No," I said, "quite the contrary. I put it into the clothes hamper myself. I gathered all the weapons I could find, and this was in the storeroom with a hat which Cynthia wore when she went to a masquerade as a Gibson girl years ago."

I think it was a full minute before there was a sound other than Priscilla's weeping. I could imagine what thoughts were racing through all our minds; but nobody wanted to express them— then.

It was Terry who finally spoke as we stood there, staring at the body, watching the tiny hole become— or seem to become— even tinier. "There was a man named Webster," he said, in no more than a throaty whisper, "who wrote nine of the saddest words that have ever been set on paper." He bowed his head: "'Cover her up. Mine eyes dazzle. She died young.'"

The women slipped the dress over the lovely body, and we all walked out of the room.

3

I, Kathleen Logan*3 A.M.*

I, KATHLEEN LOGAN, am continuing this story.

I've got to, in self-defense.

The others are sitting around the room, looking as if they had been on a ten-day jag; but I'm myself, thank you, with the wits God gave me, and I'll know how to protect myself in the clinches no matter what comes next.

They're all beginning to look at me in a funny way.

If I don't speak for myself, who'll speak for me?

A lawyer, when they decide I'm the answer to "Whodunit?"

Not if I can stop it!

I'm taking over.

Why not?

Who says I'm tight?

I know when I'm tight, and I know when I'm not, and I'm not.

I've been drinking nothing but small Scotch and sodas.

Six or eight.

To stay right side up, never mix your drinks. It's as simple as that.

Anybody who says I'm tight—

Well, it won't help to call names—

But I could walk a chalk line, or balance a cane on my chin, or recite "Frankie and Johnny," complete with the extra stanzas, this minute, and I'll bet there's nobody else here who could do that.

And I can work the typewriter without opening my eyes.

Like this:

Gibe ne liverty or gibe ne deatj.

I didn't open my eyes to write that, and I flipped the sheet of paper out of the machine without looking at it; but you can bet it's right.

Priss said she told all, but when she wrote that she'd taken a course in stenography and typewriting, she didn't mention that we took it together, and that I was better at it than she was.

If I had wanted a job, I could have had one.

Like that!

The principal said so: a string bean of a man with a face like a can opener. He said, "Miss Stevens, you have been an excellent pupil." Then he tried to pet

my arm, and I said, "Thank you, but I'm not staying for the post-graduate work."

Quick reactions, that's the secret.

I think fast, I learn fast, I act fast.

I see more in a minute than Priss sees in an hour.

Only I come right out and say so instead of beating around the bush.

Priss says I killed Mary.

So sorry.

Somebody else had that pleasure.

For it must have been a pleasure.

It wasn't mine.

Worse luck.

Some people get all the breaks.

I don't.

I've got to be careful what I write: somebody will read this and say, "Aha! She had a motive! She hated her!"

Of course I did.

But I didn't hate her any worse than I hate the rest of my good friends.

What's that line I heard somewhere?

It fits Mary.

"She had no enemies, but her friends didn't like her."

I ask you, if I were tight, would I be remembering literary gems like that?

And quoting them correctly?

Certainly not!

Shaw said it.

If he didn't, he was sorry he didn't.

Or Whistler— James Abbott MacNeill.

Little man with a gold-headed cane.

Butterfly.

Cast your eye over these pages.

Honest, do they look like the work of a lady who is blotto?

You be the judge!

Though I have plenty of sorrows to drown.

"Yes," said the defendant, "yes."

One of my best friends dead in the next room, and I'm suspected of having killed her!

Sue, whose face is like an open book, saying, "Kathleen, I wouldn't have believed it possible."

She doesn't say it.

She looks it.

I can read that kind of speech as easily as if printed in six-foot letters and pasted on billboards.

Terry giving me a wounded look, like a dying gazelle. "You, Kathleen!"

Priss putting it into words.

Bert, polite, but wondering how I crashed this party.

Cynthia ditto; likewise ditto ditto.

Jim reserving judgment— always reserving judgment.

Even Pete, who has eyes for every woman except his own wife, looking at me as if he weren't sure!

Hilary would speak up for me, but he's fast asleep.

The wisest of us all— Hilary.

That's why I'm taking my turn at the typewriter.

It's here.

I sat down at it.

I'd like to see anybody try to push me away.

Priss has had her say.

Cat!

Bert has had his.

Moron!

I.Q., 32° Fahrenheit.

Between them, things look black for me.

I know what's coming next: "Have you anything to say before sentence of death is pronounced on you?"

Yes, your Honor: quite a lot.

"Well, what is it?"

I'm innocent.

"The jury did not think so."

Hang the jury.

"That is not usual, even in capital cases—"

Wait a minute!

Wait a minute!

That heavy judicial humor!

Where's the evidence?

"The hatpin."

Never saw it before in all my life.

Honor bright!

Those long ones went out of style before I was born.

There should be a law in this country to make men read "Vogue."

Anyhow—

"Proceed."

If I had killed her, I wouldn't have used a hatpin.

"Why not?"

Too painless.

"Order in the courtroom!"

If I had killed her, which I didn't, I would have done it with an axe with a bad edge and nitric acid poured on it.

See *Bab Ballads*— Gilbert, Sir William S.

Same man that wrote *The Mikado*.

Literary quotation number two.

But I didn't kill her: I wouldn't hurt a fly.

"Madam, you are not accused of killing a fly."

Laugh.

You have to laugh when the judge makes a joke.

"Madam, this is no laughing matter."

I'll say it isn't!

It may be funny to everybody else, but it isn't funny to me!

"If you have nothing further to say, I shall now pronounce sentence."

Whoa, there!

Whoa!

Who said I didn't have anything further to say?

I've got lots to say!

Lots and lots and lots and lots!

"Proceed."

In English, that means go ahead.

You bet.

I'm going to.

"Proceed."

Don't nag me; I heard you the first time.

You big stuffed shirt, sitting up there, sipping at a glass of water, while a woman is on trial for her life!

"I shall now"— sip— "pronounce"— sip— "sentence."

Don't you ever read poetry?

"Take her up tenderly, handle with care,
Fashioned so slenderly, young and so fair.

Fragile. Use no hooks."

Literary quotation number three.

Hood, Thos., "Bridge of Sighs."

I ask you, am I, or am I not sober?

3:20 A.M.

PRISS and I have one thing in common.

She wrote that she hammered away on the typewriter because if she didn't she'd go crazy.

I know how she felt, because I feel that way myself.

It's like whistling in the dark, if you know what I mean.

I've been through hell.

I'm going through hell now.

To think that I, who can't go to one of those melancholy movies without an extra handkerchief to cry in, had to be here this night, of all nights!

When we found Mary was dead, I fainted.

Then I wanted to go away— far, far away.

They wouldn't let me go.

But I didn't faint when things began to happen after that.

I drank— like a lady.

I just drank.

I kept my wits about me.

The first shock inoculated me against the others.

I didn't faint again when Jim began to pull on that pearl-headed hatpin, and what seemed like yards and yards of it came out of Mary's body. Jim pulled so slowly— as if he enjoyed it and wanted to make it last long— and it kept on coming— as if it were endless and would come forever— and I felt as if my stomach and entrails were coming out of my own mouth.

Once I read how the Chinese killed people by running stakes through the lengths of their bodies, and I thought of it.

Ugh!

But no fainting for anybody, though I could see Pete turn green, and Cynthia would have dropped if Bert hadn't reached out and grabbed her.

"Did you ever see this pin, Kathleen?"

Jim Halsey asking that, matter-of-fact like.

What did he expect me to answer?

My pin, maybe?

Use it to pin hats on my bobbed hair?

Carry it around, because it's so handy for murdering my friends?

Lost it; nice to get it back?

No, I never saw it before.

It's out of date.

When they wear hatpins today, they're short ones.

Then Bert admitted he was the simpleton who had put it in the clothes hamper, and I felt myself beginning to catch my second wind, and I knew that come what might, I'd be ready for it.

Catch as catch can!

We got out of that room— somehow, and Bert, the gibbering idiot, brought the hatpin along.

Thrifty Bert!

Perfectly good hatpin!

Give it to Cynthia for a birthday present!

I don't like to look at it.

It's one thing that a woman has been killed.

It's another to see the horrible, long, fat, pointed pin that killed her. The woman is dead; somehow the pin is alive.

No matter how the styles change, I'll never wear one.

I couldn't!

But Bert, who has no nerves, put it down on the table in the living room, not far from the nine white marbles which we had left there earlier in the evening.

Thank God, I don't have to look in that direction, or if I do, I'll concentrate on Hilary Densmore, who is sleeping soundly, with his head resting on his elbow not a foot away from the accursed thing.

Good old Hilary!

When you can't drink, sleep.

When you can't sleep, drink.

Hilary is in for a shock when he wakes and we tell him what the hatpin was used for.

But Kathleen Logan is herself, and her brain was never working better.

3

3:35 A.M.

"SHE DIDN'T do it herself."

Jim Halsey talking.

Everybody listening to Jim while lapping up all the liquor in sight; and Jim talking as if he had been in the next room and had watched.

I'll bite.

Why didn't she do it herself?

"What could have been her reason?"

Meanness; just meanness.

"Not good enough. Think of that girl, young, beautiful, healthy, rich. She had everything to live for."

Young?

I'll grant that. She was thirty; I'm thirty-three. Any woman younger than I am is a mere child; any woman older is middle-aged.

Beautiful?

Matter of opinion. I never cared for those boyish-form females.

Epicene, I say.

Would I think of a word like that if I were tight?

Echo answers no.

Thank you, Echo.

Healthy?

From the neck down, yes.

From the neck up?

It's time to use Bert's favorite word: from the neck up, uninhibited.

In plain English, on the loose. She was married once and divorced. Since then her occupation has been stealing other women's husbands.

Rich?

Are you sure of that, Jim?

"Sure of it."

Well, how sure of it?

"The pearls—"

They're real. We all know that. But she'd sell everything else first.

"She was buying: not selling."

Got your share of the business, eh, Jim?

"I know positively that her bank balance is still in six figures. Why should she kill herself?"

Meanness, as I said before.

"Why should she pick such a peculiar way to do it?"

A peculiar girl. And what's peculiar about the way? It worked, didn't it?

"Why at such a moment?"

Why ask "why" about a woman whose life was all "why"?

Sue is waving a bottle of smelling salts back and forth under her nose. Priss is blubbering all over herself. Cynthia has a contribution: "I think—I think we women will agree that no woman would kill herself like that."

Why not? It has lots to recommend it: it wasn't messy, and it must have been nearly painless.

"That glorious pearl necklace: the thought of staining the pearls with blood! A woman would choose some other way, or she would take off the necklace first."

I wouldn't.

I'd bleed all over the damned pearls.

If I were going to die, I wouldn't give a hoot what happened to them; and Mary didn't stain them anyhow.

But I shan't say so.

Watch your step, Kathleen!

Bert nods.

That's one of the things he does best.

He thinks Cynthia's acute.

Not cute: acute.

He thinks she proved it when she married him.

I'll bet she proves it again when she divorces him.

"Of course, darling."

Why doesn't Pete call me darling sometimes?

As if he meant it?

I'll bet he calls other men's wives darling.

"Darling Sue."

"Darling Cynthia."

Disgusting!

"But that isn't all. If we are to believe that poor Mary killed herself—"

Poor Mary! Six figures in the bank!

"—we must believe that she first tuned in that brass band, next turned off the library lights, next opened the door between the two rooms, next walked all the way to the sofa in the dark without tripping over anything, next lay down, next ran a hatpin into herself right up to the hilt, next pulled a newspaper over her face, and finally died smiling. I'm not prepared to agree with that."

Jim said it, and I certainly wouldn't agree with it myself.

I never agree with anything which can't be stated in ten words.

When Jim makes a speech, everybody forgets the beginning long before he reaches the end. If there's anything in metempsychosis, he will be a traffic cop in his next avatar.

Wasn't that last sentence a lulu?

If I can dish out language like that I can stand three or four more small Scotch and sodas.

Anyhow, listening to Jim is dry work.

My lord and master is talking:

"Suicide is more logical than murder."

I've changed my opinions on the subject, but I'll tune in.

"Mary was an athlete. She was strong. I wrestled with her once, and she threw me."

First time he's ever mentioned it! But how Pete must have enjoyed wrestling with a pretty woman!

"No woman killed her. Only a man could have been strong enough."

Jim Halsey cuts in. "Only a man, Pete— but not you?"

"Wasn't trying to whitewash myself, Jim. Mary threw me because she slipped a jiu-jitsu hold on me. I'm plenty strong enough to down her."

Strong enough, if he's not wrestling!

"But it wouldn't have been easy. She could have screamed."

Who would have heard her, with a sliding door closed between and two radios playing *Scheherezade*?

"She would have screamed."

Jim is a mind-reader after all. "Door closed— *Scheherezade*," he puts in.

"That isn't all. If she had been attacked, she would have marked the fellow who attacked her. She would have clawed his face with her nails. She would have scratched. She would have bitten."

She would have fought like the hell-cat she was.

Naturally.

"She would have given as good as she took."

She didn't, therefore she committed suicide.

Q. E. D.

Only it doesn't make sense.

Jim shakes his head. "You can't get away from one fact."

What's that?

"After it was over, somebody— some person— covered her face with a newspaper."

"She did it herself."

"Never."

"It was part of her plan."

"Pete, do you really believe that after such a wound, a woman could do that?"

"Why not?"

"If the stab didn't kill her outright, it left her in such pain that she couldn't have moved."

"I dunno," says Pete.

I get it.

I get it now!

Pete is sure I did it, and he's trying to save my neck! First he's trying to prove that no woman could have killed Mary— I know that already, and I'm

going to prove it when the time comes— and next he wants to show that no man did it.

Saving both of us, that's Pete's idea; but women and children first!

Good old Pete!

Loves me, loves me not, loves me, loves me not, loves me!

Eyes for all the other women, but his heart for his own wife!

What a man!

What have I ever done to inspire such a love?

Plenty, if you ask me.

But he's human. Look at him now, swelling up when he catches my eye. I smile at him from my corner, and he knows I've overheard.

"The question is, would a wound like that be immediately fatal?" Jim Halsey talking, and Jim, for a wonder, saying it in one sentence.

"The wound is on the right side."

"The wound is on the left side."

"On the right side."

"On the left side."

Pete throws me a look: "We'd better go back and examine it again."

4

3:55 A.M.

WE TROOP into the library, half a dozen of us: Pete; me; Terry; Bert; Jim; Sue.

There have been plenty of horrors tonight, but we're getting used to them, and we can take them in our stride now.

Bert uncovers the face and the throat.

We all stare.

There isn't any trace of a wound.

We examine.

A mosquito bite would show against that white skin.

Nothing shows— nothing.

"I remember distinctly it was on the right."

Where was it Bert?

"On the left— her left."

Terry?

"Left."

Sue?

"Left."

Kathleen?

"Not sure."

"What do you mean, 'Not sure'?"

"Well, there isn't a sign of a mark now, is there?"

Jim?

"I can settle it absolutely. I stood at the head of the couch. I pulled it out with my left hand. I remember it distinctly, because I'm left-handed."

Bert cuts in. "It's true. Cynthia, kneeling here, tried to pull it toward her with her right hand. She couldn't. You stood at Mary's head, and you pulled the pin with your left hand. That's how I described it when I wrote it up."

"Jim is left-handed: everybody knows that," Sue puts in quietly.

We all get what she means: Pete has tried to prove he couldn't have done it, not being strong enough; now Jim is proving he couldn't have done it either, being left-handed.

"It was on her left— downstage." Terry talking, and when he talks, it's usually worth listening to. "I watched Jim draw it out: a stout pin with a bronze shaft. It must have passed under the clavicle— the collar bone."

"It did. I felt the bone with my fingers when I took hold of the head of the pin, and I felt it again while I was pulling."

Terry nods. "A wound on either side might or might not have killed. A writer picks up all sorts of queer information. On the right side, it would have struck a welter of big veins and arteries: it's there that the knife is driven when you stick a pig. On the left side it could have passed through the aortic arch— it might have gone through the aorta twice— and it might have ended up in the heart itself."

It's grisly stuff, but we've got to hear it.

Explain some more, Terry.

"On the right side it might not kill quickly."

Why not? You've told us you stick a pig there.

"A knife wound— a slit— will kill in a few seconds. But this was a punctured wound. There would have been holes in the big vessels, but the pin would have plugged them, and if the blood didn't get out, and the air didn't get in, she might have recovered. On the left side, a pin so stout might cause a hemorrhage into the pericardium— the sac enclosing the heart— and that might be fatal rapidly."

How rapidly?

"Ten minutes— twenty minutes— an hour."

"Perhaps," Jim Halsey speaking, and choosing his words carefully, "perhaps Mary didn't scream because there was only a matter of seconds between the time she felt the prick of the pin and the moment of actual death."

"No. It was minutes— many minutes."

Funny, isn't it?

Pete giving all the women a clean bill of health— on account of me— and then carefully whitewashing himself; Jim skipping the women— Pete has cleared them already—but showing that a left-hander couldn't have done it; and then Terry sticking out his chin, and admitting he knows more about anatomy than all the rest of us put together?

Bert gets the point, and thinks a confession is coming. "Wouldn't you say, Terry, that the wound proves the criminal knew exactly what he was doing?"

Terry sidesteps the accusation without half trying. "I wouldn't, Bert. A man who knows what he's doing doesn't stop with a wound which may not kill. He strikes a second time to make sure."

"But the detail you mentioned a second ago: that bunch of big arteries and veins on the right side. Frankly, I didn't know about it. I thought the heart was on the left."

"Most of it is."

"Exactly. So if I were going to stab somebody, to kill him, I mean, I'd stab to the left. See? But if it should come out that we were wrong about the location of the wound, and if it should be found on the right side—"

I catch the drift. Terry has laid himself open, and Bert is willing to be cleared at Terry's expense.

But Terry doesn't fall.

"The side doesn't matter," he says, and he sounds tired. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. Nobody runs a hatpin into a woman, thinking it's going to do her good. The person who struck the blow meant to kill."

"He was a right-hander?" This from Sue.

"He must have been."

Sue looks at him kindly. He has given Jim a verdict of "Not Guilty." She repays him: "He must also have been as tall or taller than Mary? To strike such a blow, the man must have been quite a bit taller?"

Terry answers as quietly as if he has forgotten that he himself is only five foot eight or nine. "I think so."

Bert is still polite, but he's getting peeved. "Jim couldn't have done it. Terry couldn't have done it. Pete couldn't have done it. That leaves only Hilary and me."

It is time for me to speak my piece.

Exactly! And while you are on the subject, Bert, tell us why, when you were collecting weapons which could be used to commit a murder, you weren't satisfied with swords, daggers, guns, pistols, hammers, sash-weights, and butchers' cleavers, but had to add a hatpin with a bronze shaft to the assortment?

I have never known Bert to lose his temper. "Kathleen, if I—if I wanted to kill somebody, do you really believe I would invite her to my own house to do it?"

He's asking for it, and besides, he suspects me. "Why not, Bert? Where could you do it more conveniently? The comforts of home, and all that?"

I feel an arm around my waist.

It is Pete's.

He's not my ideal of a husband, and about once a week I'd like to murder him; but sometimes he does the right thing at the right moment.

5

4:15 A.M.

WHAT A bedraggled lot we are!

Nine men and women in evening clothes, and dawn coming sure as judgment!

Morning newspapers coming, and the milk, and bacon and eggs, and another day!

We all need sleep, and we look it.

Many a night I've stayed up till sunrise, eating, drinking, dancing, having a good time; but this night isn't like any other I've ever been through, and I'm so tired I could scream.

Watch your step, Kathleen!

My body may be tired, but my head isn't. I'm grateful for Pete's well-meant efforts to prove I'm not a criminal, but I can do even more than that: I can prove that all of us four women are innocent, and I'm coming out with it in good time.

The others are gathered here and there.

The men's collars are wilting.

The women's make-ups are running.

The rain has eased up, and we've opened some of the windows; but it's hot even in this big room: muggy and hot.

Bert says we'll stay here until there's a solution.

That suits me.

That suits everybody.

We'll stay, and we'll see who cracks first.

Eeny, meeny, miny, mo—

They are talking, talking their heads off.

I can cock my ear without leaving the typewriter, and I can hear every voice in the room.

Bert and Cynthia are dignified, saying little. That is as it should be.

Pete, poor dear, has had his say. Now he's shutting up.

Jim and Sue have mentioned at least a dozen times that Jim is left-handed, therefore innocent. It becomes a bit wearisome.

Priss hasn't said a word to defend herself. She doesn't have to. Not only is she a frail little thing, much too weak to be dangerous to anybody, but she was Mary's closest friend, and to cap the climax, like Jim, she's left-handed. She can think of only two things: powdering her nose, which gets shiny every time another tear runs down her cheek, and glaring at me. She's so sure I'm guilty that I'm almost convinced myself.

Terry has been talking more than usual. He repeated his little discourse on anatomy for Priss and Cynthia, and now he's doing it again, with added details about the jugular, the carotids, and the first rib. He's passing around a volume of the Encyclopedia, with a diagram shot through with lines like hatpins, but nobody cares.

It proves nothing.

Nothing proves anything.

And Hilary is still asleep.

Pete came over to me and said, "Don't you think we ought to wake him?"

Wake him?

He's tight.

He's sleeping it off.

Wake him now, and he'll be hard to handle, and what's more, he won't add a useful thought to the useless ones which are so plentiful in this gathering of eight brilliant minds.

Leave him alone.

We set ourselves a problem.

Solve it.

What wouldn't I give to have Sherlock Holmes here; or Hercule Poirot; or even C. Auguste Dupin!

They'd find a solution; or would they?

Poirot: fat little Belgian, talking bad English, but always right up with the hounds at the kill.

Holmes: the violin; a few shots of cocaine— like my small Scotch and sodas; and then, "Elementary, my dear Watson."

If only it were elementary!

Dupin: thinking machine, wrong as often as he is right. What sailor, for instance, making year-long trips to Borneo on a Maltese sailing vessel, would own "a residence" in Paris, or would be able to keep an orang-outang in it without the neighbors knowing all about it? Mary pointed that out when we

were discussing mystery stories earlier in the evening; it comes back to me now.

I'm suddenly reminded that a library window was open, and that Terry is positive that somebody or something passed through it! A tramp, coming in through that window, might have killed Mary, but would have taken the pearls: a glimpse of them, and the sight of Mary, all alone, would have been a great temptation; but only an ape would have killed and would have left empty-handed.

Good Heavens, are we back to The Murders in the Rue Morgue again?

Was it an orang-outang, or a gorilla, or a man from Mars?

I shouldn't have written that.

It's insane.

But such ideas come to you when you try to do heavy thinking at half past four in the morning.

Steady, Kathleen!

Atta girl!

I know Pete isn't guilty— why should he be?— and I can prove no woman is guilty.

It's subtle, but then I'm subtle, too.

Listen to this:

If a woman was in that room with Mary, she was there for half an hour.

If she was there for half an hour, her perfume would have stayed when she left.

I would have recognized it when I went in.

Priss wears "Coq d'Or."

Cynthia wears "Tailspin."

Sue wears "Arpège."

I would have recognized any of the three, and I am the only person here, man or woman, who would have recognized them.

Why?

Because both Mary and I wore Chanel!

It's like wearing colored glasses: look through them, and objects of the same color are light; objects of all other colors are dark.

Wear one perfume, and you won't detect the same perfume on somebody else. You'll be odor-blind to that brand, if that puts it clearly enough; but you'll be sensitive to all other perfumes, and if you know them as well as I do, you'll spot which it is like a shot.

Well, I walked into that room, and I smelled nothing; and time and again I've walked into a room and said, "Ah! So Carol has been here?" or "Nancy has been here."

I smelled nothing.

Therefore none of the women had been in the room with Mary.

Therefore if one of us is a criminal, it's a man.

Not Pete; but Jim, Terry, Hilary or Bert.

I HAVE just read this page aloud to the others.

My word, what a boomerang!

Bert said, politely as ever, "You're sure, Kathleen, that no other woman could have recognized Sue's perfume— or Cynthia's— or Priss's?"

"They all recognized the Chanel which Mary was wearing, and which they weren't. If there had been a second one mixed with it, it wouldn't have been easy for them to name it. But I could have named it."

"Because you were wearing Chanel, and were, as you just read to us, 'odor-blind' to that perfume?"

"Correct."

Bert caught Jim's eye, and a glance passed between them. "Don't you realize, Kathleen," Jim said at length, "that you're piling up the evidence against yourself? Not one of the other women could have been in the room with Mary— you've just proved it— but you could have been there with her! You wear the same perfume as Mary, and your having been there would only have made the odor of Chanel, which they all recognized, a little stronger!"

I hadn't thought of that!

"Want me to draw a diagram?" said Bert.

Jim said persuasively, "All we need now is your confession. We're all good friends, Kathleen. Why not make a clean breast of it?"

My word!

6

WATCH your step!

Watch your step!

From now on I'm going to put down only what the others say, and not a word of what I think.

I think too much.

It's possible that the last Scotch was one too many.

Bert is acting the gracious host. "Let's talk this over as if we were all somebody else. Let's compare notes; say what we please; agree that no matter what is said nobody will be offended. Assuming it wasn't a suicide, and we know Mary didn't kill herself, who thinks I did it?"

Jim grins: it's like a vaudeville act, with the straight man feeding material to the comedian. "Bert, I won't insult you by saying that you wouldn't commit a murder under any circumstances; but I honestly believe that your sense of the proprieties is so strong that you would never kill a guest under your own roof."

That's a left-handed compliment, but Bert likes it. It sounds fine to the owner of an ocean-going yacht, who knows you hoist this flag if you're having canapés and cocktails, but another one if you're going to church. "Thanks, Jim. Anybody else care to express an opinion?"

Priss stops sniffing long enough to say, "I agree." She sniffs again. "I really mean it."

Cynthia nods, and pats Bert's hand.

Sue nods.

Terry raps out, "Yes."

Bert looks right at me. "You, too, Kathleen?"

"I guess so. You're like Hunding."

"Who is Hunding?"

"The gentleman who wouldn't kill Siegmund while he was in his house."

Bert knows Die Walküre as well as I do, but he blinks. I guess we're all pretty tired. "He didn't kill him?"

"Not until the next act. In the first act he merely sings to him in a deep, bass voice. The result is that Sig runs away with Hunding's wife, and Hunding absolutely has to do something about it."

Fifth literary gem, but not a smile is cracked. The audience is too frazzled to appreciate my brand of humor.

"We'll go on to Pete. I don't think he did it. What do you think, Jim?"

"Pete hasn't the guts."

Believe it or not, Pete nods and smiles as if he liked to hear it.

"Pete has no motive." This from Priss.

Terry wrinkles his forehead. "It's often the man with no apparent motive who's guilty."

"Terry!"

Bert quiets him with a word. "Pete! We've agreed that anything goes." He looks around. "Other parties to be heard from?"

Priss pipes up. "Just this: I can't conceive of Pete's being a murderer."

"Thank you, Priss."

All right to thank her, but he didn't have to kiss her.

"Anybody else?" They looked at my lord and master and agree he's a jellyfish. I knew it long ago. "Terry comes next."

Terry speaks right up. "I'll admit I'm a logical suspect."

"Why?"

"I'm mysterious. Don't you think I know it? I don't write murder stories, but I could write one. I say nothing when I ought to talk, and I talk when I ought to say nothing. What's more, I admit that I proposed to Mary once, and she turned me down— hard."

"When did you propose to her?"

"A couple of years ago."

"Not recently?"

"No."

When a man testifies against himself, somebody always jumps in to defend him. "We agreed in the other room," Jim reminds him, "that you were a little short to inflict such a wound."

"Five foot, eight and three-quarters," says Terry, "but if you add the length of my arm, I could stab a nine-footer as poor Mary was stabbed."

"The pin would go in horizontally, not vertically."

"It would go in vertically if he were charging me at the moment, and had lowered his head. I'm right-handed, too."

What's he trying to do?

Fit the rope to his own neck?

Bert squints at him. "Terry, are you confessing?"

"Yes: that I didn't do it— on my honor as a man and as a damned bad novelist."

Funny way to put it.

"Any comments on Terry?" He's taken the wind out of everybody's sails.

"That leaves Jim. Priss, do you want to say something?"

"I've written it already. It was Jim who had The Idea."

Jim nods. "I admit it."

"It was a bad idea."

"Nobody said so when I suggested it."

"You might have drawn either a red or black marble."

"I admit that, too. But you're forgetting, Priss: like you, I'm left-handed."

"Do you mean you could stab somebody with your left hand, but couldn't do it with your right?"

Jim is outspoken. "Not at all. I mean only that in the heat of a quarrel, I'd naturally use my left hand to hold a weapon."

Priss considers. "The wound was on Mary's right side."

"It wasn't, Priss. We went into the library and examined her. It's on the left."

We didn't find the wound, but it was on the left, and there's no getting away from that.

"Anything else?"

Priss shakes her head, but Pete can't shut up. "Mary gave Jim lots of business—"

"Right."

"It must have been a profitable business. A Wall Street man wouldn't kill a good customer. That stands to reason."

"Right."

"That seems important to me," says my lord and master.

I speak up. Jim is having things too much his own way. "Suppose—just suppose— that Jim had pocketed a stray block of Mary's bonds—"

"Kathleen!"

"—and that he didn't want to be found out."

Jim's mouth shuts like a trap. He says through his teeth, "My books are regularly audited by Whoosis, Whoosis, Whoosis and Whatdoyoucallem!"

Bert is on Jim's side. "Even if Jim had dipped into Mary's securities— which is unthinkable— he needn't have killed her."

"Why not?" I guess I'm talking too much.

"He could have come to me for a loan, and I would have given it to him. He could have gone to Mary, and she might have been merciful. Her executors would not be."

"Thanks, Bert."

What is this?

A mutual admiration society?

Guess not; I'm out in the cold.

"That leaves only Hilary."

We all look at him, sleeping as peacefully as ever.

Jim smiles. "Did you ever hear of a murderer sleeping like that?"

They all shake their heads as if they knew how murderers slept. Nobody knows, except up at Sing Sing.

I'll bet they snore!

"Hilary had no possible motive," says Terry. "He could have done it, but if he had done it he would have remained sober. No man who knows that the next few hours are going to be ticklish is going to drink the way Hilary has been drinking."

That's good news. "Why not?"

Terry throws me one of his rare smiles. "Kathleen, I have heard it said that drink loosens the tongue."

Remember that, Kathleen!

Drink is a monster of such fearful mien, that to be hated needs but to be seen. Bible, John J.

Literary quotation number ten.

"And now," says Bert smoothly, "shall we go on to the ladies?"

7
4:45 A.M.

YES, by all means go on to the ladies!

The ladies must not be neglected!

Which lady forgot herself, and ran a hatpin into Mary? Though we've all been hearing that it would have taken a strong man to overpower her and do that, and I'm satisfied in my own mind that the person who spent half an hour in the room with Mary wasn't a woman, we've eliminated all the men.

There are lots of things I could say, but I'm going to hush up. This time I'll know a boomerang before it turns around in mid-air and starts back for Kathleen.

But I can write what I please.

I'm going to.

Technically speaking, Mary wasn't what is known as a good woman. She divorced her husband when she was just a kid because he cramped her style. After that she became a menace to more happy households than I can remember.

It took money and it took social position to get away with the things she did. She had both, and she cut a wide swath.

Her women friends were always single— like Priss. Married women didn't like to have her around— unless they were unhappily married, and didn't give a hoot what messes their husbands got into. We've been talking about motives: why so and so should have done it; why Pete or Jim or Bert should have had anything against Mary. There are only three married women here, but if we knew everything, I'd bet we could find motives strong enough to convict two of the three.

Thoughts like that must be in everybody's minds: I don't have to come out with them.

They are going to be behind every word that is spoken: that's a good place for them.

"We'll begin with Cynthia. As my wife, she should run the gauntlet first."

Cynthia nods agreement.

Cynthia, the perfect hostess.

The socially prominent young matron who won't stoop to endorse cigarettes, cold creams, and new-fangled vitamins, endorses this pleasant parlor game which will become deadly serious for me in a few minutes!

Bert puts into words what we're all thinking: "Cynthia, even if you knew that I had had an affair with Mary, that I had recently been having one, would you have killed her?"

"No."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes."

I could write that she's a well-trained animal, obedient to her master's voice, but I won't.

It just isn't true.

There is something in the poise of her head that is convincing. When Cynthia says something she means it, and we realize it.

"Bert." Here is Pete, sticking out his chin again. "If you had had an affair with Mary, would you deny it?"

"Naturally."

"You'd perjure yourself if you had to?"

"All the way to hell and back: yes."

"Do you know that, Cynthia?"

She is more regal than ever. "It is neither more nor less than I would expect of a gentleman."

Fanfare of trumpets!

Pete shrinks back into his shell like a turtle that has snapped at a burning cigarette butt. He wishes he hadn't spoken.

Bert turns to me. "Kathleen, do you believe we should discuss Cynthia further?"

No, I don't.

Make the verdict unanimous, so far as I'm concerned.

Cynthia didn't do it.

"Let's go on to Priss."

A long, long detour which is going to wind up with me. Don't I see what's coming?

Priss stops sniffing and looks up.

She doesn't say a single word.

"Too weak."

"Left-handed."

"Mary's best friend."

"No motive."

It's true, all of it, and it hasn't taken ten seconds to whisk her through the pearly gates. She's complete now, except for a harp and wings, and they'll hand these to her as she rolls off the assembly line.

"Kathleen, do you agree we needn't even consider Priss?"

You bet!

I agree; I say so.

Priss is sure I did it, and that hasn't endeared her to me; but there is nobody in the room who has been harder hit by Mary's death, and those red rings around Priss's eyes are real.

"Shall we go on to Sue?"

Well, it is either Sue or me, and Bert's saving me for the grand finale.

Sue steps right in to meet the ball.

"Bert, you needn't ask me the question you asked Cynthia. I'll answer it. If I found out that another woman had come between Jim and me, I'd shoot her and take the consequences."

Short and to the point.

"Even if Jim lied to you?"

"We've been married eight years, and Jim can't lie to me. Even if it's something so unimportant as a birthday present with which he wants to surprise me, he can't lie to me."

Jim nods and rubs his hands. He should have been a lawyer: never a Wall Street man. He never overlooks a point. "It's true— every word of it. And I call on you all particularly to notice that Sue would shoot: she wouldn't wait for an opportunity like this, and a chance to use a hatpin."

Terry has an observation. "If you shot, Sue, there'd be a scandal."

"Of course; but what do you call what's happened tonight?"

Jim comes to the help of his client again, though there never was a woman who needed rescuing less. "Direct action: that's Sue. No beating around the bush. The short, straight way: always that."

I wonder.

Bert is turning to me again.

I wish he wouldn't!

"Kathleen, do you believe we ought to acquit Sue?"

His voice is silky.

Will you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly.

Acquit her?

Why not?

I've got nothing against her.

A sterling woman, Sue: rugged, noble character, who always gets what she wants.

"That leaves Kathleen only." Aha! The great moment has come! "Er— Kathleen— if you had learned that a woman had gone farther than she should have with Pete, would you have killed her?"

How do I know?

I've had twelve small Scotch and sodas, and I'm beginning to feel the eleventh.

Depends on the woman.

Depends on how I feel about Pete at the moment.

Depends on what other men are in the offing.

Depends on a lot of things.

May even depend on the weather.

I'm honest. See?

Help comes from an unexpected quarter. "Bert," Terry says sharply, "I rather object to throwing mud at the character of a woman who is dead, and who can't defend herself. If Mary were alive, and could answer you, it would be different. For one thing, you wouldn't dare say what you've been saying, and the rest of you wouldn't think what you've been thinking. So far as I know, Mary was a virtuous, clean-living young woman."

Bert flushes up to his eyebrows. "I apologize, Terry. I apologize from the bottom of my heart."

Sue agrees. "We all apologize. We ought to."

Priss starts weeping again. "I was wondering how long it would be before one of you said a kind word about her. God bless you, Terry!"

A diversion, but it doesn't last long. Bert doesn't let go of me. He's got his bulldog grip, and nothing can shake him off. "Forget everything I said, Terry. I'm heartily ashamed of myself. But there are eight intelligent persons in this room, and I mean to get an expression of opinion. I want them to vote."

"Vote?"

"If they had to convict right now, whom would they convict?" Terry turns his back. Bert goes on persuasively. "We've discussed each other, bar none. It doesn't follow that the majority is always right, but we must have come to some conclusion." He takes a blank sheet of paper from the pile next to me, folds it three times, and tears it into eight pieces. "Everybody take one. Who killed Mary? Vote."

It doesn't take them long.

Sue borrows Jim's pencil.

Bert lends his to Cynthia and Priss.

I can see them scratching away busily, one word each.

"Don't bother to fold them," says Bert. He gathers the votes and hands them to me with a queer little bow. "We appoint you teller, Kathleen. Count them, and tell us what you find."

One for Jim. That was my vote.

One blank. Good old Pete!

One for suicide. I'm not sure who voted that, but it looks like Terry's handwriting.

Five for Kathleen.

"When you have tabulated the vote, Kathleen, will you announce it?"

You bet!

Folks, indications are that we will carry Chenango County by a large plurality!

The rural vote has been particularly heavy!

The New York Times searchlight is swinging from northeast to southwest!

Hold it!

Hold everything!

Correction: it is swinging from southwest to northeast!

You know what that means!

The Republican candidate has sent a telegram of congratulation to his Democratic opponent!

The Democratic candidate has sent a telegram of congratulation to his Republican opponent!

You can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time.

Literary quotation number fourteen.

The searchlight has stopped swinging!

It has gone out!

Victory! Victory!

Folks, it's a walkover!

A landslide!

I'm elected!

Three more, and it would be unanimous!

Hooray!

But if that's how my friends vote, what chance will I have before a judge and a jury?

8

5:12 A.M.

I FEEL like a bad child.

If I said that aloud, Terry wouldn't miss the chance to say "Miracle of understatement," but honest, that's not what I'm driving at.

I'm sitting in disgrace at the typewriter, all alone in my corner, while the men, Bert, Terry, Jim, are consulting with my lord and master on what's to be done with me. Am I to be spanked soundly and sent to bed without any

supper— that reminds me there's a painful spot somewhere in my mid-section that isn't an aching heart— or am I to be expelled from the school? Am I to be given a stern warning, "Naughty! Naughty! Don't do it again!" or am I to be handed over to the secular arm?

The men are arguing in a compact little cluster, and I can guess what each one is saying:

Jim: "Put in a phone call and have it over with."

Bert: "No scandal— no scandal!"

Terry: "She hasn't admitted anything."

Pete: "She's my wife, and I stick to her through thick and thin."

The women, Cynthia, Priss, Sue, are whispering in another compact cluster. I don't want even to think what they're gabbling to each other!

But Hilary sleeps on: wise Hilary!

Do you believe that your ears tingle when people talk about you? If so, mine ought to be burning!

I'd like to hear what the men are saying. After all, it has quite a bit to do with me. But it's "Hush! Hush! Keep this quiet!" as if it really mattered.

Why don't they ask me what I suggest?

Barring Terry, I've got a better head than any of them.

But I'm out in the cold, and nobody cares what I think.

They're arguing what's to be done with me, and I'm the only person who has no voice!

Well, get it over with!

Hasn't it struck you that something must be decided soon?

It's another day.

The servants will be waking up.

The moment the first of them walks into the library, there will be questions.

A parlor-maid may be well trained, but you just can't prevent her from raising her eyebrows when she discovers a corpse.

She'll sweep out almost anything else, but there's a limit.

The huddle is over.

The men are coming here.

Bert is the spokesman.

Well, gentlemen?

"We've come to no decision."

You are a bright lot, aren't you?

What do you expect me to do about it?

"It would be helpful if you would confess."

Helpful to whom?

"Because something has to be settled, and in a hurry."

I came to the same conclusion long ago. In simple English, gentlemen, I beat you to it. As for confessing, I'm innocent.

"That's what I've been telling them, Kathleen." Pete has more grit than I gave him credit for. It takes nerve to be in a minority— and to hold your ground. "They think you did it. I've told them that you can't convict on thoughts; and to call in the police would mean the most horrible publicity."

"What have you suggested, Pete?"

"I won't admit that any one of us is guilty. I say it was a natural death." I raised my eyebrows, but he went on quickly. "Suppose— just suppose— we carry Mary upstairs and put her to bed. She's not well. She ought to be in bed. What's more, she needs a doctor."

"A doctor?"

"A sick woman needs a doctor."

"Go on."

"Bert tells us that there's a young doctor living in the village: a reliable one."

"How reliable?"

"Oh, very reliable! He speculates in real estate, and he owes more money than he can pay."

"I see."

"Well, we might put the library to rights. We might put the weapons where— where they came from. We might burn the cards we found with them— stupid to leave a lot of paper around— and then we might send for the reliable doctor. We'll let him in ourselves: the servants are all asleep. The doctor will find that Mary is suffering from a heart attack."

" 'Suffering'? Present tense?"

"Exactly. Any comment, Kathleen?"

"There's something like it in one of Aldous Huxley's novels. An old man kills a young one, and a doctor hushes it up— for money. Is that what you're suggesting?"

Pete cannot meet my eyes. "Well, more or less, darling. We'll get Mary to bed— without waking the servants. The doctor will come. I'll speak to him. He'll examine Mary. He'll stay here. He may even telephone for a trained nurse; but before she arrives, Mary will have another attack—a fatal one. The doctor will be right there when it happens, so there need not be any inquest."

"Why not?"

"Because the doctor was called while she was alive. He saw her soon enough to make a complete diagnosis. Everything will be very dignified and very quiet." Pete takes a long breath. "I don't believe we will be doing

substantial injustice to anybody: that's why I'm making the suggestion. We've been putting our heads together for eight hours, and except for vague suspicions, we're no wiser than when we started. If we call in the police, they won't do any better. But the newspapers will make a Roman holiday out of it."

Jim says very emphatically, "I'm against it. It means a secret, and a secret shared by ten people is no secret. It's dangerous. Some day somebody will blab. Kathleen talks when she's had a few drinks—"

"What have I said tonight?"

"What haven't you said? Hilary talks—"

"Look at him sleeping!"

"It's a serious business, tampering with justice. There's an ugly name for it."

Pete cuts in. "We know the name, Jim."

"The doctor—"

"We can depend on him. We'll contribute equally, all nine of us: say a thousand apiece. Right, Bert? If he wants still more, I'll make up the difference out of my own pocket." Good old Pete! "It's fool-proof: once he's signed the death certificate, and the body has been cremated, not all the yellow journals in America will be able to get anything on us. It's blackmail-proof: whatever the future may bring, he can't go back on his own signature."

A pause.

Sue's voice: "If Mary's relatives get wind of it—"

"You know she has no relatives. All her life she was the ward of a trust company."

Priss's voice: "I'll have nothing to do with it. I don't want publicity any more than the rest; but I won't be an accomplice to a crime."

Pete reassures her. "You'll be asked no questions, Priss."

"How do you know?"

"I'll guarantee it. Whatever lying has to be done, I'll do."

I don't like the idea.

I don't like paying out money to shield somebody.

I won't like carrying a secret to my grave; meeting my friends, and having to remember to watch my tongue; not being free to drink as many Scotch and sodas as I please.

"Think it over, Kathleen."

I am thinking it over.

I suppose that in any group of nine or ten people in our circumstances at least one would be eligible for state's prison if everything were known about all of them. I'm sure I've dined with embezzlers and forgers and thieves and plain out-and-out robbers who have escaped jail because they had some money and a great deal of luck. The man who plans a crime and makes a little

mistake pays for it; the man who makes no mistakes may get away with his particular kind of villainy. But their nerves must be better than mine, because I can't face the prospect of spending the rest of my life with eight people feeling sure that I'm a murderess, with Pete's eyes questioning me, even though he'll try not to, every time we sit down to a meal together.

I've always said I didn't want children.

Pete will be agreeing with me now, but for a different reason: he may love me, but he won't want children by such a mother.

"Think it over, Kathleen!"

I'm thinking.

If I agree, there can never be any turning back.

Whatever the world may think, these eight will have their own opinion; and if, some day, there should, after all, be a child, and that child should look into my eyes—

"THINK it over!"

I'm sober, and I wish, from the bottom of my heart, that I could change places with Mary this instant.

Mary was lucky.

"Think it over!"

I won't go through with it! No! A thousand times, no!

I DON'T know how I can nerve myself to write.

Pete said, "Wake Hilary."

Bert said, "No. Leave him out of it."

Pete held his ground. "Kathleen isn't herself. Wake Hilary. We're going to make a decision, and he's got to know about it."

He shook Hilary—and Priss screamed.

Good Heavens, what a scream!

"Look! Look! Oh, look!"

Hilary was sitting in his chair, with the upper part of his body slumped over the table; and at his left shoulder, exactly as we had first seen it at Mary's left shoulder, was the imitation pearl.

I saw it, and I felt my hair stand on end.

If I live a century, I shall never be able to describe the horror of that moment.

Terry was the first to collect himself.

He touched the pearl with his finger.

It rolled away quite easily, describing a circle about the pin, which had lain against Hilary's coat.

Terry gave a queer laugh.

We all laughed: we were nearly hysterical.

"It's given us a bad turn, but such things don't happen twice in a single evening," said Terry. "Wake up, Hilary!"

He shook him— and Hilary crashed to the floor, stone dead.

4

I, Terry Morrison

I, TERRY MORRISON, am continuing this record. I do so because of my own interest and on my own initiative.

Six weeks have elapsed.

That night during which we played a game which turned into unforeseen tragedy has begun to recede into the past. I can already look back to it with a certain perspective, accepting as real events what were incredible when they occurred; and Bert Carter, who preserved the sheets written by himself, by Priss, and by Kathleen, has turned them over to me at my own request.

When he handed me the thick sheaf of papers which recounted almost hour by hour the happenings of a night during which none of us had closed an eye, he asked, "Terry, what do you want with this stuff?"

"I want to read it."

"You have read it."

"I haven't read all of it. There's Kathleen's story, for instance. I haven't seen any part of it; and she told me she wrote a last page in longhand the next day and asked you to put it with the rest."

"It will tell you nothing you don't know already."

"I'm not so sure. Kathleen is a bright girl."

"Too bright, to my way of thinking!" He shuddered. "Terry, if I leave these papers with you, what will you do with them?"

"Read them— and add a few lines."

He shook his head vigorously. "Don't! Don't add a word! Nobody wants that!"

"The story isn't complete."

"There's more than enough of it for me!" He looked around and lowered his voice as if he feared eavesdroppers. "There's just one place for these papers now, and that's in the fire!"

"I agree with you."

"Then why write still more?"

"Because I'm a writer. I do my thinking best on paper. I organize my thoughts best if I set them down in writing."

"Why write if nobody will ever read what you write?"

"I'll read it."

He looked acutely uncomfortable. "What would the others say?"

"Have they asked you what became of these sheets?"

"No."

"Then don't tell them. They have served their purpose. When I'm through with them, I'll give them back to you."

He held up his hands in protest. "I don't want 'em back! I wish they'd never been written! Terry, do me a favor: get rid of them somehow. I'd rather have you do it than do it myself."

"Why?"

"I don't want to take the responsibility. It might look as if I were trying to shield somebody."

"Nobody needs shielding. There was an official explanation."

"There was. What of it? As you know, I didn't show these sheets to the authorities. Nobody mentioned that they existed, and I wasn't asked for them. Technically, I suppose, I'm guilty of suppressing evidence, if that's the right name for it. Technically we're all guilty of that, and we know it. But to destroy evidence is a much more serious matter, and it would suit me right down to the ground if I could pass the buck to you." That was putting it frankly, but it was not all. "We think," I write this because Bert said it, though I do not agree with it, "that you have the best head of any of us. Don't interrupt me: there's another point. As the one unmarried man, you are disinterested in a way that the others aren't. I have a wife. Jim Halsey has a wife. Pete Logan has a wife. What you do, you do for yourself. What we do, we may be doing for somebody else."

"I see," I said gravely, wondering at the curious manner in which his mind worked.

He placed the pile of sheets on my desk, obviously glad to get rid of them. "There they are, Terry: do what you please, so long as I never see them again." Then his thought processes were off on another tack. "D'ye know, I can't forgive myself for the injustice we did Kathleen when we got together and actually voted that she was guilty."

"I wrote nothing at all on my ballot."

"Wise man! I wish I had done the same! I wrote 'Kathleen,' and I've been sorry for it ever since. But that's not what I'm getting at." He paused, and I listened, noting how his thoughts were back-tracking again. "There are just two persons who are above suspicion: Priss and yourself. Priss has already told her story. It's up to you to write 'Finis.' "

I looked him squarely in the eyes. "Bert, were you satisfied with the official explanation?"

"What the coroner found? Perfectly ... Terry, were you?"

"Yes and no."

"What was wrong with it?"

"It was too simple."

"How can a verdict be too simple?"

"Mary Ashton wasn't a simple person."

"Dying is a simple matter."

"Sometimes it is; sometimes it isn't. If one person dies, yes; if two die, like Mary and Hilary, certainly not."

He looked at me hard. "Terry, that's a statement that sounds more logical than it can possibly be. I don't pretend to understand it.... Terry, do you mind if I ask you a personal question? Did you love Mary?"

I saw no harm in admitting, "I thought I did— once."

"You proposed to her?"

"Yes— three years ago."

"Er, Terry, I've got no right to be butting into your private affairs, but if she had lived, would you have proposed to her again?"

"No."

"Wounded vanity?"

"No.... There was a time when I felt I couldn't live without her. I succeeded in doing it."

"Oh! You changed your mind?"

"Bert, if it's any of your damned business, I changed my mind. Mary turned me down— hard. I was upset for all of one summer; and then I began to see points in other women."

He peered at me from under his bushy eyebrows. "Plural, Terry? Plural?"

"Plural."

"I wonder! You've been a bachelor a long time—"

"Ever since I was born."

"Well, Cynthia sees future events casting their shadows before. I hope she's right. We both congratulate you."

"Bert, there's no reason for congratulations." I said it with some irritation.

He peered at me again. "After what we've all been through, old man, it would be nice if we could look forward to something with a happy ending."

After he had gone, I understood no better, though it was clear enough what he had been hinting at earlier. If I had cared for Mary as much as he first thought, I might have been dissatisfied with the official explanations, and I might have raised questions— embarrassing questions. Murder and suicide are so simple; so very simple; so very much too simple....

And a "happy ending"? What happy ending can there be for a tale such as that told by the typed pages which Bert so willingly left on my desk?

TIME TOUCHES nothing ungently. Time spreads a kindly veil over events which are only in the recent past. But none of us, and I least of all, will forget the surge of overpowering horror which swept over us at the end of that incredible night.

We had voted solemnly, eight tired people going through with an idiotic performance, and I had written nothing on the slip of paper which Bert had handed me.

The electric bulbs were burning; yet the early light of summer was beginning to streak into the room.

It shone on the set faces of men in bedraggled evening clothes, and on those of women whose rouge and mascara could not hide the evidences of strain beneath.

Bert had given Kathleen the privilege of tabulating the ballots which showed that an overwhelming majority of the foolish people who had set themselves up as judges believed in her guilt, and Pete, loyal to his wife to the very end, had suggested sending for a doctor and bribing him—thereby committing a felony, and making all of us liable to long terms in prison. Had such a suggestion been made during the daytime, we would have ridiculed it. We agreed that we wanted no publicity; but none of us, with the possible exception of Pete himself, would have become an accomplice to such a scheme. But the hands of the big clock were creeping on, the night had left us physically and mentally exhausted, and I am ashamed to admit that for a few seconds I myself thought Pete had hit on an excellent solution. To turn a guilty person over to justice would not have brought Mary back to life: we had suspicions, but not an iota of proof; and when there is a hard way and an easy way, the natural decision is to avoid present complications even at the risk of greater ones in the future. I am glad to record that I kept my thoughts to myself, and said nothing which I would now regret.

Then it was agreed to wake up Hilary— after all, he had a right to express an opinion— and Priss had screamed.

Poor girl! What she had been through that night! How my heart had ached for her as I had watched her dabbing at her eyes with a bit of handkerchief!

She screamed, and following her glance, we saw the pearl head of the hatpin against Hilary's shoulder, exactly as it had been against Mary's.

For a never-ending moment I was quite paralyzed with horror. For that moment I expected to find the pin sunk to its full length in Hilary's body.

Then it came to me that events do not repeat themselves in such a manner, and that the pin must have rolled across the table until it fetched up at the spot where Priss's sharp eyes had detected it.

I said something to that effect— it now appears that Kathleen duly made a record of it— and I touched the pin, which rolled away.

We had been hideously frightened.

Our relief was overwhelming.

Our hearts had skipped beats: they began to pulse regularly again.

I clapped my hand on Hilary's shoulder.

"Wake up!" I said.

He did not wake, but I anticipated that after his heavy drinking, he would be sleeping soundly.

I shook him roughly.

I imagine that I was rougher than I would otherwise have been because I was so relieved.

The upper part of his body moved.

It slid to the right.

It crashed to the floor, bringing over the chair as it fell....

Bert and Jim rushed over; Pete came trailing behind; but one look was enough to tell us that Hilary was beyond both help and hurt. His eyes were wide open and staring. He did not breathe. I touched his face and withdrew my hand quickly: it was icy.

We had seen one dead body that night. It was but the matter of a split second to be aware that here was another....

I do not venture to describe what I felt: the surprise was so complete, and the shock so appalling; and coming on the heels of the false alarm of only a minute earlier, its effect was ten times as great as it would have been otherwise. It was as if I had stepped unexpectedly into frigid water, had recoiled, and had been plunged in, head over heels....

The shock to the others was certainly no less.

Like some of my friends, I have been through decidedly ticklish moments. I have seen bloodshed, and have been in danger of losing my own life; but never before was I so overwhelmingly, so unashamedly terrified.

I felt dizzy.

Along with the rest, I had been awake continuously for nearly twenty-four hours, and the limit of my endurance was at hand.

I reached for a whiskey glass on the table, but Pete pushed me away, saying "Don't touch anything! Don't touch anything!"

I did not realize until much later that he had undoubtedly saved my life.

I looked about.

Kathleen was laughing and crying hysterically. Sue had collapsed. Cynthia was nowhere in evidence. I found her later, weeping in a big chair.

Priss had been through so much, yet she kept her self-possession. "Thank God!" she said. "Thank God!"

I stared at her, doubting my ears.

She spoke to me. "Don't you see, Terry, it proves Kathleen is innocent?"

I did not see, and I could not see that it was worth proving at such a price.

"It explains everything!"

To me it explained nothing.

But Priss did not bother to answer. Priss, the weak woman, took Kathleen, the strong one, in her arms and comforted her. "There, there!" she said, as a mother might say to a frightened child. "There, there!" and Kathleen cried on Priss's shoulder.

Pete Logan recovered something approaching a normal equilibrium before the rest. "We might have covered up one murder. We can't possibly cover up two."

Bert nodded, and went to the telephone. He was visibly shaken. "The doors are locked. They will stay locked." He began to dial with a trembling hand. "I'm afraid we're in for it."

3

WHILE a constable was on the way— it took him less than a quarter of an hour to arrive, though it seemed longer— we talked in undertones.

Jim Halsey said, "Bert, what are we to tell?"

"The truth— nothing but the truth."

"It will make us look ridiculous."

"I can't help that."

"There will be a terrible stink in the papers."

"I'll try to prevent it. I can't ask the police to show favors; but I should be able to keep reporters and photographers out of my own house." Daylight was streaming in through the windows, and the electric bulbs in the room were paling. He switched them off.

"The police will talk."

"They won't— unless they have to. You don't know Connecticut men."

"One of them is bound to say something."

"The force consists of half a dozen constables. I'll answer for them."

"The servants will talk," Jim persisted.

Bert shook his head positively. "They won't."

"How do you propose to stop them?"

"They don't know what went on here last night. There is no reason why they should ever know."

From the end of the room, Priss, who had taken no part in the conversation, broke in scornfully. "You make me sick, both of you! Practical men you call yourselves! Two people are dead, and you think it can be hushed up because we have money! A dead woman in that room, and a dead man in this; and Bert will 'answer for' the police, who'll decline to be interviewed, I suppose, when the men from the Big New York papers fire questions at them! You'll keep the reporters out of your house. How? The servants will never know anything? They'll know more about it than we do in a couple of hours! We're in for publicity, whether we like it or not; but we'll get friendlier publicity if we don't make blithering asses of ourselves!"

I agreed with her. "If Jim had been murdered, he might not be so keen about having everything hushed up. Compared with what happened to Mary and Hilary, there's not much that can happen to us."

Jim snorted, "We can be hanged— that's all."

"Maybe," Priss admitted. "Maybe. But mark my word, you won't escape it by claiming that what went on in this house last night was strictly confidential! Meet the authorities half way, and they may be decent; fight them, and they'll make us sorry for it!"

The light of dawn had shown up the weakness of the artificial illumination in the room. Just so, I thought, the light of Priss's common sense showed up the flaws in Bert's unduly optimistic reasoning.

It was in a much chastened spirit that he asked her, "Are we to show the records which you kept—and I— and Kathleen?"

"No," she said emphatically, "not unless we have to." He gathered up the pile of sheets, and popped them into a cabinet. "Not there, Bert: somewhere upstairs, where nobody will find them when these rooms are searched."

He seized them. He unlocked the door, and we could hear him racing up the stairs three steps at a time.

He was back almost immediately. "They're in a safe place," he panted.

Priss nodded. "Now understand this, all of you: if one of us mentions them, out they come, the lot, and they'll get plenty of space in the papers; but we won't be questioned about them if the police never know they exist." She paused to let it sink in. "Is that perfectly clear to everybody?"

It was— perfectly clear.

"Do you mean," Pete asked, "you won't have to say that we all voted, and that it was decided that Kathleen was guilty?"

"Certainly not. We were wrong. We're not anxious to advertise what fools we made of ourselves."

Pete hurried to Kathleen. "Did you hear that, darling? Did you hear it?"

There was such honest feeling in his voice that I could not help reflecting. Being rich, they had never before encountered a problem which a check would not solve, and their marriage had come to the verge of shipwreck. The night had brought them face to face with the first serious threat they had ever known, and it was precisely what they needed. Yesterday they might have gone divorce hunting; they might again, at some time in the future; but so long as a danger to either existed, they would realize that they cared for each other, and they would stand together against the world.

It comes to me, in retrospect, that it was curious I should think such thoughts, with Mary's body in the next room, and Hilary's actually only a few feet away. It suggests how my sensibilities had become blunted: I was hardened against a state of affairs which had all but overcome me a few hours earlier, and which had given me the greatest shock of my life but a few minutes ago.

I looked about the room.

Not a single person had inquired into the manner of Hilary's death, nor had any asked who was responsible for it. We were conscious, all of us, of horror and of grief; but we were human beings, overflowing with human emotions, and the purely intellectual question of fixing the guilt for this newest tragedy simply did not occur to us.

I noted that at the time, and my thoughts return to it now.

I have read many so-called mystery stories.

I have never cared for them.

They violate the rules of human conduct.

Death comes, but there is no sadness.

A life ends, and the intimates of the victim, without pausing to wipe away non-existent tears, embark upon a merry paper chase. They go about it gaily, even exuberantly, finding uproarious humor where in ordinary decency there should be none, cracking jokes and bandying witticisms while the corpse is still unburied, giving no thought to the awfulness of sudden death, but concentrating their energies on the grisly joy of a man hunt. Their sole interest is in the discovery of a guilty person, who, more often than not, is one of their own number; and once that has been accomplished, either by a professional detective with amusing personal eccentricities, or by a busybody amateur who resorts to unorthodox methods but who never, never fails to spot his man, they relax pleasantly, feeling that all has turned out well. The episode, they concur, has come to a happy ending.

I do not agree.

To unmask a criminal does not undo his crime. His execution, a probable but disagreeable detail which my brother authors prefer not even to mention,

cannot bring his victims back to life. Detection, in real life, is a weapon of social retribution; in fiction, the more brilliant it is, the more surely it defeats its ends, for in the tale which is packed with too much ingenuity, in which the criminal has been fantastically clever, and his pursuer has risen to even greater heights of astuteness to trap him, there is no room for human nature and for truth. Surely we, unexpectedly confronted with two tragedies, were overwhelmed by our emotions, and would have no enthusiastic welcome for newcomers who would go cold-bloodedly about the business of determining guilt.

"If we're not going to show the pages we wrote, Bert," Priss said, "the typewriter should not be in this room."

He picked it up at once. Her clear thinking dominated the situation. "Where shall I put it?"

"Where we found it: on the desk in the library."

He was back in an instant, and he showed a piece of paper. "What shall we do with this?"

"What is it?"

"The suicide note." He read it aloud. " 'I have decided to end it all. Mary.' Shall I burn it?"

"No," Priss said, after an instant's hesitation. "Don't burn it. We're going to tell a truthful story, and this note is part of it."

Bert deferred to her obviously better judgment. "I'll put it in the machine, exactly as it was."

"No, you won't, Bert! Put it on the desk, next to the machine—not in it. Don't forget that we've all handled it, and that our fingerprints are on it. We're going to admit that we read it."

"Right," said Bert.

I listened, and I marveled. I had read Priss's narrative, and had considered its beginning the writing of a scatter-brained, flighty young woman. She was the reverse of that now, and it came to me that she possessed a singular ability to adjust herself to a situation. When writing about a childish game, she could be childish herself; but it had taken a serious turn, and she had changed with it. It was either that, or in twenty hours she had grown up twenty years—and that was incredible.

"Priss," said Sue.

"Yes?"

"You said Kathleen was innocent."

"Yes."

"And you can prove it?"

"Yes."

"Well, how about me?" Sue asked, and for once she lacked her accustomed assurance, and was plainly frightened. "Am I innocent—and can you prove it?"

Priss gazed into Sue's yellow-green eyes. "Yes and yes," she said in a level tone.

Sue drew a long breath. "I don't know how you're going to do it," she admitted, candidly, "but it's a comfort to know you feel that way."

It was with altogether different feelings that I listened, for until that moment I had been completely convinced that Sue was guilty of Mary's death.

Bert had returned from the library. "Anything else you want, Priss?"

"Yes," she said, with another of those lightning changes of mood, "it's too early to wake up the servants, Bert. Unlock a few doors, and show me where you keep the eggs and the bacon. We could all do with a bit of breakfast."

I suddenly realized that I was hungry; but even if we had had no appetites, we needed no urging to leave the ill-omened room in which Hilary's body still lay sprawled on the floor.

4

CONSTABLE Chester Perry, of the local guardians of law and order, turned out to be tall, thin, and angular. He wore a dark uniform, black leather puttees, a glittering badge, and a cap which must have been an essential part of his anatomy, for he never removed it. A holster containing a heavy revolver hung at one side of his belt, a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs jangled at the other, and a reserve supply of snub-nosed cartridges was stowed in loops attached to his mid-section. Though it was summer, and he could not need them, he carried leather gauntlets. When he turned, the end of a short club with a thong attached protruded from a hip pocket. His eyes were deep set, his mouth full and at variance with his face. His complexion was singularly pink and boyish.

If Bert had thought of it, he might have suggested that the constable refrain from sounding the police siren on his spick and span roadster while driving up to the door. It had not occurred to him, and we deduced that Mr. Perry was on his way when we heard a strident ululation in the distance, and shuddered at its rising pitch and volume as it neared the house. The servants, as Priss had commented, might have been asleep before his arrival. It was a foregone conclusion that no living man or animal within range of his ear-splitting instrument was asleep any longer.

His huge, ungainly figure overflowed the entrance to the dining room.

He greeted Bert. "Mornin', Mr. Carter."

"Good morning, Chet."

He knew Cynthia, too, and had a special salutation for her. "Mornin', Mis' Carter." He turned to the assembled guests. "Mornin', folks."

Cynthia was unable to speak a word, but Bert told our visitor, as succinctly as possible, what had happened.

Mr. Perry whistled. He gazed at me with a look of deep distrust. He clapped his hand to the butt of his revolver. "Two?" he remarked incredulously. "Two?" "Two."

"That was a corpus I passed coming in?"

Bert shuddered. "Yes."

"I thought he was drunk," said Mr. Perry shortly. "Shows appearances ain't always what they look like. Where's t'other?"

Bert pointed.

It seemed as if it required only two or three of Mr. Perry's long strides to take his towering frame through the library door.

He was back in a flash. "Two is right," he declared. He glanced at Pete Logan, who happened to be nearest him, with a piercing eye. He turned on his heel, fixing his suspicious stare successively on each person in the room. " 'Male an' female He created them, ' " he quoted cryptically, "one of each." Then his feelings ran away with him. "By gum, Mr. Carter, this here's the biggest news that's hit this little village sence the cashier of the bank run away with the fust selectman's wife nigh on to forty years ago, before I was born!"

Bert inclined his head soberly. "You see I told the truth, Chet."

Mr. Perry nodded ponderously. "It's better that way, because I'll find it out anyhow." He jingled the handcuffs at his belt invitingly. "Well, who done it?" he inquired.

"That's just the trouble," Bert explained. "Nobody has owned up."

"Nary one of 'em?"

"Nary one. We've asked the murderer to come forward and confess."

"An' he ain't?"

"Not yet."

"You should of sent for me sooner," said Constable Perry. "Remember when Ike Hubbard stole old man Northrop's shotgun? I got it back in no time by findin' out who was buyin' shells to fit it." He wheeled again, drawing his brows together, and scowling into our faces. "I know Mr. an' Mis' Carter. The rest of you, don't touch nothin' in any of these here rooms. There might be clues."

"There are," said Bert.

"Ah!"

"Lots of clues, Chet: almost too many."

"There can't be too many," declared Mr. Perry. "Seein' as there's two murders, it might be a hull gang that done it, an' every one of 'em would leave his own private clue. If there's lots of clues, it was a large gang. Mr. Carter, for nigh on to fourteen years I've been a constable, an' all of that time I've been waitin' for somethin' like this to happen!"

Priss was in the kitchen, and Bert foolishly returned to a subject which I thought had been dismissed for good. "Chet," he said ingratiatingly, "we've been hoping that this could be kept out of the papers."

"Kep' out of the papers, Mr. Carter? Kep' out of the papers?"

"My friends are pretty well known people. Here are Mr. and Mrs. Peter Logan. You must have heard their names. This is Mr. Halsey, the banker, and this is his wife. This is Mr. Morrison, the author. They'd just as soon have no publicity."

Mr. Perry's eye roved over us with a frankly hostile air. "If they're so well known, I'd cal'late they'd like to bust into the papers just as often as they could. Leastways they're used to it."

"Not to this kind of thing, Chet. Chet, I'd consider it a particular favor if everything were kept as quiet as possible."

The constable stared at him as if he could not believe his ears. "Mr. Carter, you don't know what you're askin'!"

"But I do! These crimes— if they were crimes— took place in my own house," declared Bert, as if that gave him a proprietary interest in them.

"Naturally I'd like to find out who was guilty of them—"

"Nacherly," echoed the puzzled constable.

"But if it could be done without headlines, without a hullabaloo, without sensational articles in the tabloids—"

The constable shook his head decisively. "No, Mr. Carter," he said firmly, "No. Murder ain't no respecter of persons. With two bodies— two of 'em— the reporters will be here, an' the fellers with the cameras an' the flashlights, an' I've got to send for the state police, because that's what the law says, an' the medical officer, an' it would be the same if the bodies was you an' Mis' Carter instead of just friends of yours."

Jim Halsey ventured upon an unfortunate interruption. "Bert," he reminded him, "I thought you said Connecticut men never talked."

"Neither they do," said Mr. Perry promptly, "but they like to have their pitchers took." He surveyed Jim from head to foot in none too friendly fashion. "Strikes me that the feller that made the mistake was the feller that broke the laws of the sovereign state of Connecticut by killin' two poor innocent people. He couldn't do that an' expect the officers who are sworn to uphold the laws to look on an' shet their heads about it."

Priss appeared in a doorway with an apron about her middle. "Eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee will be ready in a minute," she announced.

Mr. Perry surveyed her with visible interest and approval. "Snappy little number," he commented. "New help?"

"No," said Bert.

"Funny I don't remember her—"

"Miss Evans is one of our guests."

"Oh, well," remarked Mr. Perry, dismissing the subject, "she looked good to me, but if she's one of your guests that lets her out." From a capacious pocket he produced a large notebook and the stub of a lead pencil. He carefully headed a page with the date and the hour. "Found," I could see him inscribing, "at res. of H. P. Carter, 2 boddies." A sudden thought struck him. "Mr. Carter, you ain't kiddin' me, are you?"

"What do you mean, Chet?"

"These friends of yours, they're dead, ain't they? They ain't just makin' believe to have the laugh on me—"

"They're dead," Bert interrupted, with a shiver.

"Have you made sure?"

"We made sure."

"The best way is to put your mouth close to their ears an' call 'em names—"

"They're dead. We made sure," Bert repeated hastily.

"All right," said the constable, shutting his book with a slap, "I'll take your word for it.... An' now, where's the telephone?"

The days that followed, with men in uniform and men out of it pouring through the great house, with a cordon of police surrounding it, with cars with screaming sirens racing up to it or away from it, with camera men exploding bulbs in the faces of the guests and the servants, and with Constable Perry, always in the foreground, being photographed in his car, next to it, talking to Bert, talking to me, or making still more entries in his notebook, were one long continued nightmare.

5

DURING that period there were high spots which I shall not forget.

There was the enterprising reporter whom we rebuffed, and who turned out to be an important county official.

There was the important county official to whom Bert talked at great length, telling him things which, as he informed me later, he would have

mentioned to no other living soul, and who turned out to be an enterprising reporter.

There was the chap with the old, battered camera whom Jim Halsey stopped from snapping the vista from the house, and who indignantly identified himself as a police photographer; and there was the man with the expensive outfit whom the constables actually helped to set up a tripod in the library itself, and whose photographs subsequently appeared in a sensational weekly periodical.

There was the big doctor, with a bushy mop of hair, who painstakingly examined Hilary's body, and then combed every inch of the great living room in search of the weapon to which he had succumbed; and there was the little doctor, with no hair at all, and thick-lensed spectacles, who gave but a glance, smelled the lips, and spoke the single word "Cyanide," a diagnosis which was confirmed on autopsy. There was enough left in the nearly empty glass to kill another man, the doctor mentioned to me, not knowing how close I myself had been to draining it.

Quite early Constable Perry announced that he had a theory. He confided to an intimate gathering of a dozen reporters. "I found a suicide note already without half lookin' for it." It was photographed, while he added, "After the woman in the liberry killed the man in the other room, she got skeered, an' she done away with herself."

I disposed of that by mentioning that Mary's death had preceded Hilary's by at least six hours, and Mr. Perry's indignation knew no bounds. He interrogated Jim Halsey, only to find that his story agreed with mine, and he took it as a personal affront. Facts, he seemed to feel, had a business to conform with theories: not the reverse, and he deeply resented my interference.

Far more painful to me was the session, a day or two later, during which we were obliged to describe the discussion which had culminated in what the yellower sections of the press christened "The Murder Game." The assistant district attorney who interrogated us, and who looked more like a clergyman than like a professional investigator, remarked, "It is hard to believe that ten grown-up people could have been so childish," whereupon one of the tabloids, after quoting him in full, described the game in detail, and suggested how its readers might play it themselves.

But it was the same investigator who lighted upon the facts which led us toward a really satisfactory explanation of what had occurred. "Mr. Halsey," he said, "you seem to be well informed about the financial status of your friends."

"They have all made investments through me," Jim admitted.

"Exactly. You have already told us that Miss Ashton was independently wealthy—"

"Yes."

"How would you describe the financial condition of the late Mr. Hilary Densmore?"

Jim hesitated. "A broker's relation to his client is supposed to be confidential."

"Yes; but when the client is dead, the relation ends. We shall investigate Mr. Densmore's affairs. If we must, we shall subpoena you to produce the records of his accounts. You can save time for us and annoyance for your friends by voluntarily telling us what you know."

Jim nodded. "If you'll find it out anyhow, I might as well speak. All his life Hilary was a natural-born target for gold-diggers. I don't know how many breach-of-promise cases he paid to have hushed up. He had signed agreements to pay alimony to two divorced wives. As has happened with other men in the same fix, they were based on assets which have since gone to pot."

"The reporters told me that," said the assistant district attorney. "At a guess, what will be the value of Mr. Densmore's estate?"

Jim shrugged his shoulders. "For the last year and more, Hilary kept up appearances by dipping into capital. He speculated. He lost. At the time of his death he was practically broke."

It was no surprise to several of us, who had suspected as much. "And the big bankroll Mr. Densmore flourished?" It lay on the table, a pathetic reminder of the events which had preceded.

"If it is really big," Jim remarked, choosing his words carefully, "I should say it represented nearly everything that Hilary had left."

"It tots up to less than two hundred dollars."

"Then he may have had a thousand more in the bank: that would be about right."

The investigator nodded, and glanced around our sober little circle. "You understand, don't you, how this simplifies everything? Mr. Densmore had previously asked Miss Ashton to marry him."

"Yes," said Priss.

"How do you know?"

"She told me; and he told me himself."

"He asked her once again— when they were alone in the library. If she had accepted him, it would have solved his problems. She didn't. We know she had rejected him before."

I interrupted. "I can't believe that Hilary would ever have killed anybody."

"Nobody ever believes such things," the investigator said gently, "but you have the evidence before your own eyes, Mr. Morrison. Remember that Densmore had been drinking. With the false clues which Miss Ashton helped him to prepare when pure chance brought them together in a game which was almost made to order to suit his purpose, he believed that he would never be found out. He acted. He acted violently, on sudden impulse. It was the tragedy of his life that he was subject to impulses which he could not control. But then, as the night wore on, and he began to fear that he would be exposed—"

"He was never suspected."

"Perhaps not by you—"

"I suspected him," said Sue Halsey, flatly.

"There you are," the investigator said. "He pretended to be drunk. He fooled you. He did not fool Mrs. Halsey. A man who shams intoxication can avoid talking when talk is dangerous, but he can see and hear as much as he pleases. He did both. He heard things he didn't like. He knew that detection would be certain. He did not care to live through that: do you blame him? He dropped a capsule into a glass of whiskey. He took the same step which many headstrong, impulsive men before him have taken. Perhaps it was for the best, because it both explains everything and atones for everything."

It did not sound right to me, though I presume my literary instincts were to blame. It is a truism that fiction must be more logical than life itself; conversely, life need not justify its episodes by logic, yet it is a thought which my disciplined mind is reluctant to accept.

Why should Hilary have carried poison?

The investigator remarked that he had known of many men who had done so; that Hilary must have had it on his person.

I found that quite incredible. A man's deeds conform to his character, and there was nothing in Hilary's past, present, or probable future to explain why he should be ready, at a moment's notice, to end his own life. Had he been eccentric, and had I written the story, he would have worn a mediaeval Italian ring with a secret poison compartment, which he would have kept filled for the sake of the thrill. But he was not eccentric, and even financial straits should not have made him unduly pessimistic, for he had relatives and friends who could and would have come to his aid if it were ever required.

Out of pride he might have been unwilling to appeal to them. If so, the same pride would have prevented him from proposing to Mary, and expecting her to support him. The man who would not borrow to get out of difficulties, would not marry in order to do so, and would certainly not stab the woman who rejected him. Whatever his faults, and Heaven knows they were many, Hilary was a gentleman.

To me, therefore, the findings of the assistant district attorney, confirmed as they immediately were by the verdict of the coroner's jury, did not at first make sense. Either Hilary had performed a series of acts which contradicted every rule of his being, or I, who had been his intimate friend for years, had completely misjudged him.

I said as much to the physician whose diagnosis had been so prompt and so accurate. "But your second alternative is a possible one," he pointed out. "You misjudged him."

"It is possible."

He smiled at me pleasantly, tapping the table between us with a gold pencil as he made his points in professorial fashion. "Poison, under the circumstances with which we have to deal, is almost certainly suicide; and suicide is even more certainly confession. If there is only one solution, and it is possible, then it is also probable, and it may be inevitable."

I recall that I wrote, but a few minutes ago, that theories must fit facts, for facts cannot give in. They are the immovable obstacle whose existence precludes that of an irresistible force. But some theories are hard to accept—as life is sometimes hard to accept.

Since these pages will never be seen by another eye, I digress again. In my judgment there was among us just one person who had the brains, the strength, the resourcefulness, and the unscrupulousness to commit both crimes, and that was Sue Halsey. A powerful woman, even Mary Ashton would have been a child in her grasp. A jealous and a vengeful woman, she would not have balked at murder if she found, or thought she found Mary going farther than she should with Jim Halsey. A shrewd and a clever woman, she could either have planned in advance, or could have taken advantage of a sudden opportunity. Finally she might have joined us with a poison capsule ready, hoping to use it on Mary if the chance offered itself. She did not have to use it: she found a more direct weapon. But if, then, she was guilty of the stabbing, and if Hilary had been too observant and had learned more than he should, she would not have hesitated to remove him from her path as ruthlessly as she did Mary.

I noticed that a French window was open when we returned to the library. Is it not possible that Sue, who knew the house thoroughly, entered through that window during the second interval of darkness, did what she had planned, and rejoined us before the lights went on? Even if she had not remained in the library with Mary, she could have watched what went on through the window, for we, in the darkened living room, would never know whether there were eight or only seven of us present. It rained—yes—but it was a slanting rain, and sheltered by half of the window, through which she had left and through

which she would re-enter at the selected moment, only a few drops would have touched her.

She would have seen Hilary and Mary, for I am positive it was they who stayed, making their preparations and laughing at the probable outcome. She would have seen Mary finally lying down on the couch, covering her face with a newspaper, and Hilary going to the door, to switch off the lights before joining us; and then, with a perfect picture of the room and its arrangements in her mind, she would have had no difficulty in making her silent way through it in the dark. One hand would have felt for the desired spot at Mary's throat—and Mary, startled, puzzled, but unsuspecting, would not have moved—and then, abruptly, the pin would have been thrust in, and without waiting to discover the results, Mary's assailant would have left the room.

It is thus that I reconstruct the actual commission of the crime. Whether I am right or not, I shall never know, but I cannot forget that it was Sue who prevented us from sending for either a doctor or the police when Mary's death was first discovered.

Lastly there is the detail of the weapon, an unusual but a significant choice. Most certainly it was appropriated before we left the room: had it been left in the clothes hamper, it would have been tagged and conspicuously placed, as were the more obvious weapons. It was not, and it would have been easy for a woman to abstract it and hide it under her dress until the time came to use it. Indeed, what other weapon could have been so readily snatched up and concealed?

These are conjectures: dangerous conjectures, I know, and it is well that I never voiced them. The official verdict, which, by the kindness of the authorities, declared that Hilary had killed Mary in a fit of insanity and had then slain himself, is a matter of public record. The press, with whoops of joy, romanticized everything. It was a modernized combination of Romeo and Juliet and Othello, chanted the newspapers, closing their eyes to everything else. With Juliet dead, Othello wished to live no longer, or words to that effect; and one super-sentimental editorial, brought to my attention a week later, admitted surprised pleasure that such love existed among the moneyed upper classes. Another described Hilary as a great lover, chronicled his many entanglements, and declared that he had ended his life in a way which might have been foreseen. I, who was his intimate friend, cannot agree—but some day I may persuade myself to do so.

Constable Perry, needless to say, reversed himself when he saw in which direction the tide was running. He had theorized that one of the two had committed murder and suicide. When the assistant district attorney came to a similar, but opposite conclusion, turning the rôles about, the constable

mentioned that he had been the first to light upon it. And he adduced proof which has gone a long way to resolve doubts which troubled me and others.

"You drew Chinese checkers to settle which two was to stay in the liberry, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"The one that drew the red was to make-believe to kill the one that drew the black?"

"Yes."

He held out his closed hands before me— and was subsequently photographed innumerable times doing the same before each of us. "I found this on the sofa under Miss Ashton's body after they had carried it away." It was a black marble. "I found this here one on the rug not more'n a couple of feet from where Mr. Densmore was layin'." It was red.

Such evidence is clinching—almost too clinching.

"Does that settle it?" demanded the constable.

I admitted it did.

How feeble a thing is the human mind when it attempts to substitute its deductive powers for mute testimony which may not be contradicted!

What is man, to set up his reason against the stark facts which alone are reality?

Life is illogical: that is the secret of both its beauty and its terror.

We walked out of the house into the sunshine, free as air, at liberty to do as we pleased. Behind us we left the tragedy which had struck among us and had obliterated two of us, but which, I humbly pray, will cast no shadows over the years whose histories remain to be written by the future.

Epilogue

THEY SAY confession is good for the soul.

Perhaps: but perhaps I have no soul.

Do people who kill have souls? And do those souls go wandering around, damned through all eternity? Or is there a special dispensation for those who kill in defense of their own lives, and who do not regret what they have done?

It is now more than two years since Mary died.

I have brought happiness to the man I love.

I have brought happiness to myself— after having been cheated out of it for most of my life.

During every single day of those two years I have thought back to the night which cannot be forgotten. I have relived its every moment, and I know that if I were faced today with the same problem, I would solve it as I did then.

I committed no crime.

No living person committed any crime.

A dead person committed a crime, being dead at the time; but can a dead person commit a crime?

I should like to discuss that with somebody, and I cannot. Perhaps that is my punishment, because I need a confidant, and cannot have one. I should like to confess to almost anybody, for if I am right, all right-thinking people will agree with me; but if I told the one person whose good opinion matters most, and if he did not understand, or if he disbelieved, because I have so little proof, then life would no longer be worth living.

And life is worth living!

Life is savagely worth living!

I fought for my happiness: what a fool I would be to risk it!

A thousand times I have been on the point of speaking: a thousand times I have forced myself to be silent.

He has been wonderful about it.

He takes it for granted that I am innocent.

From the very beginning, he would not even consider the possibility that I, and I alone was responsible for Mary's death.

He could suspect everybody else— but not me.

Perhaps that is one more reason why I love him.

Once, a month or so after we were married, a reference to that night came into the conversation, and he said quickly, "What happened at Bert's is over and done with. Let's agree, dear, that we won't even think about it."

I agreed— gladly; and less gladly later, because a secret demands to be shared.

Not think about it?

How can I control my thoughts?

He realized that, for he came to me a week after and gave me a neatly bound manuscript. "Read it," he said. "Reread the parts you already know, and then read what I added. As my wife, you have a right to know what I thought."

I read— and I handed it back to him.

"You agreed with my conclusions?"

"No."

"You preferred the official explanation?"

"As between the two? Yes."

"Perhaps I will, some day. You're more intuitive than I am."

I said, "Why haven't you destroyed these sheets? That's what Bert wanted you to do."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Do you want me to destroy them?"

"It's a matter of indifference to me."

"Perhaps I feel the same way."

I chose my words carefully. "In view of some of the things you yourself wrote, about Sue, for example, they're potential dynamite."

"Not in my safe."

"But you've given me the combination to it."

"I trust you with that as I trust you with everything else. If you ever wish to destroy them, do it, and I won't ask any questions."

I have often wished I could do that. The bound manuscript is at my elbow as I write. But some force stronger than myself will doubtless prevent me from getting rid of it once and for all.

Terry has shared his secret, and is happier for it.

Shall I also share mine?

By telling him I might gain my own peace of mind; but I might also lose.

I am debating these things as I sit by the fire in the new home we have built for ourselves tonight. It is not cold, but I like the cheerfulness of a fire. I can gaze into its flames and escape from reality. I can escape from what was ugly in the past, and dream of the promise of the future.

But not now.

He is in the city, and cannot possibly return before midnight.

I am alone, and shall be alone for several hours.

Whatever I decide to do, I shall be happier for putting these words on paper, for telling coherently and from beginning to end the story I have never told before.

I remember reading somewhere that every cell in the body is renewed every six months. If that is true, then I am not the same person I was when

these things happened, and I can consider them as a stranger would. I am actually somebody else, and can sit in judgment on myself.

The logs crackle merrily as they burn. There is a deep satisfaction in gazing at them from time to time as I write. After I have written myself out, and everything is between me and my conscience, I shall make up my mind what to do next. But no matter what may be in store for me in the future, I know I shall never again live through hours so terrible as those which came between Mary's death and the proof, it seemed an eternity later, that I was innocent.

I am guilty and I am innocent. Even if I had intended to kill, which I did not, I would be innocent. But Mary was doubly guilty.

2

WHY do two young women go around together?

Oftenest because they enjoy each other's company; but often, also, because they complement each other.

The orchid and the violet: I liked Mary because she was showy; she liked me because I was an excellent background against which to display herself. She was brilliant: I was not. She was daring: I was timid. She was versatile. She could do everything well. She stood out in any crowd. She shone more brightly in my company, and I enjoyed her successes quite as much as she did.

From our girlhood days it was the instinctive realization of what we meant to each other which drew us together. But when we met boys, she had first choice: it was fair, because it was she who had attracted them. We were classmates in college, though she was younger than I. We roomed together. We were inseparable. But when she picked out dresses for me— she had a way of managing other people's lives— she never forgot that mine were to be a background for hers.

Sometimes I wondered why I stood for it, but I know today: a public needs a star quite as much as a star needs a public. I was never worth a second glance; but as Mary's friend I was a somebody. We both acted in amateur theatricals. I believe I had a genuine talent for it: the only talent I possess. Quite naturally I played the difficult, subordinate parts, and quite as naturally Mary annexed the more brilliant, showy ones.

Mary, during her undergraduate days, took up tennis seriously. I was never good at it, and gave it up after a few years. But when Mary became a ranking player, I sat in a box and applauded. It seemed the natural thing for me to do: to contribute to her brilliance; to encourage her; and I would not have sat in a box but for her.

In our junior year I fell in love: I met a man who really cared for me. That was the beginning and the end of the story, so far as it concerned me, because when Mary couldn't talk me out of it, she eloped with the man. She didn't want him, and told me so shamelessly; but she always took anything I wanted, and he was no exception. They went off on a honeymoon, she became heartily sick of him before the summer was over, and she divorced him. And that finished him for me, too, because as Mary's intimate, I could not again become a friend of her divorced husband.

She was always irresponsible.

She was an orphan. She was brought up by a trust company, which worried only about investing and reinvesting her money. If there was a penny short, they would be blamed; but if she never understood what life was about, and if she played with it and with the people she met like the spoiled, petulant child she was, it was not their concern.

Except for the fact that she never told a lie, she had no morals. I say it here, though I have never told it to a soul. She lived for the joy of the moment. She thought I was old-fashioned and prudish because I couldn't readjust my views to conform with hers. Even after her divorce, which didn't help her reputation, she could have married any number of men. She didn't because she preferred the variety of a succession of love affairs to the humdrum of settling down quietly with a husband. And when Terry, whom she dazzled, as she dazzled everyone else, proposed to her five years ago, she rejected him. She had led him on. He had asked her to marry him. That was all she wanted. She told him she didn't love him— truthfully, because she never loved anybody but herself— and she spread her wings in search of other game. And it was while Terry was recovering from his chagrin and disappointment that he turned to me.

Mary had expected him to be just as attentive even after she rejected him. Other men were like that. He wasn't. He knew the best way to get over it was to forget her, and it was her turn to be disappointed.

She blamed me.

"What have you said to Terry about me?" she said.

I had never said a word against her, but she would not believe it.

"You mustn't see him so often," she said.

"Why not?"

She didn't answer that question. She never answered it. "I'd like to know what he sees in you that he doesn't see in me!"

I knew, and I told her. "Mary, you've trained me too well. You've taught me to be a good background for yourself. I would be just as good a background for a distinguished husband."

She snorted. "Fiddlesticks!"

"What's more," I said, "Terry knows it. I don't mean that he understands it as clearly as I do— men don't have women's intuition—but I admire him, and he likes to be admired, and I would set him off properly, and he realizes that he needs a setting."

She said, "Will you marry him if he asks you?"

"In a minute!"

"Why?"

"Would it surprise you to learn, after all these years, that I have feelings, just as if I were a human being? I love him. I wouldn't care why he wanted me: it would be enough just to know that he wanted me."

She tilted her nose. "What a worm you are!"

I took it smilingly. "What a worm you've made me!"

She hesitated only a second. She said, "I love him myself."

"You turned him down."

"That was long ago."

"You told him—"

"It doesn't matter what I told him. I've got the right to change my mind."

"Mary, you wouldn't come between me and a man who cares for me— again!"

"Wouldn't I?"

I said something foolish. "If he knew everything about you, he wouldn't look at you."

She drew herself up. "He knows I've been married and divorced."

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the kind of life you've led since."

She tossed her head. "I've never pretended to be an angel, if that's what you mean."

"It's part of what I mean. Now, if Terry were to see a list of names, dates, places—"

She looked at me, and a hard, steely glitter came into her eyes. "You're the only person who could supply it. You probably know better than I do myself."

"Probably."

"Would you tell?"

I said nothing.

"Why would you tell? Because there's no other way you can get him?"

"No."

"Why, then?"

When a worm turns, it turns hard. "I would tell him because I wouldn't want you to marry him and break his heart. You say you love him. You don't."

You want him only because I want him. But you wouldn't change your way of living for him, and you know it."

She said lightly, "If you told, he would despise you for it."

I said, "I would expect that."

"It would put an end to your chances with him."

"I'm thinking of him: not of myself. I don't care what happens to me." I said that, and I really meant it.

She looked me over from head to foot, the little that there is of me. "Are you really in earnest?" she said.

I don't know how I stood up to her, but I did it. "I would do anything to save him from you," I said. "Anything!"

She lighted a cigarette and puffed the smoke into my face, just as if she were the villainess in a melodrama. "What you know about me is confidential," she said. "You've been my most intimate friend, and I've never kept secrets from you."

"I never asked you to tell them to me."

"I've told them, anyhow." She drew in a breath of smoke. "Do you know what I would do if you ever said a word to Terry?" She paused, and I waited. For all her misdoings, she had never lied; and she had never made a threat which she had failed to carry out. "Priss," she said lightly, "I'd kill you." Then she threw her arms around my neck, and kissed me. "Let's be friends, Priss! Good friends! Honest, I'd rather have you go on living!"

That conversation took place five or six months before the party at Bert's.

Terry, if you were looking over my shoulder, and if you were reading these lines, would you believe them?

3

TERRY, I never set my cap for you.

Heaven knows I'm not too proud!

I have no dignity to lose.

But from the time that I was a child, I've known that I could never have what I wanted most. Of course I had family and money, and I had plenty of proposals from men who would have put up with Priss for the sake of the advantages that went with her; but I was never beautiful, or brilliant, or the natural center of anything, and yet I had the funny notion that in spite of it some man might come to love me for myself.

I hoped that one day you would come to me.

You did.

Bless you, Terry!

But if I hoped that Mary would avoid me after declaring that it was war to the knife between us, I was in for an awakening. We met—often. She stopped in at my place to chat. She invited me to hers when she had people there, and because it would have made talk if I hadn't gone, I went.

I said to her once, "Mary, what is your object?"

She smiled and stroked my hand. "Little Priss in a state of revolution! By and by little Priss will quiet down."

She knew me, or she thought she knew me. She had trampled on me for so many years that at first she could not realize I had changed. "Do you remember what I warned you?" she asked occasionally.

I said, "You'll get over feeling that way."

She said, "So will you. You don't really love Terry."

I said, "I've had plenty of crushes, but this time it's the real thing."

"You think so, Priss." She looked at me quizzically. "I've invited him to a little dinner I'm giving two weeks from tonight."

"Without me?"

"By no means! You're invited, too Priss. I want you there."

"As background for yourself?"

"If you want to put it that way— yes."

"Well, I'm not coming."

She laughed. "You won't be able to stay away. You'd never be able to twiddle your thumbs at home, knowing he's here!" She changed her tone suddenly. "I know you've seen a lot of him lately. Have you told him anything against me?"

"No."

"If you do, remember what I promised."

"Mary, you don't mean it!"

"You know me better than anybody else, and you know if I mean it."

I said, quite calmly, "Mary, has it ever struck you that there are laws?"

"Of course there are laws, you old darling!"

"And if you do away with me, they might put you in a big armchair and toast you to a crisp."

"How delightfully you put it, Priss! Yes, there are laws; but I've broken lots of laws, and if I have to break one more, it will be the perfect crime. Priss, isn't it too ridiculous for words: me, the perfect criminal, and you, the perfect victim?"

Terry, you remember we went to her dinner; and you remember she flirted outrageously with Bill Laird; and I tell you now that she did it to make you jealous, and didn't have the sense to quit when you showed you didn't mind?

Terry, did I ever tell you that one of your most lovable traits is that you just don't see whatever I'd rather not have you see? Sometimes you're so bright that you terrify me, but you do have the nicest blind spots!

Mary was furious when she dropped in casually the next day. "You told him things!" she said.

"I didn't."

"I know you told him! He's never acted like that before!"

"I didn't tell him."

"He hardly spoke to me all evening."

"The way you carried on with Bill, you can hardly blame him."

"You told him!"

"If I had told him, he wouldn't have been there at all. Can't you see that?"

It was so reasonable that she hesitated, even though she didn't try to hide her anger. She said, "Priss, I want him. I want him badly."

"You want him because you can't have him." Having stood up to her once, I was finding it easy to do it again.

"That's a lie," she said.

"You could have had him three years ago, when he proposed to you," I said. "You had your chance, and you wouldn't take it. It's my turn now, and I'm not going to give it up."

She was white with anger, but she asked coolly, "Has he asked you to marry him yet? No, I needn't ask you that. If he had, you'd be shouting it from the housetops. Therefore he hasn't asked you. Well, I'm going to a week-end party at the Carters', and so is he. He'll ask me there."

I said very quietly, "I'm going, too."

She stared at me. "D'you mean, you expect me to take you along?"

"Oh, dear, no!" I said. "Cynthia asked me before she asked you."

"Stole a march on me, did you?"

"I wasn't thinking about you," I said calmly. "I was thinking about myself."

Mary went through one of her characteristic transformations. "Let's be friends about it, Priss. I'll stop for you in the morning, and drive you up."

I shook my head. "Terry has already asked me to drive up with him."

"Oh!" she said, and then again, "oh!"

So that was the state of affairs when it started to rain, keeping us indoors, and Jim Halsey had The Idea.

When you've waited for a chance to do something for months and months, and the chance finally comes, that's not coincidence: it's certainty. It would be coincidence only if the chance didn't come.

I don't know that Mary put Jim Halsey up to suggesting The Idea. I don't even know that directing the conversation into the channels she did, doing autopsies on the Sherlock Holmes stories, explaining the dumbness of all detectives, and insisting that we ourselves should be better at it, had anything to do with it. I only know that The Idea came forth, and that it was the chance for which Mary was looking.

I wasn't blind.

I saw what it might mean quite as clearly as Mary did.

I tried to stop it while I could: I said it was childish, and Mary answered that we were in a childish mood.

I thought fast.

I adjusted myself to circumstances.

I elected myself historian.

I went to my room and locked myself in.

I thought of pleading a sick headache, and letting the game go on without me, but I decided against it for two good reasons: at the most, it would only postpone a moment which was bound to come sooner or later, and then, too, I was no coward, and I realized that if I surrendered once, I'd have to surrender again and again. It would have meant giving you up, Terry, and I wouldn't do that: whatever the risk, I knew you were worth it.

It sounds incredible that a young woman in our set, a young woman with family, and education, and social position, and money, should seriously consider committing a murder; but if it could be done without rousing the least suspicion, and if she were brilliant, and had a high opinion of herself, and were sure she could get away with it, as she had with almost everything else—

I said to myself that nobody could cheat with a bag of colored marbles.

I calculated that with ten of us, the odds against my drawing either the red or the black would be four to one, and that even if I were unlucky, and chose either, the odds against the other person in the room being Mary would be many times as great. If two persons are to be chosen out of ten, then there are forty-five possible combinations— or have I forgotten my mathematics?

I knew how ingenious Mary was. I could have found an excuse to let the game go on without me. But there isn't an ounce of fear in my whole body, and if there was to be a showdown, I wasn't avoiding it. It had to come.

When the door between the library and the living room slid shut, when the lights went on, and I found myself alone with Mary, my first question was, "Well, how did you do it?"

She laughed. "Clever, wasn't it?"

"How did you do it? After I drew the red marble, how did you make the black come to yourself? Nine people drew before you."

"The black didn't come to me, darling. Look!" She pulled the bag out of her bosom and showed me the single marble left in it. It was white.

"But I saw you drop a black checker into the bag!"

She laughed even more loudly. "We magicians don't explain our secrets; but we do admit that the hand is quicker than the eye. Would you like to see the black checker?" She opened her hand and showed it to me. She adjusted it in the crook of her finger, and shot it into the couch as if she were playing marbles. "Now you see it, and now you don't!"

That, incidentally, was the checker found under Mary's body by Constable Perry the following morning, though he bettered his story by dropping a red one in the living room near Hilary's body, and you, Terry, wrote, "Such evidence is clinching— almost too clinching."

Mary was in the best of good humors. "I need the white marble for myself," she said, patting the bag which she had returned to her bosom.

"Why?"

"Darling, in an hour or two some bright soul is going to try and solve the crime by making all of us show our marbles. Wouldn't it be embarrassing if I had a black or a red?"

"But I drew the red, and I'm supposed to kill you!"

"So you are, darling! So you are!" She winked at me deliberately. "All you have to do now is to do it."

I played for time. "I still don't understand how you forced me to draw the only red checker. There isn't any way—"

She interrupted. "There are lots of ways. Offhand I could mention several. There could have been two bags—"

"Were there?"

"There could have been one bag with a partition down the middle—"

"It would have taken time to make one—"

"I had time while you were typing before dinner; and I'm an excellent needle-woman."

"That would have meant one red on one side of the partition for me, and nine whites on the other side for the rest. I would have noticed—"

She burst again into triumphant laughter. "Dear, literal Priss! Why one red, when you would have fumbled about and become suspicious? Why not half a dozen? You saw me drop ten marbles into a bag. Did it ever strike you that the bag might not have been empty at the start?"

"Was that how you did it?"

"I'm not telling you how, and that's final."

It is time to mention that I examined the bag carefully the next day. I found a hole at one corner, just large enough so that a marble could be forced through; but there was no partition, though it might have been ripped out after having served its purpose, and the few inches of unattached silk thread which I discovered in the bag might have signified anything or nothing.

I still do not know how the trick was done.

Mary enjoyed the situation enormously. "When the game was suggested, I saw my chance, darling," she said, bustling about the room, taking weapons from the clothes hamper, cocking her pretty head from side to side as ideas and still more ideas came to her. "An imitation lei! What fun! Conan Doyle's snake! Type out a card, dear, and we'll hang it over the door. Type out another card for the dagger. Type out cards for every weapon there is: we'll use them all if we can. Type out a card for the bust on the pedestal: Colonel Moran's bullet flew in through the window, and went right through the bust. Oh, and one more card for the bullet! I'll drop a poker chip to show where it flattened against the wall!"

I interrupt, Terry, to mention that the window was shut and stayed shut until I opened it for purposes of my own later. That open window set you guessing; but you never did guess right, dear!

The radio was playing *Scheherezade*, and Mary was flitting around, doing little dance steps in time with the music, preparing the elaborate stage setting which I myself described when I wrote the second half of my narrative.

"Bring me the card for the bust, darling."

I had typed it as she had directed.

"Er, Priss, have you changed your mind about Terry?"

"No," I said emphatically.

" 'No,' like that?"

"I haven't changed it, I mean."

"What a pity! And you won't change it now?"

I didn't answer.

She had half-filled two glasses with whiskey, and she emptied one.

"Darling, wouldn't you like a drink yourself? You look green about the gills."

I dare say her description of my appearance was accurate, but I needed a clear head for what was to come. "No, thanks," I said. "No."

"Darling, you'd look ever so much better if you took just a swallow—"

"No."

" 'No' is all I can get out of you tonight. Well, if you won't, you won't." Like a great cat, she enjoyed playing with the mouse she had caught. "Will you lend me your lipstick?"

"What for?"

"It would be so artistic to put smudges of blood on the dagger and the sword."

"Use your own lipstick."

"Darling, that would never do! Nobody else uses orchid, and it would be a dead give-away. Just stop and think: when we return to this room, your body will be lying on the couch, and smears of orchid would be my signed confession that I was here, too."

Her effrontery was so magnificent that I don't know how I resisted her. I didn't waste time repeating that she was supposed to be the victim and I the criminal. She had reversed our rôles, and that settled it. But I made a pretense of looking through my bag. "I'm afraid I've lost my lipstick," I said.

"You're fibbing, Priss! You're fibbing! But never mind: I'll find it later."

5

TERRY, I hope you're not going to be so foolish as to ask why I remained in the room with her: why I didn't leave at once. You might as well ask why the bird doesn't try to fly away from the snake. It knows that if it makes a move, the snake will strike. The sliding door to the living room was not locked, but at all times Mary kept herself between it and me. If I had made a dash for it she would have acted at once.

Why didn't I scream? With two radios going, and every door closed, I might not have been heard. Had you heard me, you would have thought it was just part of the game; and Mary would have let me scream only once.

Why didn't I pick up a weapon, and stand my ground? Of course I thought of it, but what chance would I have had? Only a few years ago Mary had become so angry with me that she had turned me over her knee and spanked me. I don't know which hurt most: the spanking, or the humiliation of realizing that I was helpless in her hands. Don't forget that Mary was a trained athlete, and that I weigh less than a hundred pounds.

I had to fight her with my brain, such as it was, and I was the last person in the world to underestimate her intelligence and resourcefulness. But I was resolved I was not going to make things easier for her. I knew, and she knew, that a struggle was out of the question. If I could rip her dress, if I could scratch her face, if I could mark her, somehow, somewhere, before she killed me, she would never be able to explain it away, and as we stood, not ten feet from each other, staring into each others' eyes, we knew what we were both thinking.

She laughed, and took another sip of whiskey. "You won't join me, Priss?"

I didn't answer.

"And you won't give up Terry?"

I didn't answer that either.

She began to call me names, trying deliberately to make me lose my temper. "Sneak!" she said. "Tattletale! Sneak!"

I smiled: such tactics do not work with a grown woman.

"Can't get your man by fair means; perfectly willing to win him by foul!"

She moved toward me: so near that I could smell her perfume.

I tried to hold my ground, but I could not.

I backed away.

"Mary," I said in desperation, "if you turn this game into earnest, they'll find you out!"

She gave an exhibition of mind-reading which was almost worthy of Dupin. "Thinking of my perfume, aren't you, darling?" She had seen my nostrils quivering, and had brilliantly divined my thoughts. "Barring yourself, Priss, there's only one other woman here who's bright enough to catch on to that clue! That's Kathleen; and that's why I'm wearing the same perfume that she does tonight! She uses Chanel. So do I— for the time being! When she comes in here— later— she'll recognize your Coq d'Or, Priss, but she won't smell the perfume she wears herself!" She took another step toward me. "I've thought of everything, haven't I?"

It was in that moment that I realized positively, certainly, that she would not stop with threats, but that she actually intended to kill me.

I said nothing.

What was there to say?

By now you have already guessed what followed.

She backed me clear across the room.

I glanced into the clothes hamper.

She followed my glance.

"No use," she said. "I've taken out the weapons."

So she thought— but she had overlooked the hatpin, and I hadn't. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it was better than none; and taking advantage of an instant when her back had been turned, I had grabbed it, and had stuck it into my dress on the left side, where I could get at it quickly.

Do you remember, Terry, one of the reasons why I was never suspected was because I am left-handed?

"Just one more note for you to type," she said, forcing me back to the desk.

I shook my head.

"Won't type it? Dear me! Then I'll type it myself, and nobody will ever know the difference."

Her confidence in herself was boundless.

She sat down at the typewriter, contemptuously turning her back to me.

I was empty-handed: she thought she had seen to that.

The weapons were in the center of the room.

She knew that I could do nothing with my small fists and puny muscles; and it had not occurred to her that there was one weapon so inconspicuous, so slender, that any woman might hide it in her clothing.

You caught on to that, Terry, though you misinterpreted it.

"Want to see what I'm going to write, Priss?"

I came nearer, and looked over her shoulder.

Quickly she typed, "*I have decided to end it all. Priscilla.*"

That could have only one meaning.

I had drawn the pin, and I struck.

I was standing behind her.

I had the pin in my left hand, and it entered at her left—behind the collarbone, exactly as you explained, Terry.

She felt the prick.

She started up.

The pin sank in to its full length....

No, Terry, I'm not saying that I meant only to stab her lightly, and that she really killed herself. I'm not like the man who insists that he merely held out his fist while the other chap ran into it.

I meant harm, and I meant as much harm as I could inflict. The pin might not have been forced in the whole distance if she had not risen against it: I don't think my strength alone would have been enough. On the other hand, I would have buried it to the head if I could have done it.

I meant to kill, even though I didn't think I could do it: that's the truth, and I don't want to conceal it from you.

She was so strong that she rose to her feet and turned to face me.

"Priss!" she said, "why, Priss!"

She stood for an instant, with a look of astonishment in her eyes: no hate; only astonishment—astonishment.

Then she fell.

6

REMORSE?

Not then— and I'm not going to write about it now.

I had won— temporarily— but it was up to me to make sure that I did not still lose. It would be no victory if I paid for it with my own life.

My mind was calm and collected. Scheherezade was still playing, and I knew I would have plenty of time.

I half carried, half dragged Mary's body to the couch.

My strength astonished me.

I tore the card she had written out of the typewriter. I burned it, and crushed the ashes in the fireplace.

I typed a second card: "*I have decided to end it all. Mary,*" and I left that in the machine.

If it occurred to the police, later on, to examine the keys for fingerprints, they would find Mary's, because I used just one finger, and that only after wrapping a handkerchief around it.

I marked the dagger and the saber with smears of lipstick: Mary's orchid lipstick.

I exchanged the red marble I still carried for a white one: Mary had foreseen that there would be questions.

I completely forgot the black marble, which the constable found later on the couch; but it meant so little by itself that he had to drop a red one near Hilary's body as well to make his story convincing.

I flung open the French window.

Why?

To air the room, so that Kathleen would not spot my perfume the moment she came into it!

Mary had mentioned that detail: I profited by her forethought.

You were right, Terry, when you insisted that somebody or something had passed through the window; but what came in was fresh air, and what went out was a telltale scent!

I left the window open purposely: it would be noticed, and there couldn't be too many false clues.

And then, with Scheherezade crashing into my ears from the radio, I sat down, and wished I could smoke, and dared not, and relived every minute of the six months which had come before, asking myself if Mary had really meant murder, or if she might not finally have said, "Priss, of course I never actually intended to kill you. You've called my bluff, and you win."

Terry, I thought she was dead when I dragged her to the couch.

I knew the pin must have reached the heart, and I thought such a wound caused instant death.

It didn't.

I heard a sound: "Priss!"

I'll swear that every hair on my head stood on end.

"Priss!"

I stood up automatically.

I moved toward her— and I didn't know I was walking.

Her eyes were wide open, looking into mine.

She had always been a good loser at tennis. She was just as good a loser now. She whispered, "Good girl— Priss. Not— a worm— any longer."

She smiled, and closed her eyes.

Perhaps she died then: perhaps she didn't die until later....

To turn the radio to another station: to walk to the door: to switch off the lights: to open the door in the dark: to join the others: it sounds easy enough, but I was so completely unnerved that if it hadn't all been rehearsed in advance, I wouldn't have been able to go through with it.

7

MY STORY of what took place in the living room while I wasn't there was convincing. That was natural: I wrote while overhearing the conversations which were going on around me, and I put in whatever suited my purpose.

What happened while you were waiting in the dark? I might have guessed, but when I listened to the others, I didn't have to. Kathleen debated who sat on whose lap. I borrowed that, because if I sat on a lap it proved I had been in the room all the time, and I improvised a detail about the man who kissed me on the bare shoulder. Perhaps some man did that to some woman: perhaps he didn't; but all of us would believe that some man had done it, and it wouldn't and couldn't be contradicted. I mentioned that somebody had thought to turn off the light behind the radio dial: I noticed it had been done after I returned to the living room. I explained how I walked about in the dark: who could say I wasn't telling the truth? I wrote about the empty bottle on the table: I saw Bert investigate it and discover that it was empty.

Separately not one of those little touches proved I had been in the living room with the rest; but taken together, they had a cumulative effect, and I had a first-class alibi.

I made one frightful mistake which should have given me away at once, but nobody noticed it, even though I made the mistake worse by describing it in writing. All of you bright people read the manuscript, and not one of you spotted it! I'll come back to it again.

We had agreed that after the criminal had joined the rest, he would do his best to confuse them. Of course! I did it. In spite of what I'd been through, I regained my self-possession before the others did— largely because I knew what was coming— and I tried to make suspicion rest in turn on seven different people, knowing that they were innocent, and that nothing could

ever be proved against them. I landed hard on Kathleen: I never liked her; but I'm human, Terry, and I had nothing to say about you which was not good. I didn't want you to be under a cloud even for an instant!

The hours between the finding of Mary's body and the moment that Hilary dropped were agony to me. No human being takes life lightly. I said over and over again to myself that I had been justified, that I had acted in self-defense, that Mary had really meant murder, that I had fought for my own life and for the happiness of two persons against a creature who cared for nothing but herself. And then I doubted, and the doubt nearly killed me.

How simple everything became when poor Hilary's death gave me the solution!

I understood at once!

He had come into the library when Mary's body, with half of the clothes off, had been exposed on the couch.

He was drunk: he didn't know what to make of it.

He apologized.

I quote from Bert's story: " 'I beg your pardon, madam.... I didn't know—hic!— that you weren't dressed to receive callers. My mistake.' " Then Bert goes on, "He bowed, turned, and stumbled gravely from the room, pausing only to leave his empty glass on a table and appropriate a half-filled one which he found there."

That last sentence is the key which unlocks everything, even if it didn't mean a thing to Bert when he wrote it. Hilary, poor fellow, walked out with the glass from which Mary had repeatedly urged me to drink, and which, though I didn't suspect it, she had dosed with poison! To Hilary whiskey was whiskey, and the bottle which Bert had refilled with water didn't taste right to him. He saw a glass which had been overlooked: he took it along.

I can picture what followed when he was alone in the living room. He sat down at a table. He didn't empty the glass at a gulp. Bert had tricked him once, and what little there was in it would have to last him a long time. Hilary took a sip— one sip— but that was enough!

When we found Hilary was dead, I forgot myself and said aloud, "Thank God!" I said at once that it proved Kathleen was innocent, and so it did; and I said, too, that it explained everything, and to this day Bert believes that I guessed that Hilary, after stabbing Mary, had done away with himself.

I guessed nothing of the kind.

What actually came to me in a blinding flash, though I had not then read Bert's narrative, was the true solution: I was right; Mary had meant murder, and in striking first, I had made no mistake. I was acquitted in my own eyes,

and I knew that Mary, hours after she was dead, had killed Hilary as surely as if she had held a pistol to his head and had pulled the trigger.

You wrote, Terry, that Kathleen's innocence was not worth proving at the price of Hilary's life. True: but if a second one of us had to die, whom could we have spared more easily than the playboy who had gone through life shirking all of its responsibilities, and whose only dependents were the scheming women who had married him for the money there was in it?

Mary carried the poison, waiting for an opportunity to use it.

Where and how did she carry it?

I guessed that final link almost at once, and when her executors, long after, asked me to choose some trinket as a memento of the woman who had been my friend, I asked for the gold lipstick holder which I myself had given to her years before. The lipstick is at one end, and at the other is a screw-capped compartment large enough to hold a dozen saccharin tablets.

You know the Sherlock Holmes stories better than I do, and you remember how Holmes tested the pills in "A Study in Scarlet." His landlady, it appeared, had an old dog which needed to be put out of its misery.

I knew what I should find in the little compartment, and with the aid of a wretched stray cat and a saucer of milk, I tested the few grains of grayish-white powder which had stuck to the metal.

I was not wrong.

Like the dog in the Doyle story, the little creature died as if a thunderbolt had hit it.

Has it ever struck you, Terry dear, that Providence surely watched over us that night? Death came very close to us, for you almost drank from Hilary's glass, and we both escaped.

8

THAT is my story.

Terry, shall I or shall I not tell it to you?

If I tell, will you forgive?

If you do forgive, even if you say, "Dear, you did what any self-respecting woman should have done," will it not make a difference in the relations between us? Technically I am a murderess. If you learn that, will you still kiss me in the same way? Will you look into my eyes and into my soul without shuddering? Can a man who knows his wife stabbed to death her best friend forget it when they are alone, and when it is time to take her tenderly into his arms?

I wonder!

If I tell, I shall hurt you dreadfully.

Do you wish me to hurt you?

Do I wish to hurt you?

God forbid!

But I would give much, very much, to be able to share the secret which is killing me....

Terry, with your powers of reasoning, you should have discovered the truth long ago. You didn't even have to observe, because the facts were before you in writing.

Shall I explain?

Turn back to my own narrative.

I described how the lights went on in the living room, and how Jim Halsey opened his case and offered me a cigarette.

I said, "No. I don't like Turkish," and I lighted one of my own.

That line should have exposed me at once, for no woman who has been sitting in pitch blackness for half an hour can read the fine print on a cigarette a second after the lights have been turned on! I made the mistake still worse when we thronged into the library, and when I read aloud the card which the others, with their eyes accustomed to the dark, could not read: "This Is a Speckled Band." Kathleen Logan, you will remember, didn't even see the swinging lei which struck her in the face.

But I saw it— and I could read typing— and fine print— because I had spent the half-hour preceding in a room which was lighted... and among eight intelligent persons there was not one who could put two and two together and reach the only possible conclusion!

Instead, Terry, you tried to draw inferences from the bust, and the poker chip, and the open window, though you knew all three had deliberately been arranged to deceive you; and you overlooked the simpler clue which led straight to the truth because it was unintentional!

If I tell, Terry dear, you will believe that I killed—why else should I confess?— but you will ask me to prove why I killed.

If I were sure that Mary would do me harm, why did I never utter a word?

Why, when I spent so much of the afternoon at the typewriter, did I not write just a few lines to tell you what I anticipated?

Ah, but I did, dear, and those phrases have been read and reread without their meaning being suspected!

How carefully do you read?

When you read sentences which are gibberish, do you always scurry on?

Why don't you read again?

You might discover what is in the mind of the writer.

Turn back to the last words I typed before we went in to dinner: "Idea for idiots and morons! Suicide? Laugh at it! Nonsense! Many are reluctant, yes. Dinner is due: it's time. Peaceful refreshment is somehow soothing."

Do those lines make sense?

At the time I didn't want to speak my mind too clearly; but if the worst happened, I hoped that some day somebody reading my story would stop, would think, would wonder, and would put together the initial letters of the words, so that my message might be known, complete with my signature at the end.

Shall I read it for you?

IF I AM SLAIN, MARY DID IT. PRISS.

"Slain" is a melodramatic word; but I tried to make up a sentence using "killed," and could not, because there are too few words commencing with "k" in the language.

Even if I died, that message, I prayed, would save you from Mary.

Today I wonder... and I wonder still more if at some future time, rereading the manuscript, sucking thoughtfully at your pipe, you will not stop suddenly and discover the message which I am now content to have hidden forever.

You will gasp.

You will say, "Priss, why didn't you tell me long ago?"

Well, why didn't I?

Why don't I?

My secret is buried in the manuscript, and so long as the manuscript exists, it will be a threat to our happiness.

To tell, of my own free will, is one thing.

To tell, because a question which you might ask any day would force me to tell, is another....

The freshly written pages lay on a table, and the table stood near the dying fire.

The young woman leaned back with a sigh. "I'm glad I've written them," she thought, "but shall I show them to him? Shall I?"

A puff of autumn air, neither cool nor warm, came in through an open window, and lifted the top sheet off the pile. The young woman moved to catch it, but stopped, as if hypnotized, as the sheet stood on end, swaying from side to side, as if uncertain where to fall. It dropped on the edge of the table,

balanced easily, and teetered presently, to the hearth itself, while the young woman, holding her breath, watched and stared.

A second puff moved it almost imperceptibly nearer the glowing embers, and a third gently reversed its movement; but after a fourth, the draft of the chimney caught it, and spun it delicately into the flames.

A sudden light: a brief incandescence, and it was gone.

The young woman gasped.

Deliberately she dropped a second sheet.

It found its way into the flames more quickly— as if the first had marked a path which it could not help but follow.

She dropped a third sheet— and a fourth....

With a sob, she seized the bound manuscript with both hands, and flung it into the spot where the reviving fire seethed hottest.

It began to burn, burgeoning out like a brilliant flower, single pages detaching themselves, and hurrying toward the chimney with bursts of flame.

She fed into the fire every sheet that had lain on the table.

Presently what little there was left was blazing brightly, luminously....

End