

Thrills and Murder on Every Page!

***Blood
on his
Hands***

BY

MAX AFFORD



BLOOD ON HIS HANDS

Max Afford

1945



Max Afford, 1906-1954

Prologue

FROM SOME miles away, the train was a worthwhile sight. It slipped across the gently undulating country like a linked string of flame-coloured jewels, now springing across an iron bridge, now vanishing momentarily from sight as it dived into a cutting. In that desolate stretch of country nothing seemed alive, save the cold stars, already brightening in a sky dusky with approaching night, and that twisting metal snake with the single flashing eye set in its head.

Hans von Rasch, curled up in his corner, paid little attention.

The young man sat upright and, pushing aside his rug, took a leather wallet from his coat-pocket. He drew out a folded letter and first glanced at the newspaper-cutting pinned in one corner.

"A position is offered to a third or fourth year medical student possessing a fairly sound knowledge of anatomy. Applicants should be without family responsibilities. Apply, giving full particulars of training and qualifications, to 'Medicus,' this office."

From the cutting von Rasch lowered his eyes to the letter. There was no printed heading; the address on the top stated briefly "Eldon Towers," and gave the date. The contents he knew by heart.

Dear Sir, I have great pleasure in informing you that your application for the position of assistant to Dr. Bernhardt Meyersen, of this address, has been accepted. You will report for duty on Monday, April 8th. Enclosed you will find cheque to cover your travelling expenses, also directions as to the vicinity of Eldon Towers.

Dr. Bernhardt wishes me to impress upon you the greatest need for discretion about your new position. You are not to discuss the name of your employer nor your destination with any other person.

Please reply to this letter in person. The doctor is expecting you.

Yours faithfully,

R. Austin Linton (Secretary).

A sudden noise recalled him. The door at the end of the carriage was flung open and a guard entered, rolling his body to the lurch of the train. He was a middle-aged man with a stolid, pleasant face. He paused near the solitary traveller.

"Getting near Greycliffe prison now, sir. Thought you might like to take a look." As though excusing his uninvited approach, he added: "Most folks do, travelling on this line, you know."

Von Rasch nodded.

"Thank you," he said. He spoke slowly, choosing his words with care. Their guttural accent betrayed his nationality, so that the official glanced at him curiously.

"That's where the chap escaped from a week ago," he volunteered. "Warders and dogs been hunting the place for days now—stopped the train once, they did, for a search. Guess they'll never find him now. He's probably fallen into one of those gullies and broken his neck—sure as sin!"

Von Rasch had heard about the queer volcanic formation of this country; of the hollow earth that opened beneath the feet and the depthless caverns with their wells of green and stagnant water. He averted his head. "That is horrible."

The guard ran his tongue along the gum of a cigarette-paper. "Horrible's right." He spat out a wisp of tobacco. "But then, this chap was a horrible one himself. Oscar Dowling, the Golganna murderer. You remember him—no? Well, he murdered his wife and three children—chopped off their hands. Mad, he was—mad 's a hatter! That's why he got life instead of the noose. But I guess he's dead now all right."

"I cannot remember the case," von Rasch replied shortly. "I do not read newspapers."

The guard lit his cigarette and tossed away the match. He seemed glad to impart the information. "Strange case, it was. Made a lot of talk at the time. This Dowling was a well-educated man—one of those chaps who write books and things. Loving husband and father, the newspapers said. All at once he went off his head—phut." He clicked his fingers in the air. "Just like that! Been working too hard, doctors said. Anyhow, when he came round again, he knew nothing of what he'd done. In the court he swore they were sentencing an innocent man, said someone else was responsible for the murders! Then he went off again. They locked him in a madhouse for three months, then shifted him down here. When he was sane they set him to work in the cook-house. That's how he came to escape. Cunning, you see—cunning." The guard nodded to himself. "That's how they all are. But I guess he's gone for keeps now—and the best thing that could happen, I say!"

He paused in his gloomy recital and leaned closer to the window. Then he straightened and turned back. "You're for Henbane station, aren't you?"

"That is right."

"Well, it's the next stop." Reluctantly the guard pinched out his half-smoked cigarette and pocketed it. "Better get ready. We don't stop more than a minute or so." With a nod he moved out of the carriage and vanished with the slamming of a door.

Von Rasch rose to his feet and began to fold the rug. Reaching up, he took

the suit-case from the wire rack overhead and, thus laden, began to sway down the corridor, and out onto a vacant platform.

TEN MINUTES PASSED before a sudden commotion aroused him. He jumped to his feet as a man walked into the station and halted a few paces away from him. Von Rasch had a swift impression of a huge, swarthy giant, bearded to the eyes, his great form wrapped from throat to ankles in an old-fashioned Burberry overcoat buttoned about his throat. A slouch hat was pulled low on his forehead. The new-comer stared at the young man for a moment, then asked gruffly:

"Mr. von Rasch?" He barely moved his lips as he spoke.

The young man replied quietly: "That is my name."

Without another word the big man bent and lifted the heavy suit-case as though it were a child's school-bag, then turned and walked out of the station. As the other made no move to follow, he turned and flung the words over his shoulder:

"This way. Carriage's waiting."

It was a small rubber-tyred sulky that waited a few paces away, drawn by a plump mare who fogged the chilling air with her breath.

With a nod he placed one foot on the step and sprang into the seat. With a grunt the big man was by his side, and the next minute they were spanking along the grassy bank leading to the road.

They must have been driving for close on half an hour when von Rasch saw a dark grove of trees some distance ahead. From the tangle of foliage, he could make out something like a squat tower pushing its way, reminding him of a deserted lighthouse in a dark and waveless sea. As they approached along the gently sloping road, he picked out the dim lines of pointed gables and steep roofs, and began to wonder if this house, guarded by the whispering army of trees, was his destination. He was not left long in doubt. The sulky purred on its way and ten minutes later turned in between the high stone pillars of the entrance gate.

The drive was so short that the house seemed almost to leap out from the trees to confront them. Von Rasch had a confused impression of outbuildings lost in obscurity, of arched doorways and twisted chimneys grotesque against the star-spangled sky. The sulky pulled up so abruptly that the mare's hoofs pawed the ground. The driver, lopping the reins about the whip socket, jumped out and nodded to his companion to follow. He gestured in the direction of the house.

"This way," he said briefly.

The young man had naturally assumed that they would enter through the

front of the house. But he was mistaken. The servant led the way past massive pillars and a creeper-covered verandah to the side of the building. Here he pushed open a door with his foot and told his companion to enter. In the darkness they groped along a narrow corridor. The guide opened another door, and a flood of light illuminated the corridor.

"Wait in there," the bearded man muttered. Von Rasch heard him moving away, and a slam of a door announced his departure. He moved forward into the room and looked around.

It was apparently the library, this wide room with the four walls lined from floor to ceiling with books. The reds and golds of the bindings winked in the light of an old-fashioned oil-lamp hanging on chains from the ceiling. What little furnishings the room contained were artistic rather than utilitarian. A marble bust of a saturnine Dante sneered from a mahogany cabinet; there were several imitation tapestries stretched on screens here and there, and a barbaric note was struck by the presence of a many-armed Hindu idol raising pious almond eyes in one corner of the room. Von Rasch was about to examine this close, when the servant entered.

"Dr. Meyersen will see you," he said. "Come along."

Again they trod the dark corridors that wound so endlessly that the young man lost all sense of direction. At length they paused before a heavy door. The servant knocked sharply, favoured his companion with a curt nod, and moved off. From within came the harsh scrape of a chair thrust back, and footsteps approached. It was flung open and the young man had his first glimpse of Dr. Bernhardt Meyersen.

His first impression was a pair of deep-set eyes in a face of astonishing pallor, a pallor accentuated by the wild aureole of white hair. The eyes swept him from head to foot as he stood there staring at this man who was to be his employer. The silence became almost embarrassing, and the young man spoke quickly.

"Herr Doctor?"

"Yes." The voice was as thin and as sharp as the face.

"I am Hans von Rasch."

"So?" The eyes narrowed, focused on the other's face. "You are very young. How old are you?"

"Twenty-three, Herr Doctor. I understood you knew that from my letter."

There was no reply. Von Rasch dropped his eyes under this penetrating scrutiny. He was aware that the doctor had stepped aside to allow him to pass. "Come inside," he said.

The room into which they moved was almost Spartan in its severity; he noticed that the floor was of bare, unpolished boards and the furniture heavy

and cheap. Near the centre stood a table covered with papers, and above this a hanging oil-lamp spread a yellow tent of light cutting sharply downward and leaving the rest of the room in half-shadow. High in the wall was the outline of a small window, protected by iron bars.

The doctor followed him inside and, pausing by the table, pulled up a chair. "Sit down, Herr von Rasch," he invited, and when the other had obeyed he leaned against the table, folded his arms, and stared down at him. He spoke quietly.

"You have adhered rigidly to the terms of my letter—told nobody of your destination or the name of your employer?"

"I have told no one, Herr Doctor."

"You are not married, nor have you family responsibilities of any kind which bind you to the outside world?"

Von Rasch said simply: "I am quite alone in the world, sir."

Dr. Meyersen nodded and pulled forward a chair. "That is good," he announced. "Now listen carefully, my boy. I want you to understand exactly what is required of you."

Chapter 1

BERTHA FENTON pushed open the door of her tiny room on the "Weekly Informer" and, moving inside, dropped into a woven-cane chair near the table. For a while she sat limply, yielding to the pleasure of complete relaxation. The mirror on the opposite wall threw back her reflection—a dumpy, untidily dressed, middle-aged woman with sharp, almost cunning features centring about an arrogant beak of a nose. With her mousy hair drawn back and cut as short as a man's, Bertha Fenton looked every day her forty-three years.

A knock on the door aroused her. She peered through the grey haze of tobacco-smoke at the copy-boy who stood in the entrance. He pushed a sleek, pomaded head into the room.

"Mr. Armitage wants you, Miss Fenton."

Bertha made her way into the news editor's room and crossed to his desk.

Herbert Armitage, a prematurely bald young man wearing thick-lensed spectacles, leaned back in his swivel chair and waved a slip of paper. "Carstairs, nosing round the detective office this morning, ran across a pretty definite rumour that Judge Sheldon had been murdered—"

The woman sat up, her indifference dropping like a garment. "Not Sheldon, the K.C.M.G. of Spring Street?"

Armitage nodded; "The same man. It's a wonderful story—if it's genuine."

"There's just a chance that the dailies may not get on to it until late this afternoon," he said. "There's only one thing for you to do, Bertha. Get around there and bluff your way inside somehow. Keep your eyes open and don't let a word out to those daily scroungers."

In the office of the "Informer" Bertha Fenton stood out as an individual, unique almost. But the moment she set foot in the street the great moving throng swallowed her, and her eccentricities were lost in the bewildering kaleidoscope of colour and motion that packed the pavements and overflowed on to the streets.

Carnavon Chambers was a new block of apartments built at the top end of Spring Street. A policeman stood waiting under the striped canvas awning that decorated the entrance. He knew Bertha, and grinned as she approached.

"You're the fourth," he told her. "Talk about vultures around a corpse."

The woman halted, standing with feet apart. "Don't be so damned crude, Thomas," she admonished. "Three here, you say? Who are the others?"

"Wilkinson from the 'Courier,' another new chap from the Associated Press—don't know his name—and that fair-haired mother's boy from the 'Globe.' Lascelles, isn't it?" Constable Graves eyed her closely. "How'd you

come to get in on this, anyhow?"

"That well-known little bird," Bertha told him airily. She shrugged her shoulders and spoke quickly.

"Who's looking around for the Department?"

Graves considered a moment. "Four of them. Burford, the Coroner Doc Conroy, O'Connor the plain-clothes man, and the fingerprint boys."

"And who's in charge?"

"Denis O'Connor temporarily. They're waiting for Chief Inspector Read."

Bertha pursed her lips. "So-o—? It's that big, is it? The Chief Inspector himself?"

The constable nodded portentously. "In the flesh," he added impressively.

"Then I'm going up," Miss Fenton said abruptly

Like a bird zooming for cover, the elevator soared upward.

The steel cage slid to a stop, and Bertha, stepping out, found herself in a long, brown-panelled corridor. A few paces away from the lift-shaft, a narrow, circular staircase wound downwards. Outside an opening half-way down the corridor two uniformed policemen stood. They watched her suspiciously as she approached, and one, after a whispered conference with his companion, began to walk toward her. Bertha cursed under her breath. If they were going to be officious...

"You're not allowed along here, madam," the policeman told her brusquely. Six feet of blue uniform blocked her way so that she was forced to halt. Bertha stiffened. She fumbled in her bag and produced a tiny leather-and-cardboard square.

"I'm from the 'Weekly Informer,'" she said curtly. "Here's my Press pass."

The constable did not even glance at it. Neither did he move. "I don't care who you are or where you're from," he returned. "You can't come along here."

The woman checked the hot retort that rose to her lips. She realized that it would be foolish to quarrel with these officials at such a time. Producing a card and pencil, she scribbled a few hasty lines and handed the card to the constable.

"Would you mind taking that inside to Mr. O'Connor?" she said, trying to keep the harshness out of her voice.

Miss Fenton waited impatiently, a square-toed shoe drumming the carpet. So! They were trying to keep the Press out of this thing. Wilkinson, Lascelles, and the A.P. man must have got in with the first alarm at headquarters before the police realized the seriousness of the business. They had apparently given orders that all other reporters were to be refused admission. What luck that she happened to know Denis O'Connor! Because, the more dailies excluded from this murder, the more chance for the "Weekly Informer."

The constable returned and was beckoning to her. Bertha allowed herself a sniff, eloquent of the contempt she felt for this underling. Tossing her head, she strode past like a triumphant Amazon.

She was standing in what was apparently a bedroom, a small apartment made to appear larger by the skilful arrangement of the furnishings. Her eyes made a swift survey, took in the low bed, covered with scarlet satin eiderdown, the built-in cupboard and wardrobe, the inlaid table near the bed with its pipe and tobacco-jar, and the small bookcase standing in the far corner. On the opposite side of the room, a door leading to a larger apartment had been torn from its hinges and lay askew, portions of the shattered woodwork splintering about the lock. Bertha was staring at this ruin when it was pushed aside and O'Connor, a thick-set giant of a man with curly hair surmounting a good-natured moon-face, came out. He glanced at her and nodded.

"It certainly never pays to ask a presswoman a favour," he complained. "Sooner or later they'll ask for it back a hundredfold." But the twinkle in his blue eyes belied the tone.

Bertha Fenton grinned and took his hand in a grip firm as a man's. "You know these men, of course?" O'Connor was saying.

The woman nodded and glanced around, exchanging greetings. She recognized the stocky, dapper man with a dark moustache as Dyke Wilkinson, while the tall blond boy standing by the bed was Gilbert Lascelles of the "Globe." The third man had her puzzled for a moment, although she remembered having seen those pleasant, regular features photographed in a trade paper. Then the young man himself came forward, hand outstretched.

"Miss Fenton, isn't it?" he said. "My name is Yates—Martin Yates. I'm the new man on the Associated Press. Took Ken Hubbard's place about a month ago."

The detective spoke quietly.

"It's a bad business, Miss Fenton. We can't hope to hush it up, but we don't want a line more publicity than we can help. Especially at this early stage. In fact, they're getting the new Chief Inspector on the job—the big chief from London. The Coroner and the medical examiner are inside now, with Larsen, the finger-print man. I'll take you inside as soon as they're through. But you must promise to publish nothing save what we—the Chief, that is—actually gives you."

"Does that go for the others?" the woman demanded.

"Naturally."

"Then it suits me." Bertha tossed her bag and hat on the bed and sat down. "Now, what's it all about?"

O'Connor thrust his hands in his pockets. "There's not much we actually

know," he said. "Briefly, it amounts to this. Judge Sheldon who has been renting this apartment for about two years, came out of that inner room about seven o'clock last night. He told his man, Hoskins, to take the evening off. The servant watched him return to that apartment, lock himself in, and cross to his desk. Then Hoskins went to his own room (which is farther down the corridor), dressed, and left the building, to return about eleven o'clock and go straight to bed. He says he rose about seven o'clock this morning, came in here, and discovered his master's bed had not been slept in. Crossing to the door of the inner room, he found it still locked, so he knocked. There was no answer. Believing that the judge must have spent the night away, he did not worry until about nine-fifteen, when something happened that aroused his fears."

Bertha, following this recital closely, looked up. "What was that?"

"At that time, the telephone-girl in the desk downstairs came to Hoskins and asked what was the matter with Judge Sheldon's telephone," O'Connor explained. "She said that the Judge had forgotten to replace the receiver on the hook, and although she had rung him several times in the morning he had not answered. This made Hoskins suspicious. While the manager telephoned police headquarters, three porters broke in the door of the apartment." The detective paused for breath. "They found the Judge sitting behind his desk. He was dead—stabbed in the back."

Miss Fenton nodded slowly. "I suppose it was murder?" she said shrewdly.

The detective looked, at her. "Suicide?" he suggested.

"It's happened before now," the woman reminded him.

It was Gilbert Lascelles who drawled from his corner: "Not in this case, Miss Fenton. You see, they can't find the weapon."

Denis O'Connor squared his shoulders like a man tackling an unpleasant task. "There's more to it than that," he explained. His tone was harsh and awkward. "You people haven't seen the body. The murderer took a souvenir away with him. One of Sheldon's ears is missing. The right ear—neatly sliced off his head."

"I'll take you inside now," he announced. "And please remember to touch nothing. Do you understand—nothing at all!"

It was a much larger room than the one they had left—a long apartment lit by two tall windows in the outer wall. The massive glass-topped desk before the nearest window, the figured blackwood cabinet, the deep leather chairs scattered over the scarlet velvet pile carpet squares—these things bespoke dignity and comfort. At the far end of the room an ornamental grate housed an electric fire, and there were small cabinets and inlaid tables about the room. The floor, uncovered by the carpet squares, was highly polished.

Standing near the desk were four men. Burford was engaged in earnest

conversation with Dr. Conroy. Larsen, with his insufflator, was busy searching the glass top for fingerprints. A young man standing near a photographic apparatus was watching him. As the reporters entered, Larsen and his assistant moved across to the long window behind the desk. Burford and the doctor, still talking, paced to the cabinet, leaving the desk clear. It was at that moment that the reporters had their first glimpse of the body of Sir Merton Tenison Sheldon.

It was propped up in a swivel chair behind the desk, slumping limply like a bundle of washing tied to give semblance to a human form. With both hands resting on the desk and the head lolling on one side, the eyes stared glassily. The pallid face still reflected the gracious somnolence that had marked the features during life, but the head was disfigured by a blackish clot of blood where the right ear had been removed.

As the reporters started to walk toward the desk, the Coroner's voice sounded authoritatively:

"Don't touch anything, please! And walk on the carpet."

Martin Yates was first to reach the desk, but Miss Fenton was only a split second behind. They stared at the body. The single-breasted coat, swinging open, showed the material of the waistcoat unstained. Bertha turned to the detective.

"Got it in the back, did he?"

O'Connor nodded. "Took him completely by surprise. Accounts, too, for the lack of expression on his face."

They walked around the desk. Wilkinson moved forward and touched the stain that smeared raggedly across the back of the coat. "Seems to have bled very little for a mortal wound," he remarked, his fingers touching the damp material gingerly.

"That's because of the weapon used," the detective explained. "Something resembling a long, thin piece of steel, very sharp and strong. Most of the bleeding would have occurred inwardly, according to the doctor."

"But why take his ear?" murmured Gilbert Lascelles. And no person offered an explanation.

Burford came forward again. At a nod from O'Connor, the reporters withdrew toward the shattered door. Now Larsen was working on the catch of the long window, and the tall frames stood wide open. Miss Fenton's eyes rested on that tiny balcony outside, the balcony overhanging a sheer drop of eighty feet into the street below.

The reporters crowded together in the doorway. The Coroner and the detective were bending over the dead man, transferring articles from his pockets to the desk. Presently they finished the task. Burford nodded, and

O'Connor rejoined the others in the bedroom.

"Anything new?" Yates said eagerly, as he came in.

The detective nodded, his face shadowed. "We've found the key of the locked door," he told them.

"Where was it?"

O'Connor eyed them levelly. "It was in the dead man's waistcoat pocket."

There was a surprised, momentary silence. Then, as the full realization dawned upon the company:

"How could that be?" Wilkinson demanded. "Do you mean to say that the door was locked on the inside?"

O'Connor nodded slowly. "That's what it looks like, doesn't it?"

Gilbert Lascelles gave a droll whistle. "Good Lord—and those windows look out on to a sheer drop of eighty feet!"

"We're faced with an apparent impossibility," Bertha told, the room.

"Seeing that Sheldon had the key, that door could have been locked only from the inside. As there are no other known entrances, it means that the murderer must have locked himself in with the dead man. And if he did that," said Miss Fenton forcibly, "where the sweet hell is he now?"

Dyke Wilkinson sniffed. "I once read a story in which a murderer climbed a sheer wall with suckers on his feet. And, if I remember rightly, he shot a man through a window. The story was called 'Strawberry Jam.'"

"'Raspberry Jam,'" Gilbert corrected him. "Carolyn Wells wrote it." He smiled. "Yes, I've read that one also. And now all we have to do is to examine the entire wall with a magnifying glass, looking for damp, circular rings the size of an ordinary breakfast-cup rim." He turned to the detective. "There's your case, Denis."

O'Connor regarded him unsmilingly. "There won't be any need for that," he told them. "Nobody came through that way into the room. Both windows were firmly latched on the inside when we broke down that door. It was one of the first things we looked at."

He broke off as voices raised in conversation were heard in the corridor. The next moment four men entered, and Miss Fenton, watching them as they filed past, named three. The tall, well-dressed man with the military bearing and the bristling grey moustache set against his ruddy face was Chief Inspector William Read. His two companions were plain-clothes detectives—Steve Donlin and Jed Armstrong. It was the fourth man she could not place. He was talking intimately with the Chief Inspector, who had taken his arm as they passed into the room. Bertha, who prided herself that she knew all the officials in the Criminal Investigation Department by their first names, puckered her brows over this stranger.

He was a man in his middle thirties, clean-shaven, with the face of a scholar, a face that might have been severe but for a pair of grey eyes that twinkled humorously. Of medium build, he had that lean fitness that comes from perfect training, and the broad shoulders and spare hips emphasized his well-cut, quiet clothes. One hand was buried in his pocket, the other had its long fingers clasped about a stick and gloves. At that moment O'Connor came forward. The Chief Inspector turned, and Bertha heard him say:

"I want you to meet a friend of mine from London—Mr. Jeffery Blackburn." The young man smiled, acknowledging the greeting quietly, and moved away. Read, about to follow him, appeared to notice the others in the room for the first time. He frowned and turned back to the detectives. "Who are these people?" he snapped. "They have no business up here. Who let them in?" He added quickly: "They haven't touched anything, I hope?"

Detective O'Connor, suddenly sheepish, explained the reporters' presence.

The peppery Inspector was not to be placated. "Get them out of here—at once!" he shouted. He turned and strode into the inner room, muttering to himself.

Chapter 2

JEFFERY BLACKBURN stood in the entrance of the late Judge Sheldon's apartment. "From higher mathematics to the mathematics of murder," he murmured.

Chief Inspector William Jamieson Read had been Blackburn senior's closest friend, and young Jeffery had inherited that affection to almost the same degree. The only other thing that threatened to rival his friendship was the young man's love of his work. As a professor of higher mathematics, Jeffery Blackburn was destined for a brilliant career. His parents dead, he had few responsibilities, and every minute that could be spared from his equals and infinitives was spent in the company of the elder man.

They were taking coffee together when the news of the Sheldon death was telephoned from headquarters. Read's suggestion that Jeffery should come along had been welcomed by the young man. An hour later, they were entering the block of flats side by side.

Read walked across to the desk and ran his eye over its furnishings. In addition to Sheldon's personal belongings, the glass top supported the usual office fittings—a clean sheet of blotter, an automatic calendar in a nickelled frame, a pen-tray and inkwell, some books between bronze stands, and a deep ashtray containing fragments of cigarettes. A desk telephone stood near the edge, but the receiver was hanging at the end of the wire, dangling almost to the floor. A pipe with a highly polished bowl lay near the ash-tray.

Read turned away and spoke sharply.

"Donlin! Armstrong!"

The two plain-clothes men stepped forward alertly.

"Search the room. Every inch of it." The Inspector swung around on the waiting detective. "You've been on the spot all the time, O'Connor. What's the news up to date?"

Speaking in terse phrases, the plain-clothes man put his superior in full possession of the facts, beginning with the story of the manservant, Hoskins, and concluding with the discovery of the key.

Read pulled him up shortly.

"What pocket?"

"Lower right-hand pocket, sir, in the waistcoat."

"H'm." The Inspector tugged at his moustache. "Where is this man Hoskins?"

"In his room. He occupies a small apartment about two doors farther along the corridor."

The Inspector rubbed his hands. His tone was business-like.

"Good! We'll see him as soon as I've had a word with the doctor. In the meanwhile, stand by in case you're wanted." He dismissed the detective and turned to where Conroy was staring out of the long window. "What can you tell me, Doctor?"

Conroy, a fussy little man with a short, pointed beard, walked across to the desk. "Here's my report, Chief. Death almost instantaneous. Caused by a thin, strong, steel weapon entering the back below the shoulder-blades. Weapon pierced the anterior tip of the heart where the large blood vessels lie. As far as can be ascertained, without an autopsy, I should say that the point of the weapon rested somewhere near the sternum bone. Wound neat and clean-edged, resulting in a certain amount of bleeding, but not nearly so much as if the wound had been jagged. A bullet-wound, for instance, would have made an ugly mess." He paused and looked at his superior. "There's one outstanding point. The direction taken by the weapon, the strength of the thrust, and the neatness of the entire business points to some person with a good elementary knowledge of anatomy." Conroy eyed the Inspector quizzically. "Anything more?"

"Very comprehensive," Read admitted. "What about the time of the murder?"

Dr. Conroy frowned, and one hand stroked his beard. "I can't say definitely without an autopsy," he said brusquely. "But rigor is well advanced and the wound has closed..." He considered frowningly. "I should say about twelve hours ago—say round about ten o'clock last night. Can't say nearer, at this stage."

Read nodded. "That's near enough. Anything else?"

The doctor took a turn up and down before the desk. Then he took the Inspector by the arm and walked him around to the rear of the body. "See that stain on the back? Well, it puzzles me. That weapon penetrated the large blood-vessels, and although the orifice was small it should have bled much more freely. That stain's merely a seepage after the blood clotted and closed the wound." Again he eyed the body disapprovingly, as though resentful of this illogical point.

The Chief Inspector considered for a moment. "And what about the ear?"

"Oh, that!" Conroy dismissed it with a gesture. "Another neat job. Sliced off with a sharp instrument—probably a surgeon's scalpel. No mystery there."

"Not from your point of view perhaps," Read muttered. He was silent for a moment. "The weapon used to incise the ear wasn't the same as did the stabbing, I suppose?"

"Impossible. The two wounds are entirely different. A scalpel has only one cutting edge. The weapon used for stabbing was circular, without any cutting

edge."

Read frowned. "Queer...queer...he could have quite easily stabbed with the scalpel, I suppose? Then why the devil didn't he?"

Conroy allowed himself a prim smile. "That's your job." He turned away. "That's all the help I can give you at the moment. I'll tell O'Connor to 'phone the morgue and get this body out of your way. Then perhaps I'll be able to tell you more." He moved out of the room, stopping to talk to the detective near the door. The Inspector, watching, raised his voice.

"When you've done that, O'Connor, we'll see that manservant. Then the desk-clerk and the rest of the witnesses. Make it snappy, now." He turned back to Jeffery, who was watching interestedly. "Take a seat, son. And keep your ears wide open. Don't be afraid to ask questions. This isn't a murder case—it's a chapter out of a detective serial."

If, as Chief Inspector Read had said, this was a chapter from a detective serial, then Hoskins, who entered the room with O'Connor, was well cast in the role of sinister servant. Thin, stoop-shouldered, and dressed in sombre black, there was a certain funereal atmosphere about him that clashed with the Inspector's vital personality. He came forward apprehensively and took his stand opposite Read. In deference to the feelings of the witnesses, the Inspector had ordered the body behind the desk to be sheeted, and had Hoskins been face to face with the ghost of his late master, he could not have looked more ill-at-ease. He stood with downcast eyes, hands linked together, every now and then passing his tongue across his pale lips.

"Afraid, eh?" Read barked abruptly.

Hoskins raised his eyes, encountered the sheeted figure, and lowered them quickly. "No, sir. But a thing like that has never happened to me before, and—"

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Read assured him. "If you've nothing to hide, that is. What's your full name?"

"Albert Turner Hoskins, sir."

"How long had you been with the Judge?"

"About five years, sir. I came from Sir Trevor Anthony, the millionaire stockbroker. About five years ago Sir Trevor sailed for London and broke up his home here. I was unemployed when a friend of Sir Merton's, who knew of my service, suggested he should take me on. I have been with the Judge ever since."

"Did you serve him at his home as well?"

Hoskins shook his head. "Not for the past two years, sir. That's since Sir Merton had this apartment. During that time, he visited his home very rarely." He raised his pale eyes. "I understand that Sir Merton and his wife were not—not—"

"Not compatible, eh?" the Chief Inspector rapped. "Well, well! And what time do you retire at night?"

"Usually about eleven o'clock, sir. Unless, of course, I was given the evening off. Sometimes I received a summons in the night. The Judge has a bell-push by his bed connected to my room. If he wanted anything in the night, he rang for me."

Read eyed him narrowly. "That was rather an imposition, wasn't it?"

The man passed his tongue over his lips before he replied. "I—I think Sir Merton was nervous about sleeping alone."

"Ah! Attacks on his life, you mean?"

Hoskins nodded. "Yes, sir. There was that business of the key to this apartment, sir. Sir Merton insisted on having a special lock made for the door and retaining the only key. I was never allowed to enter this room. Sir Merton used to bring his correspondence into the bedroom and collect it from me when he returned in the afternoon. He locked this door after him on every occasion, and, as far as I know, the key was never out of his possession. Once when Sir Merton was in a confidential mood he showed me the key, balancing it in his hand. 'There's many a person who'd like to get hold of this for a few minutes, Hoskins,' he said. 'But they'll never catch me napping.'"

The Inspector nodded and gestured toward the long windows. "Do you know if these were always kept latched?"

Hoskins nodded. "Whenever I caught a glimpse of them through the doorway they were shut, sir. I could not see whether they were latched."

The Inspector, his face darkened with a frown, paused before his next question. Then: "What about that bedroom outside? Was the same guard placed on the key of that room?"

The servant shook an emphatic head. "No, sir. The door was always left unlocked all night. On occasions when I have answered Sir Merton's bell I have just walked into the room. And I know the door was unlocked during the day, since the maid cleans the room."

Read caressed his moustache. Jeffery, straddled across a chair, saw that his friend was mulling over the servant's reply, and he anticipated the Inspector's next question. Read fixed the servile Hoskins with a keen eye.

"Doesn't it strike you as peculiar, my man, that Judge Sheldon should have been so particular about the locks on this room—a room in which he was constantly on the alert—yet his bedroom, where he could have been easily attacked during sleep, was not even locked during the night?"

A shadow crossed the man's face. But his voice was steady. "I can't offer any explanation at all, sir. Naturally, the same thing occurred to me. But it was not my place to ask questions."

"Naturally." Read's tone was suave. "And did the Judge occupy this room frequently?"

"About three afternoons in every week," was the reply.

"What was the nature of his business?"

"I have no idea, sir." There was cold reproof in the tone. "I was always busy in my own room."

The Chief Inspector accepted the snub calmly. "Of course, the perfect servant. Did Sir Merton remain in here long?"

"On those afternoons, he would go in about two o'clock and come out for dinner at seven-thirty."

Again Read paused. He ran his fingers through his greying hair as if uncertain how to continue. Jeffery was pencilling some lines on a slip of paper. This he passed to the elder man, who read it and crumpled the paper in his hand.

"Did the Judge occupy this room yesterday afternoon?" he asked abruptly.

Hoskins, who had noticed Jeffery's action, darted a sudden suspicious glance in his direction. He looked back at Read and nodded.

"Yes, sir. He came in about the usual time. But I noticed a difference...worried, he seemed, and irritable, as if he had something on his mind. I heard him tramping backwards and forwards about this room all the afternoon. There might be a lull of about five minutes and he would be off again. When he came out at dinner-time he looked pale and ill. I noticed his hands when he lit his pipe—unsteady and trembling, they were. He told me to take the evening off. I was rather surprised, for I had already taken my regulation night off."

"Where did you go last night?"

"To a talking-picture, with a friend. I left him outside this building and came up to my room about eleven thirty."

Read's tone was quiet. "You didn't think to look in the bedroom and see if your master was all right?"

The servant's face reddened. "It did occur to me. But I was rather nervous about going into that room in the dark. Sir Merton was a queer man—he would not have thought twice about attacking anyone who came blundering in there unexpected like that."

The Inspector nodded curtly. "That's all right, my man. Now, as regards visitors—did Sir Merton have many women calling on him?"

Again the shadow crept across the servant's face, and this time there was definite fear in the expression. He shifted nervously and his eyes roved from face to face. Jeffery, watching the danger-signals hoist suddenly in the Inspector's cheeks, sighed for the man. There were storm-rumblings in Read's

voice as he barked:

"Come on, my man! What's up with you?" Then, as the other swallowed awkwardly but did not speak, he leapt forward. Taking the servant's narrow shoulders between his powerful hands, he glared into the working face.

"You've been paid, is that it? You've been paid to keep your mouth shut!" The narrowed, steel-blue eyes almost shot sparks at the hapless Hoskins. "By God, if you don't speak, I'll turn you over to the boys at Headquarters and they'll get it out of you with a piece of hose-pipe!" He released the trembling man and stepped back.

Hoskins washed his hands in agitation. "I'll tell you," he whimpered dryly. Then, with sudden defiance, he burst out: "Yes. It's true that I was paid—that Sir Merton gave me certain sums of money to keep quiet about these women. They were always coming to him—sometimes half a dozen in a week..." His voice slurred, broke.

"And did they occupy this room with the Judge on his—er—afternoons at home?"

"No, sir." The reply came so quickly that the words almost tumbled on each other. "Sir Merton never kept them in this room longer than a few minutes. Some came at night, sir, but they never stayed long in his company."

Read smiled fiercely, his moustache bristling. "Ha! Guessed we'd find a love-nest if we probed deeply enough!"

The Inspector considered for a moment. "You knew Lady Sheldon and her daughter, of course. Did either visit the Judge while he lived here?"

The man raised his eyes. "Miss Sheldon came very infrequently, sir. Lady Sheldon never."

"And in your handling of Sir Merton's correspondence, did you ever run across anything that suggested an attack on his life...threatening or anonymous letters or anything of that nature?"

"Nothing whatever, sir."

"And you have nothing to add to the story you told O'Connor about your finding of the body?"

Again the man shook his head. He seemed anxious for the termination of the interview. Read measured him with a calculating stare for some moments. At length, he nodded.

"That's all, Hoskins. You may go now. You'll be wanted for the inquest, of course, as you found the body. You'd better wait in your room in case we want you again."

Thankfully, the servant turned to go. He had reached the door when Jeffery spoke quietly from his chair.

"Oh, Hoskins!" As the man wheeled about: "Did Judge Sheldon know that

you were dismissed from the service of Sir Trevor Anthony for attempted blackmail?"

For a moment it seemed as though the servant would drop where he stood. The colour drained from his narrow face, leaving it deathly in its pallor. One hand sought the shattered door to steady himself. He glanced quickly about him like a trapped animal, and when his eyes came to rest on the young man, hatred burned beneath their heavy lids. He spoke with an effort.

"Yes—yes, sir. He knew about it. I..." He turned and almost ran from the room. There was a silence while they watched him go. Read glanced at Jeffery and traces of a smile hovered about the corners of his mouth.

"A reminiscence of your Court days, son?" he asked. As Jeffery nodded: "That's close on four fears ago, isn't it?"

"I never forget a face," the younger man returned. He eyed the servant's trail speculatively. "I shouldn't have brought that business up again perhaps, but it was a particularly nasty piece of work. Just about finished Sir Trevor's daughter's life, you know. That was the reason for the millionaire's sudden flight from Australia. And friend Hoskins was responsible for it all." He broke off as O'Connor signalled from the door.

"The boys are here to collect the body, sir," he called, and in response to Read's nod, two young men entered with a stretcher and proceeded to load it with their gruesome burden. The Inspector did not speak until they were out of the room. Then he gave an order to the plain-clothes man.

"Send in that desk-clerk from the other room. Hennessy brought her up ten minutes ago." He crossed to the desk and took up a sheet of paper, glancing at it. "Miss Mary Meynell."

Miss Meynell, when she appeared, was a tall, dark-haired girl with a firm, business-like mouth. She answered the questions put to her intelligently and with the crisp readiness of one long experienced in the business of inquiries. She stood opposite the Chief Inspector, returning his truculent stare with level eyes. The grim lines about Read's mouth relaxed and his tone softened as he asked:

"What time did you come on duty last night, Miss Meynell?"

"Six o'clock," the girl replied promptly. "I finished my eight-hour shift at two o'clock this morning."

The Chief Inspector glanced at Jeffery with a look that said plainly: "There's something for your higher mathematics," then faced the girl. "I understand you have something to tell us about a visitor—who called to see Judge Sheldon last night." He pushed forward a chair. "Please sit down, Miss Meynell. And tell us everything, no matter how insignificant or trifling it may appear to you."

The desk-clerk thanked him. Seating herself, with her hands folded loosely

in her lap, she began:

"It was a few minutes after nine o'clock last night. I remember the exact time, because at the nine hour I put my wrist-watch right by the clock in the foyer. Sir Merton entered from the street with another man. He came over to the desk to inquire for mail, leaving his companion standing some distance away. But it was this man's appearance that attracted my attention. He looked—well—rather queer."

"Queer?"

Miss Meynell wrinkled her forehead, and her words came slower. "Yes. It's hard actually to describe how—unless it was the full beard and moustache that the man wore. It's unusual to see a man wearing such an extravagant beard and moustache these days."

Read considered for a moment. "You weren't, of course, close enough to see if the beard was natural?"

The girl hesitated. "Well—it looked as natural as any full beard ever looks," she said with a slow smile. Then she sobered and continued crisply. "However, there were no letters for Sir Merton. As he moved away I heard him say to the bearded man, 'What is it you want?' and the man replied, 'If I could see you alone, I won't keep you more than a few seconds. But it's a matter of utmost importance.' Then they passed on out of earshot, walking toward the elevator. That was the last I saw of either man."

"You heard this bearded man say that he would keep the Judge only a few seconds?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yet, although you were on duty until two o'clock in the morning, you did not see this man come downstairs again?"

Miss Meynell shifted in her seat. "I didn't see him," she admitted.. "But that's not to say that he didn't come downstairs. Round about ten o'clock, we get busy at the desk—we serve after-theatre suppers, and people start booking by telephone about that time. I may have been busy on the wire when he came down." She paused and added: "However, if he came down by the elevator, the boy would know."

"Good!" Read rubbed his hands briskly. "Could we speak to that boy now?"

The clerk nodded and rose to her feet. "It was young Tommy Mallory—he's off shift and we'll probably find him in the basement. I'll send him up straight away."

Jeffery gave an apologetic shrug of his shoulders. He seemed rather uncertain how to continue. He was engaged in framing an opening sentence, when there came the sound of footsteps outside. Then O'Connor announced that a Tommy Mallory was waiting to see the Inspector.

Tommy Mallory, when he entered, was a young man about sixteen years of age. A pill-box hat was perched askew on his close-cropped, fiery hair and he had a snub nose set amid scattered freckles. The Chief Inspector surveyed him.

"You're Thomas Mallory?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were on duty last night about nine o'clock, I believe? Do you remember the man who came in with Sir Merton Sheldon—a man with a curling black beard?"

The boy nodded, and his eyes gleamed intelligently. "Yes, sir. Funny-looking chap."

Read said slowly: "Now—think carefully, Thomas. Do you remember taking this same person down in your lift last night?"

Without hesitation the lad replied: "I didn't take him down. He walked downstairs."

"Ah! What time was this?"

"Must have been close on twenty past nine, sir."

The Chief Inspector and Jeffery exchanged the briefest of nods. Then Read asked: "You actually saw him on the stairs?"

"Yes, sir. It was like this. I was standing outside my car last night when a party of young chaps came in. I think they'd been celebrating, sir, 'cause one was a bit funny. The others were trying to get him across the floor to my car. The clock inside was just sixteen minutes past nine. At that moment, the bell in my car buzzed and I saw it was a party on the eighth floor ringing. I thought it would probably be the chap with the beard, sir—but I didn't know what to do—whether to wait for the young chaps or go up to answer the buzz. At last the chaps got their friend inside. All the time the chap on the eighth floor was buzzing away and I thought how mad he'd be."

Young Mallory paused for breath. When he continued, the veneer of the Carnavon management began to slip away in his excitement.

"Well, sir, they put the tight chap off at th' fif' floor, and that took quite a time. It must have been about four minutes before I got up t' the eighth. When I got there an' pulled up, there was no party. I opened the door on the car an' there he was, sir, just starting to walk downstairs. 'Lift waiting,' I called to him. He looked round but didn't stop. 'Go to hell,' he says. 'I've been waiting for your lift for five minutes an' now I'll walk downstairs!' Mad, he was, sir. An' he went round the bend in the stairs an' that's the last I saw of him. A party on the tenth gave me a buzz an' I shot up t' answer that."

"Thank you, Thomas," said the Chief Inspector. "That's all for the time."

The boy nodded, grinned, and scuttled from the room.

Read looked across at Jeffery.

But the younger man's face reflected no satisfaction. "We're merely back where we started," he mused. "Sheldon's movements from nine o'clock until nine-thirty are accounted for—but what happened between that time and ten o'clock?"

Read was about to speak, when a sudden commotion in the outer room interrupted him. The next moment a young woman burst in—a tall, dark-haired girl, severely but expensively dressed. She stood in the broken doorway and glanced about with complete self-possession.

The Chief Inspector spoke sharply. "What are you doing in here, young woman? You have no right to come pushing your way into this room."

With calm confidence the girl walked forward and halted opposite him. "I believe I have quite as much right in here as you have," she said coolly. "After all, this is still Sir Merton's apartment." A cold smile hovered about her lips. "Allow me to introduce myself, gentlemen. I am Valerie Sheldon."

Chapter 3

JEFFERY BLACKBURN sat up and stared at the newcomer with sudden interest. So this was Val Sheldon, the twenty-five-year-old daughter of Sir Merton. He knew her age, as every person who read the newspapers knew it. Valerie Sheldon, despite her tender years, had already begun to make a name for herself with her brilliant detective novels, and critics promised a golden future for this young writer.

She was no bespectacled blue-stocking. Youth and freshness marked her clever, rather disdainful face. As she stood there, the young man found himself wondering just what it was that marred the attractiveness of her features. Perhaps it was the mouth, with its sullen droop. Perhaps her face was too austere, too sharply etched for beauty. There were no traces of grief on the chiselled features, only an expression of repressed excitement. The eyes, too darted quickly about the room. It was scarcely the face of an only child, who had lost her father. Read wondered at this also. He spoke gravely:

"This is a sad occasion for you, Miss Sheldon. The sudden death of your father must have come as a severe shock."

The girl, sitting with crossed knees, was occupied in the business of lighting a cigarette. She struck a match and, while it burned, raised her eyes and stared at the speaker steadily. Then she lit the cigarette, dropped the match on the carpet, and blew out a thin plume of smoke. "Let's get this business straight," she said. Her dark eyes never left the Inspector's face. Her voice was level. "This murder doesn't mean a thing in my life. I'm not going about shedding crocodile-tears over an occurrence that doesn't even stir me. Call it callous if you please—but Sir Merton probably got just what he deserved." She paused, shrugged her shoulders, and drew on her cigarette. "And he wasn't my father," she added slowly. "Sir Merton was my step-father."

"Your stepfather? Then Lady Sheldon—?"

The girl nodded. "Mother was, obviously, married twice. I was the child of her first husband. He enlisted with the first batch of men to go to France, and he was reported killed—although I feel sure that there was some mistake in that report. However, that doesn't concern us at this time." Her voice was grave, matter-of-fact, flowed on without variation. "After his death, Mother, who is one of the sweetest souls on this green earth, threw herself into Red Cross work. In that way, she met my stepfather, and they were married. I called myself Val Sheldon and let it be thought that I was Sir Merton's daughter because—well, frankly, it was a social advantage to be known as the daughter of a knight. And nobody, with the exception of Mother's personal friends and relatives, knew the truth." She paused to flick the ash from her cigarette.

"The marriage was a mistake from the start. My stepfather just didn't believe in monogamy—three, four, or even five weren't a crowd for him, so long as they were pretty and attractive. Mother discovered all manner of shady intrigues that almost broke her heart. She wouldn't divorce Sir Merton—had some quaint idea about the honour of the family, I believe. So it just went on, getting worse and worse. Then my stepfather took to secret vices, and that was the finish! I had disliked him intensely up to that point. From then onward I loathed the sight of him. After Mother had found about his unfaithfulness, he made no effort to hide it; indeed, he rather flaunted it in Mother's face. About two years ago, he took this apartment, and we at home saw less and less of him, thank heaven! He came down for an occasional week-end for the sake of appearances—but that was all. I visited him here when I wanted money matters arranged. And, except for these occasions, we tried to forget that he ever existed." She broke off with a crooked smile. "So you can scarcely expect me to shed copious tears at his passing, can you?"

"You know, gentlemen, I often believe there is too much fuss made about murder, especially the murder of a man like my stepfather. After all, human life is just about the cheapest thing in the world, and it has always puzzled me why the violent death of one insignificant individual should make such a difference." She had been studying the tip of her cigarette. Now she looked up. Her face was grave, "Wasn't it Oscar Wilde who pointed out that the meanest scullery-maid and the most loutish of ploughboys could manufacture human life between them? Even congenital idiots are capable of it."

"Where is all this leading us?" Read asked brusquely.

"Only to the fact that the means do not seem sufficient to the end," Miss Sheldon said calmly. "If a person steals a rare painting or a valuable piece of pottery, even the plans of an invention—by which I mean anything created, anything that could only be achieved by one brain out of tens of thousands—then that person should assuredly be punished. For that person has taken away something that may never be replaced. But to punish a person for taking the cheapest and most easily replaced of all things—human life—seems to me as ridiculous as punishing a person who crushes a spider on the floor."

The Chief Inspector eyed her grimly. "Fortunately, Miss Sheldon, the vast majority reject such an advanced point of view. An eye for an eye, the Scripture says. Here a man has been murdered and, regardless of the character of that man, the law says that the murderer shall pay forfeit with his life."

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"According to what I've heard," she said coolly, "it's a most original murder. One of those locked-room enigmas, isn't it? All the doors and windows bolted on the inside and not a single clue left. Just like the plot from the latest

novel..." She paused abruptly.

Read leapt on her words. "Rather the kind of plot you would plan, eh, young lady?"

Jeffery watched the dark eyes open and the brows rise arrogantly. "I don't understand you," she said coldly. "Are you accusing me of the murder of my stepfather?"

The Inspector grunted. Blackburn interposed gently: "Don't you realize that you've done everything in your power to make us believe that?"

Val Sheldon looked at him. Anger and amusement struggled for expression on her face. "Listen to me," she said at length. "The constable who rang my home this morning told Mother that Sir Merton had met with an accident last night. The detective in the other room told me that my stepfather had met his death at ten o'clock." She paused to give impressiveness to her words.

"At a quarter to ten last night I was speaking to my stepfather on the telephone from our house at Toorak."

The Inspector took a step forward. "You actually talked to him at that time?"

Miss Sheldon inclined her head. "That was what I said."

Jeffery moved from his chair and crossed to where Read was standing by the desk. He asked gently: "If you were barely on speaking terms with your stepfather, as you would have us believe—why did you ring him at that late hour?"

"I can't explain that without telling you the whole incident," the girl replied. She sat back in her chair and fingered her driving-gloves. "Last night Mother was giving a bridge-party. About half-way through the evening, as I happened to be dummy, I got up to look for some cigarettes. Just as I stepped into the hall, the telephone rang. Elsie, our maid, answered it, and told me that the call was for my stepfather. Mother was deep in her game—I didn't want to disturb her, so I told Elsie I would speak."

"What time was this?"

"A minute or so before half past nine. I took up the receiver, and a deep voiced asked, 'Is that Sir Merton?' in answer to my greeting. I told him (for it sounded like a man) no, and asked who was speaking. There was a slight hesitation, almost as though the voice were conferring with somebody. Eventually it replied, 'I'm a friend of Sir Merton's, and I must get in touch with him at once.' I suggested that the speaker ring my stepfather's town apartment, but he replied he had already rung there without raising an answer. Then suddenly the speaker seemed to lose all control. I could hear his voice trembling over the wire. 'For God's sake get in touch with Sir Merton and tell him to keep away from his town apartment to-night. Or you'll never see

him alive again!' Naturally, I was astounded at such a message. I just stood there open-mouthed. Before I could think of a suitable reply, there came a click as the receiver was hung up abruptly. Just as that happened, the clock in the hall chimed nine-thirty."

Read nodded slowly. "What happened then?"

Val Sheldon gave a shrug. "It rather upset me, that call," she admitted. "I did not know what to do. If I told Mother, it would ruin her evening; and, besides, she had enough worry on stepfather's account already. I considered the matter for some minutes and then decided to ring up Sir Merton's town apartment. He must be there. When I did so, the call was answered almost immediately by my stepfather himself. He was surprised at my ringing him, naturally."

"You were sure it was Sir Merton's voice answered you?" Jeffery asked.

"Positive!" Miss Sheldon's lips twisted. "I've heard it raised against me often enough. Shortly, I told him of the message. He took it with a sneering chuckle. 'I don't see why you should take the trouble to do this, my dear, when you'd be perfectly happy to see me dead.' I told him that it was for Mother's sake. He chuckled again. 'Such touching thoughtfulness. But I've managed to struggle along these past two years without your felicitations, and I'll continue to do so.' With that, he hung up. Pleasant kind of parent, you see. I replaced the receiver and then the clock struck nine-forty-five. Mother was calling me from the drawing-room to come and continue my game."

Blackburn put a question when she paused. "When your stepfather spoke to you, Miss Sheldon, could you say if he was alone in his apartment?"

The girl shook her head. "I was only speaking to him for a few seconds. It never occurred to me to listen for any other voices."

There was a silence in the room. A sharp exclamation broke the hush, it came from the direction of the blackwood cabinet—a massive piece of furniture with drawers fitted on either side of a centre door. One of these drawers was standing open, and the two plain-clothes men were bending over it, their eyes focused on something that lay inside.

"What is it?" Read barked sharply.

Donlin turned toward him. "Let's have those tweezers, Chief. There's something in here that's going to interest you."

Without a word, the Inspector crossed to the cabinet, passing the tweezers to the detective. Blackburn did not move, nor did Val Sheldon, but their eyes followed every gesture. They watched Donlin manipulating the tweezers, attempting to grasp something that lay inside the drawer. After three attempts he lifted out the object, and, carrying it carefully, laid it on the desk. They craned forward and, as the detective stepped back, had their first glimpse.

It was a long, slender steel spike, one end sharpened to a needle-point and the other sunk in a small leaden base a trifle larger than a matchbox. The upper portion of this thin spike was stained a faded, reddish brown...

Chief Inspector Read, his arms folded, surveyed the object with narrowed eyes. He wheeled on Jeffery. "So that's the weapon. It's a paper-file, isn't it?"

No one answered. Then Val Sheldon rose to her feet and moved across to the desk, her eyes on the grim exhibit. She nodded quietly.

"It's certainly a paper-file," she told them. "But I can place it nearer home than that. For some months I was doing casual reporting work for the '*Courier*,' and I saw dozens of files identical with this one." She raised her dark eyes to meet the Inspector's keen scrutiny. "Every reporter on that paper keeps one on his desk to file his notes upon."

Chapter 4

IF VALERIE SHELDON had expected to cause a sensation with her statement, she was disappointed. Read merely grunted non-committally. The plain-clothes men gave the girl a hard stare and returned to their work of searching the room. It was Jeffery who put the question:

"Is the 'Courier' the only newspaper using these steel files?"

"I doubt it," was the reply. "Every office must have a few dozen lying about. They're common enough, heaven only knows."

Blackburn was bending over the weapon, careful not to touch it. He looked up. "Perhaps you can help us to establish this point," he said quietly. "If this is the weapon—as it certainly appears to be—could an ordinary outsider, a person not connected with a newspaper office, obtain one of these files?"

"I should say it would be a fairly simple matter," the girl told him. She was about to say something further, when she closed her lips. Jeffery, watching, noticed a thoughtful expression cross her face. He smiled at her. "You were going to say...?"

Val Sheldon's eyes were grey. She spoke slowly, almost as though weighing every word.

"I was going to say this," she confessed. "It isn't so much a question of what manner of person could get possession of a paper-file, so much as the manner of person who would recognize a potential weapon in an object of that nature." Her voice dropped a key. "See what I mean, gentlemen? Probably someone used to impaling papers..." She was staring at the file with fascinated eyes.

The Inspector crossed over to the cabinet, staring down at the strip of polished flooring. "He must have stood about here and tossed the file into the drawer." He was measuring the distance to the open drawer with his eyes. "If so, why aren't his footprints on the polished floor?"

With a faint curl of her lips, Miss Sheldon retorted: "Footprints can't show through carpet."

A flush crept into Read's face at her tone. He said coldly: "It so happens that there is no carpet in front—"

But he was interrupted. Val Sheldon gave a sudden ejaculation and snapped her fingers decisively. Excitement trembled her tone.

"I knew there was something different about this room from the moment I stepped into it! But I couldn't think what it was. Now I know." She crossed to where Read stood staring at her. "See! One of the squares of carpet has been moved!"

"Moved?"

"Of course!" She was staring at the floor, genuinely excited over her discovery. She turned with a quick gesture of her hands. "When my stepfather furnished this room, it was impossible for him to get a carpet length large enough to cover the entire floor. He had the floor stained while the management purchased two smaller squares. When I visited Sir Merton last week—and on every time before that—these squares were placed together in the centre of the room. This formed one large carpet with a wide border of stained wood showing on the four sides of the apartment." Again that quick gesture, this time to the floor. "Now look at them."

There had certainly been an alteration in the carpet. Instead of the two squares fitting closely edge to edge, the nearer square had been dragged up against the wall supporting the shattered door. This square fitted close to the skirting-board, and its new position left a wide swathe of polished boards down the centre of the room and in front of the cabinet. The carpet square on the further side of the room had not, apparently, been touched.

Read was already walking about the moved square, his eyes on the scarlet pile. Near the heavy desk, he dropped on to his knees, and Jeffery saw him purse his lips in a silent whistle. Presently he rose.

"The carpet's been shifted all right," he announced. "You can see where the desk-legs have impressed into the pile. Whoever moved those legs must have lifted them one at a time and kicked the carpet away from under them. Then the rug was dragged from its position in the centre of the room and over to the left-hand wall." He paused, one nervous hand tugging his moustache. He seemed irritated by this discovery. "Now, why in the name of Noah should anyone go to that trouble?" He swung round on the girl. "You say that arrangement of this carpet was in order last week?"

"Positively."

"And you have never seen it in this position before?"

Val Sheldon shook her head emphatically. "Never! You see how it throws the entire room out of proportion? Makes it appear lop-sided. That was what struck me when I entered, although I never thought of looking at the floor."

Read turned back to the desk. He bent his knees and, gripping a corner of the massive woodwork with both hands, put forth all his strength. The heavy leg jerked clear of the carpet, but the strain was apparent in the blood that crimsoned the Inspector's face. He lowered the leg and moved round, glancing ruefully at the ugly red weals scored across his palms by the desk-edge.

"It took a husky to move that carpet," he admitted. "I'm no weakling, yet the task of holding that leg up long enough to kick the square from under it doesn't appeal to me. And, remember, he had to do the same with both the

front legs."

Val Sheldon frowned. "But what's the idea of it?"

Jeffery, hands in pockets, came forward. "Perhaps my mathematical training may help," he suggested drolly. "You see, one of the first things we learn concerns Marteen's law of compensation. That when an article of a given dimension is moved across a flat plane of a larger area, it must necessarily cover an area of similar proportions to that which it automatically reveals." He grinned as the elder man's moustache began to bristle. "All right—don't bite me, Chief. In simple language that strip of carpet has been moved for only one logical reason. To cover something on the left side of the room that the murderer wants to hide!"

"It's sense," Read admitted gruffly. "Even though you had to make a dashed mathematical problem out of it." He broke off to call to the detectives, who came forward. "I want you to lift that desk so that the legs clear the carpet," he ordered. "We're going to drag that strip back into position. Now, you take this corner, Jeff, and I'll manage the other." He waited while the men took their place. "Right? Then—away with her!"

The square of the carpet was jerked suddenly from the wall, leaving a wide patch of polished boards clear. But those in the room had eyes for only one portion. They were focused on a smeared patch that lay directly in front of the shattered door—a dark stain which straggled blurred tentacles where the carpet had dragged across it. The Inspector and Blackburn released the carpet, while the detectives dropped the desk with a thud that set the floor trembling. Read spoke briskly, rubbing his hands.

"A bloodstain, eh?" There was pleased satisfaction in his tone. "So that's where the Judge was killed! No wonder Conroy was puzzled about the paucity of blood on his clothes."

Jeffery nodded soberly. Together with the plain-clothes men, they crossed to the spot and stood looking down at the stain. It was an irregular patch about eighteen inches square. As the Inspector came up:

"Here's a find, Chief!" O'Connor announced.

It took but an instant to comprehend the detective's jubilation. On the outer rim of the stain were the prints of two small shoes, the narrow toes pointing into the room. A more perfect pair of prints could not be imagined. Even the worn patches in the soles were visible. Miss Sheldon gave a soft exclamation that held an undercurrent of mockery.

"Ah-ah! *Cherchez la femme!*" And as Read's eyes dropped to her shoes, she added: "My dear Inspector—how you flatter me! Although I have previously blushed to admit it, I am now most thankful to inform you that I could barely get my toes into those shoes. They are twos—or two and a half, at the outside.

Fortunately for my neck"—she patted it fondly—"I've never been able to don less than a five!"

Read did not answer. Jeffery said slowly: "Size two—or two and a half."

"And pretty worn," added the girl. She began to pull on her gloves.

"Without appearing too Holmes-ish, may I suggest that you look for the owner of those shoes in the theatrical world—a dancer presumably, and one pretty much down on her luck?" She nodded to the men. "Will you be wanting me any more, gentlemen?"

The Inspector stared at her, almost speechless by her cool insolence.

"Where are you going?" he barked at length.

The girl turned back a furry driving-glove to reveal a tiny gold wrist-watch. "It's twelve o'clock," she told them. "I have an important luncheon appointment with an editor. If I can't help you further, I'm sure you'll excuse me..." Her voice trailed away confidently.

Read looked at Jeffery, who shook his head, then back at the girl. She stood tapping one foot impatiently, but the Inspector was obviously reluctant to let her go. Yet he could think of no reason for detaining her. Slowly he nodded.

"Yes, Miss Sheldon. You may go now. But please understand that you are not to leave town without first communicating with us." He turned away. "That is all."

Valerie Sheldon inclined her head, slipped her glove back on her wrist, and without a word, moved through the shattered door. They heard her moving about in the other room, picking up her purse and belongings; then the sound of her footsteps echoed in the silent corridor.

Inspector Read turned to Jeffery.

"So that's Sheldon's daughter." His tone was not appreciative. "Self-possessed little puss—and a bit too casual for my liking." He stared down at the shifted carpet square. "Still, she gave us some interesting news."

Jeffery's eyes were very thoughtful. A queer smile shadowed his lips.

"She gave us information on everything save the most important point," he drawled.

Read glanced up sharply.

"What do you mean, son?"

The young man paused in the act of lighting a cigarette.

"I wonder why Miss Valerie Sheldon really came here this morning. She is too intelligent to be merely inquisitive; she bore her stepfather no love, so the visit was not one of sentimental attachments, and nobody ordered her presence in this room. Yet, of her own free will, she came here."

"Well...?" Read demanded.

"Why was it?" Jeffery asked. "Did she come here to find just how much we

had discovered—or was it for some other reason?—a reason that would help us far more than all the other evidence that she so willingly gave."

Chapter 5

SEATED BY the desk in the inner apartment of the late Judge Sheldon's suite, Chief Inspector William Read and Mr. Jeffery Blackburn were enjoying a tasty lunch and continuing their investigation by examining the contents of the dead man's pockets.

Read handled the late Judge's possessions while Jeffery, a sandwich in one hand, a fountain-pen in the other, jotted each item down on paper. At length, as the Inspector paused in his enumerating, the young man laid down his pen. "Is that all?" he asked.

His companion nodded. "Just check them over with me, son."

Jeffery laid down his sandwich, swallowed a final morsel, and read slowly:

*"One tobacco-pouch.
One pipe-case,
One matchbox in silver case,
One long envelope containing packet of treasury-notes,
Twenty-five shillings in loose change,
Two handkerchiefs,
One gold watch and chain,
Gold pen and pencil,
Spectacle-case with spectacles,
One leather wallet containing:
Folded newspaper-cutting,
Two stubs theatre-tickets,
Business cards,
Three private letters,
Banknotes,
Motor-car licence."*

He glanced up. "Is that all right?"

Read sat back. "Right as a bank!" He picked up a cream cake and sank his teeth into it. "Wonder if there's anything in that little lot to help us?"

"If so, it will be in the wallet," Blackburn opined.

"Personally, I'm more interested in this packet of money." Read took up the envelope and began counting the notes. He spoke after a pause. "There's two hundred pounds here, son. That seems to clinch the theory that robbery was not the motive. But why should the Judge carry that sum about with him?"

Jeffery shook his head. The Inspector replaced the packet of banknotes on the desk and took up the newspaper-cutting. He unfolded it—a slip of

newsprint some six inches long. His eyes swept it casually, then more closely. Reading, he gave a sudden ejaculation.

"Great Scott!"

Blackburn looked surprised. "What's wrong?"

The elder man did not reply for a moment. He was re-reading the cutting. He raised his eyes and passed the printed slip to his companion. "Read this," he invited. "It's either the long arm of coincidence or something deeper."

Jeffery took the cutting and read it carefully. There was no date on the print. The story began with the headlines:

*BACK FROM THE DEAD!
STRANGE STORY OF WAR SURVIVOR.
Here on Mission Work
(By Dyke Wilkinson, Special Correspondent)*

To be erroneously reported dead in the war, only to return safely and lose his memory in an air-raid upon London, was the experience of a passenger on the "Cornwall," which berthed at Port Melbourne to-day. His name is James Alfred Torrance, and he is travelling to Australia to inaugurate a Gospel Tent Mission in this city.

Mr. Torrance's experience dates back to the early days of the war. He is an Australian and was among the first to enlist. In December of 1914, a mistake in identification-discs occurred and he was reported dead.

In reality, Mr. Torrance was among those scheduled for early leave in London. While in that city, he was seeking shelter from an air-raid when a bomb exploded near him. The shock caused a complete loss of memory, followed by a nervous breakdown. He spent three years in hospital, during which time he partly recovered. When released, he could not remember his name nor recall any recollection of friends or family. He adopted the name of Torrance and obtained work at the King Alfred Hospital, where he worked until six months ago.

It was about this time when Mr. Torrance was fortunate to win £2000 in a newspaper contest. At first he refused to take the money, since the competition was in the nature of a lottery. He determined, however, to resign from his position and spend the money financing a Gospel Tent Mission that would tour Victoria through the Centenary Celebrations.

While in Australia, Mr. Torrance hopes to meet and talk with friends who may help him in regaining his lost memory. He will disembark at Sydney, from which capital he will set out with his Tent Mission.

Blackburn raised his eyes. "Well?" he inquired.

The Inspector spoke slowly. "I wonder whether Mr. Torrance could possibly locate his relatives in this city."

The young man tossed the cutting on the desk. He rose to his feet. "Meaning Miss Sheldon's story about her father?" He shook his head. "That seems rather like twisting the arm of coincidence clean off!"

"When you've been in this game as long as I have," Read told him, with a frown, "you'll come to depend on coincidences." He thrust out a finger at Jeffery. "If this missionary hasn't anything to do with the case, why should Sheldon keep that cutting?" As Blackburn shrugged his shoulders, the other man made an impatient movement. "Wonder where we could locate this Torrance? He'd surely be able to tell us something."

Blackburn was forming the crumbs on the desk-top into neat little heaps. Without looking up, he said: "If you're so persistent in third degree methods, the opportunity is to hand: Torrance's Gospel Tent arrived in Melbourne two weeks ago."

Read jumped to his feet. "The deuce!" he exclaimed. "Do you know the address?"

"It's in the newspapers every day. I suggest you send one of your minions to the stall in the foyer."

Already Read was half-way across the apartment and calling to the constable on duty at the door. Within a few minutes the man returned with the daily. Spreading it on the desk, the two investigators flicked the pages Until they found the advertisement. Read straightened with a satisfied grunt and rubbed his hands. "We can be there in ten minutes!" he announced. Recalling the constable from the door, he barked out a quick succession of orders.

Chapter 6

Half an hour later, the police-car, with Chief Inspector Read and Jeffery in the rear seat, slowed down before a wide space of ground surrounded by a galvanized-iron fence. The Gospel Tent Mission had its location on the outskirts of the city.

About the iron fencing, fluttering bills were plastered—bills that adured in bold, scarlet lettering:

"ARE YOU PREPARED TO MEET YOUR GOD?", "REPENT, THE DAY OF JUDGMENT IS AT HAND!"

and, farther down, the invitation:

"GO YE INTO THE WORLD AND PREACH THE GOSPEL TO ALL MEN."

From the fence, the top of a large bell tent could be seen. The police-car crawled slowly until it halted opposite a swinging gate. The Inspector and his companion stepped out and made their way across to the entrance.

They passed through and their eyes rested on what appeared to be a tiny village under canvas. The large tent occupied the main position on the grounds and a number of smaller canvas structures were spread about it in a wide circle.

There was a collection of people about the encampment, some sitting outside their tents reading, others moving about the grounds in twos and threes, talking quietly. From somewhere came the wheezing strains of a harmonium, followed by a choir of voices which balanced in enthusiasm what they lacked in harmony. In an open marquee people were engaged in clearing tables, while from the end of the tent a curl of blue smoke proclaimed the cook-house.

"Seems rather like a loafer's paradise," Read grunted, looking around. "Sitting out in the sun, reading and singing, appears to me a pretty pleasant way to heaven!"

Jeffery's tone was reproachful. "'Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you,'" he quoted.

"What the devil are you talking about?" snapped Read.

"Thessalonians two. Chapter three—verse eight," Jeffery explained mildly.

The other gave a surly grunt. With the young man at his heels, he strode across to the marquee and buttonholed a young woman who was passing with her arms laden with hymn books. She was a rather plain young woman, with rather sharp, pinched features emphasized by the manner she wore her hair—strained harshly back to form a tight bun. There was a pallid wart on her chin. She walked straight ahead, lips moving soundlessly, eyes fixed on some distant

goal, so that when Read laid a hand on her arm she started like a sleeper awakening and flinched back. Her eyes were wide with alarm.

"Just a moment, young lady," Read spoke quietly, without preamble. "We are from the Criminal Investigation Department. Could you say where I would find Mr. Torrance?"

The girl blinked at him. "You the police?" she stammered.

The Inspector's mouth tightened impatiently. "Yes—yes! Where is Mr. Torrance?"

She hesitated, darting swift, suspicious glances at the two men. A tongue moistened her lips. "We—we don't know, none of us."

One of her books toppled from its pile and fell to the ground. Jeffery picked up the volume, dusted it carefully and returned it. The girl was staring at them. "Honestly, we don't know," she repeated.

"What do you mean—don't know?"

Sudden defiance blazed in the girl's eyes. "We just don't—that's all." After a pause, she continued: "We haven't seen the Master for two days. Took morning prayer yesterday, he did—and we haven't seen him since!"

"Oh...!" The Inspector murmured slowly. He stood with his hands clasped behind him, staring narrow-eyed at the frightened girl. "And has the Tent Mission business been delayed all that time?"

"Oh no, sir. First Bond-servant Hillier has been conducting the services in the Master's absence:"

"First Bond-servant?" The Chief Inspector made no attempt to keep the amusement from his voice. "What's the idea of the fancy name?"

The girl shifted the burden in her arms. Her tone was stiff with dignity. "We're all known by names like that here," she said tightly.

"Mr. Torrance is our Master. Mr. Hillier, next to the Master, is his First Bond-servant. Miss Turpin, in charge of the women, is First Handmaiden."

Read nodded, his grey eyes twinkling. "And what are you, young lady?"

A blush spread across the girl's plain features. "I'm just one of the Daughters of Israel," she said primly. "One of the Gershonite daughters."

The Inspector, glancing at Jeffery, noticed the corners of the young man's mouth twitching dangerously. His eyes telegraphed a warning and he turned back to the waiting girl. "At least you have the virtue of humility," he said dryly. "And now, where would we find Mr. Hillier?"

"This way." And the girl, wheeling about, began to retrace her steps across the stubbly ground. The two men followed at a respectful distance.

The tent occupied by First Bond-servant Hillier proclaimed his rank by being larger than the average. It stood apart from the circle, and a cleared path through the dried grass and rubble led to the entrance. The Inspector thanked

the girl with a nod and, dismissed, the Gershonite daughter almost scuttled away. The two men approached the tent and then, as though by mutual consent, halted suddenly. Inside the canvas structure, two voices were raised. A woman's voice, husky with emotion, put a question—a question that caused the two men outside to stiffen. For the voice had asked tremblingly:

"You fool! Don't you realize that it's murder?"

There was a moment's silence. Read and his companion exchanged a significant glance. The woman's voice spoke again, and they could read fear and agitation in the frenzied syllables.

"But why did he do it? He must have known he'd be found out."

A second voice—that of a man—interrupted. The words, mumbled and slurred, were barely audible.

"And one of these smote the servant of the High Priest, and cut off his ear. And Jesus answered and said, Suffer ye this far. And He touched the ear—"

Again the woman's voice, bitter, sneering, interrupted, cutting into the crooning monotone:

"Don't try to work off that biblical tripe on me! Justification or not, it's callous murder! Understand that! It's murder and he'll swing for it!"

Chief Inspector Read advanced and rapped sharply on a wooden box standing outside the tent. From inside there came the sound of breaths sharply drawn and a sudden tense silence, as though the occupants were eyeing each other in terror. Read knocked again—peremptorily. Scarcely had he moved back when the canvas flap was thrust violently aside and a woman emerged. Then, with a sharply drawn gasp, she turned and plunged her way across the grounds. They had a momentary impression of wide fear-darkened eyes set in a sallow complexion, and then she was gone. They were still watching when a smooth voice called:

"Yes, gentlemen. You were wanting someone?"

Both men swung round. At the entrance to the tent stood a middle-aged man dressed in ill-fitting sombre clothes. He was quite bald, yet it was the face that held Jeffery's eyes: a remarkable face, thin to the point of emaciation so that the pale skin stretched tightly over the jutting beak of a nose and high cheekbones. The mouth was a tight, grim line, almost devoid of lips. But even more disturbing than this cruel slit were the deep-set burning eyes that peered from under sparse brows. Sunken, wild, they were the eyes of a fanatic. So might Savonarola, or one of those pallid elders who sent old women screaming to the stake in the dark days of witchcraft, have looked. The young man felt a ripple of fear shudder down his spine. To his relief, those smouldering eyes were turned away, to fix on Read, who came forward.

"Mr. Hillier?" And as the man nodded, the Inspector performed

introductions. "We would like a few minutes' talk with you." He paused and eyed the other keenly. "We are investigating the murder of Sir Merton Sheldon."

Not the shadow of expression crossed the lean face. The dark eyes, smouldering deeply, did not waver. "Certainly, gentlemen. Come inside. My dwelling is humble, but you are welcome." He stood aside to let them pass.

The furnishings of the tent were spartan in their simplicity. A narrow truckle-bed, a table, and a cheap chest of drawers stood on the bare wooden floor. The young man's sensitive nostrils contracted at the odour of stale food and unaired clothing which hung about the place. The missionary pulled out two wooden chairs, and motioning his guests to be seated, dropped on to the bed.

"Now, gentlemen." He linked his fingers in an attitude of prayer And waited.

Read came to the point at once.

"We have reasons to believe, Mr. Hillier, that your employer, Mr. Torrance, may be able to give us certain information regarding the case we are investigating. One of your followers in the mission has told us that Mr. Torrance is not here at present." He paused as if expecting the other man to say something, but Hillier continued to stare at the floor, his eyes veiled by heavy lids. Read flashed a quick glance at him, and when he spoke again a sharpness had crept into his voice.

"We understand that Mr. Torrance left this camp yesterday morning and has not been seen since that time." He hunched forward in his seat and flung the question abruptly. "Do you know where he is, Mr. Hillier?"

A shadow, too faint to be called an expression, flitted across the lean face. "I have no idea, Inspector Read."

"But surely you are making some effort to find your leader?"

The evangelist unclasped his hands and spread them in apologetic gesture. "We have been so busy. After all, it is only two days..." The voice trailed away. The thin fingers met and clasped almost lovingly.

Jeffery spoke from his chair. "Surely this is strange, Mr. Hillier? The most important person in your mission disappears without warning for forty-eight hours and you do not consider it a serious matter!"

Hillier's eyes sought the young man's face. Their queer fascination was almost hypnotic. "The Master is not like an ordinary man. Often he leaves us for days at a time...wandering here and there, his mind filled with the great holy Voice, his eyes on the high stars, and his earthly desires subjugated to the divine glorification of truth, light, and beauty." The voice rose, resonant, compelling. It completed the impression of power and authority about this man. Now it dropped to that monotonous semi-tone. "But always his feet were

safely guided—always..." He nodded convincingly. "He will return...never fear."

Blackburn glanced at Read and shrugged his shoulders. This man Hillier was side-tracking them, whether by accident or design he could not say. But his movement was not lost on the Inspector, who squared his shoulders and gave a sharp cough, as though bracing himself for a difficult task. He spoke smoothly.

"You will forgive our intruding on your more private affairs, sir. But as we approached your tent we could not avoid overhearing a rather remarkable conversation between yourself and a young lady visitor. That conversation dealt with the subject of murder, and you quoted a biblical reference to the losing of an ear." He paused and spaced the next words heavily. "The body of Sir Merton Sheldon, found murdered this morning, was mutilated in the same way!"

No answer. The evangelist's lips were locked tight as a steel trap. The knuckles of his hands showed ivory-white as his fingers clenched firmer. In the silence, it was as though some invisible hostile presence had crept into the tent and stroked the air with lean suggestive fingers.

Jeffery was first to speak.

"We saw this woman as she left your tent. Although it was only a brief glimpse, we noticed two things. One was that she appeared to be in deadly terror, and the other, that she resembled Miss Gloria Grey, a former musical-comedy actress."

With his words, a change swept over the man. Two scarlet spots burned in his cheeks and his eyes were so merciless as to be terrible. He was like one in the grip of a torturing dilemma. Then his clasped hands broke, hung limply at his side as he spoke.

"Yes, brother. Miss Grey was here. She too had the idea that the Master knew something about this killing, and that, through cowardice, he was hiding away. Pah!" He spat the word in bitter scorn.

"Who is this woman?" Read demanded.

"The Master engaged her as a soloist to lead the singing. That was two weeks ago. Since that time she has brought nothing save trouble to the great work. By her wiles and her flattery she turned the Master's mind to the fleshly things of earth." The venom in his tone could almost be felt, so searing was it. "Cursed be she and her harlot sisterhood!"

"She was a wicked woman! I knew it as soon as I saw her enter these gates. I told the Master. I prayed and implored him not to jeopardize our great work in this way." The hand dropped, the lean body seemed to shrink in its garments. "But she had blinded his eyes, even as Bathsheba the Hittite's wife tempted David. The Master could not—would not see, even after I proved to

him that this woman sneered at the great work..." He broke off suddenly and stood looking at them.

Jeffery shifted. His voice was high, excited. "And so you both had a thundering row." It was a statement rather than an inquiry.

For a moment it looked as though the missionary would spring across the tent at him. They saw the long body tense, the hands clench into fists. The red blotches on his cheeks spread until the face was an angry mottled scarlet. The Inspector jumped to his feet. There was a tense momentary clashing of will-power that seemed to quiver the still, hot air inside the room. Then Hillier relaxed and sank down on the bed. The scarlet drained from his cheeks, leaving them pallid. Only his eyes glittered and burned beneath the craggy brows. After a pause, his words came—jerkingly, dryly.

"Yes. We did quarrel—the Master and I. I told him he was sinning. Sinning in sight of God and man. But that was later—after the woman had left us."

Read had resumed his seat. Now he leaned forward. "Left you? What do you mean?"

"About four days ago the Master came to me saying that the woman would be with us no longer." The harsh, dry tone did not vary. "She had broken her engagement with us. He gave no reason for this, merely telling me to look for another soloist."

"And have you any idea what caused the break between these two?"

Hillier shook his head. "No. But I can only pray that the Master repented and drove her from the camp." He paused as if considering the point. "But this cannot have been so. The next day he brought a second woman into the mission. Then it was that I reproached him. He refused any explanation and became angry. So we quarrelled...bitterly!"

Jeffery Blackburn had taken a small notebook from his pocket and was making entries with a pencil. He looked up. "Just correct me if any of these points are wrong, Mr. Hillier." Consulting the book, he continued: "Gloria Grey joined your mission two weeks ago. Four days ago Torrance told you she was leaving, but refused an explanation. The following day he brought a second woman into the camp. That same day you quarrelled. The following morning (one day prior to the murder we are investigating) he disappeared. No trace of him has been discovered up till this moment." He looked up at the evangelist. "Is that all correct?"

Hillier inclined his head. "Perfectly."

Jeffery nodded and pocketed his note-book. The Inspector asked:

"Had you seen the second woman before Torrance brought her here?"

"No." The answer was curt, the thin lips barely moving.

"At what time did she arrive?"

"About ten o'clock in the morning. She and the Master stayed in his tent for some three hours. They came out to lunch in the city and returned to the mission in the afternoon. Finally, the woman left in the evening, before prayers. That is, at seven o'clock."

"Did Torrance accompany her this last time?"

The evangelist's eyes glowed, as though at some recollection that was not unpleasing. "The Master did not leave the grounds until close on nine o'clock that night," he said softly. "Three times I visited his tent, and each time I found him on his knees, praying. About a few minutes before the nine hour, I crossed to his tent again and met him coming out. He seemed excited and thrust me aside almost roughly. Without, a word, he walked on and out through the gates." Hillier paused. "And that was the last I saw of him."

"He came back again that night, didn't he?"

"Yes. But I did not see him. Other friends in the mission told me. I was rather upset over the quarrel of the day and tried to avoid the Master as much as possible." Almost as though anticipating their question, he added: "He left the mission about eight o'clock next morning."

Read appeared satisfied. He rose and looked around the small room. "Have you a portrait of Torrance—one that would help us to identify him?" he asked.

Hillier crossed to the chest of drawers and drew out an unmounted print. This he passed to the Inspector, and as Jeffery moved across to inspect it:

"That photograph was taken by the Press when we came to this city," Hillier explained.

The two men scarcely heard his words. Their attention was focused on the square of glossy paper. It showed a stocky, strongly built man with a flowing black beard stepping from the express. He was being greeted by a group of clergymen.

"A black beard..." Read murmured. Smartly, he spoke to Hillier: "May we take this photograph?"

The man nodded.

"Just one last thing," the Inspector added, slipping the photograph in his pocket. "Can you give us any description of this second woman whom Torrance brought to the mission?"

The dark shadow had fallen across the evangelist's face. "I can do more than describe her," he said sombrely. "I can show you her photograph. The Master has one in his tent." He made a movement toward the door. "If you would come this way...it is not far." He led the way across the cleared patch of ground to a larger tent, isolated from the remainder. Hillier held back the tent-flap and motioned the two men inside.

The tent of the Master was larger and more lavishly furnished than the tent

of the Bond-Servant. There were rugs on the wooden floor and among the furnishings a handsome radio cabinet of polished wood. A low divan, covered with cushions, occupied one side of the tent. Hillier crossed to a small desk and gestured toward a photograph propped against a vase of withered flowers.

"That's the woman!" he said bitterly.

Jeffery took one look at the elaborate studio portrait of Miss Valerie Sheldon.

THE AFTERNOON editions of the "*Globe*" and the "*Courier*" were on the streets when Bertha Fenton emerged from the detective headquarters that afternoon to make her way back to the offices of the "Informer." She passed an army of newsboys screaming the headlines of the Sheldon murder to the four corners of the city.

Although this premature competition was regrettable, it did not perturb her, since Miss Fenton was feeling pleased with herself on that particular afternoon. In spite of the authority's attempts at "hushing-up" the strange decease of Sir Merton, she had wormed a valuable clue.

Shortly after three o'clock, in company with Wilkinson, Yates, and Lascelles, she had gone down to the detective offices to pick up what further information was available. The result had been disappointing. the finger-print experts reported no success.

Back to the offices on the ground floor...and here was a find! The woman's quick eyes gleamed as she took in the collection of objects on the table: that tobacco-pouch, the spectacle-case, and the other articles found on the dead man. The folded newspaper-cutting interested her particularly. Long experience in Press psychology told this plump scribe that a person rarely carries a newspaper cutting about unless the printed words touch that individual closely.

Miss Fenton, whose ideas on the subject of *meum et tuum* were extraordinarily elastic, meant to appropriate that cutting in the sacred cause of the scribbler. But she had reckoned without authority.

Scarcely had she reached out a hand to take the cutting when the detective in charge rapped out an order to get back behind the counter. Bertha obeyed reluctantly. "Behind the counter" meant being four feet away from that much-desired cutting. She took her stand and lit a cigarette, and all the time her sharp brain was doing an admirable piece of deduction.

Every newspaperman and woman comes to know the peculiarities of type and printing in the rival pages. Each newspaper had certain characteristics known to the initiated—a slight gloss on the surface of one paper, a dark-ink printing on a second, a scare-head on a third, and a dignified quiet line on a

fourth. That was how Miss Fenton was able to identify the cutting as coming from the columns of the "Courier." There was the smooth-surfaced paper and the light-ink printing. So much was easy. But the cutting was folded in four, and now Miss Bertha must tread delicately as Agag. She smoked and considered, her narrowed eyes never leaving the slip of newsprint.

The cutting lay at an angle to her eyes so that the top was facing half way. She could perceive only half of the printed black heading, the first word "BACK" followed by something that appeared like "THE D..." In the smaller-type line she read the words "Strange story..." and the rest was lost in the acute angle of the paper. And next—"Here on M..." was plain. This was followed by a small nonpareil line which absolutely defied her short-sighted stare.

Bertha considered.

The headings, as far as she could see, were inked in a bold bodoni type, which meant that the report would probably be found on the main news page of the "Courier" and almost assuredly at the top of a column. Now—bold bodoni. Hadn't there been a row about that type of heading on the "Courier" some months ago? She remembered how Wilkinson had told her that the sub-editors—lazy bums!—had been slamming bold bodoni heads on every single column until its prevalence began to attract unfavourable attention. A notice had come forth from Carmody, the editor-in-chief, forbidding the use of bold bodoni until further orders. That was about six months ago.

Miss Fenton's plump fingers drummed the counter. The "Courier" of six months ago. Main news page. Top of column. That narrowed the search considerably. Now, if she could discover the day of publication...

The detectives were talking in a group in the far corner of the room. If she could only turn that cutting an inch nearer her eyes...but she dare not reach out! Suddenly her eyes gleamed. She drew deeply on her cigarette and, leaning her chin on her hand, blew a careful cloud of smoke toward the table. After the fourth attempt, she was successful! The breath from her lips caught the edge of the cutting and twisted it about so that it faced her squarely.

Now she could see the entire heading...now she could read "By Dyke Wilkinson, Special Correspondent", and also—praise be—she could make out the words of the opening paragraph. She screwed her eyes ferociously and picked up the words "Cornwall" and "Port Melbourne to-day." Crushing her butt out, she gave a grunt of satisfaction and dragged her hat into position. Overseas steamers berthed on Port Melbourne three times a week, but mail steamers like the "Cornwall" on Mondays only. Now she had everything she wanted.

Back in her office, she entered the reporters' room. A group of men were

chatting near the door; they looked up as she approached, and she returned their greeting vaguely. She made her way to a high bench at one side of the room where files of the various newspapers were kept bound for reference. Her fingers closed about a safety-razor blade in a nickelled holder.

Above the bench, a stern black-lettered warning read: "THESE FILES MUST NOT BE CUT. THIS MEANS YOU!" Bertha closed an expressive eye at the notice and dragged the fat bound copy of the "Courier" toward her. Six months ago. She must begin her search well back in the volume. She began to turn the dog-eared pages. Luck was with her. On the main news page for May 8 she ran the cutting down. With a muttered ejaculation she flourished her razor-blade in the face of the notice and neatly clipped the cutting.

Back in her cubicle, she read the report carefully. It conveyed nothing to her. The reason why Judge Sheldon should cherish a cutting of a crazy evangelist was beyond her comprehension. Sitting back, she turned the newsprint over in her fingers. Suddenly her eyes dilated.

On the rear of the Torrance story was another report. Bertha held the cutting close and read':

*OSCAR DOWLING DEAD
GUARD FINDS BODY
Strange Wounds on Throat*

The body of Oscar Dowling, the Gulganna murderer, who was serving a life-sentence at Greycliffe prison for the murder of his wife and children, was found late this afternoon by a guard of the gaol. The body was lying face downwards in a small creek running through one of the gullies. It had apparently been there for some time, since the face was bloated and disfigured by the length of time in the water. The lower part of the face was mutilated and there were wounds on the throat.

Dr. Crotty, the prison doctor who examined the convict's body after recovery, is of the opinion that the man had been dead for some time, possibly a week or even longer. The gully in which the body was found is in an isolated spot and it is quite possible for it to have lain there that length of time without being discovered.

Dr. Crotty, after an examination of the wounds on Dowling's face and throat, said they may have been caused by the teeth of a bloodhound. These animals were used in tracking the convict after his escape. It is believed that Dowling must have encountered the animal and attempted to kill it to prevent an alarm being given. The animal must have turned on the man and inflicted the wounds.

Bertha Fenton raised here eyes from the report. A wrinkle formed between her brows. There was something she was trying to place, some fugitive idea that would not be trapped. Oscar Dowling. Oscar Dowling. She repeated the words as if they might help her. But it was useless. With a shrugging movement of her shoulders she dropped the cutting, and reached across for her glass.

Chapter 7

NINE-THIRTY ON the following morning found Chief Inspector Read sitting in one of the deep arm-chairs at the far end of the Sheldon apartment.

On the heavy glass-topped desk at the other end of the room stood a pair of shoes. Woman's shoes, almost fragile in their black satin uppers fronted with rhinestone buckles, their heels slim and soles paper-like. Those soles and the satin uppers were stained and dirty...

There came the sound of a door being opened, and footsteps crossed the bedroom. Read rose as Jeffery Blackburn entered, accompanied by O'Connor and Donlin. The Inspector nodded to the young man, who came forward eagerly.

"Any luck?" he asked abruptly.

The Inspector nodded and gestured toward the desk. Jeffery turned, dropped his stick and gloves on the near-by chair, and walked across. He did not touch the shoes, but stood looking at them.

"How did you get them?" He turned toward the elder man.

"Give the credit to O'Connor and Donlin," the Inspector replied. "They enlisted the aid of the boots downstairs and, through that lad, traced the shoes to the lessee of an apartment about six doors down the corridor. I've asked the manager to keep quiet about the business for the time being." He paused and nodded to the plain-clothes man. "Give Mr. Jeffery the layout, O'Connor."

The big detective came forward. "The apartment belongs to an actress. She's not working at the time. Been renting the rooms for the past month. Name's Grey—Gloria Grey."

Blackburn glanced up sharply and caught Read's eye.

A grim smile played about the Inspector's lips. "You've heard the name before, haven't you, son?" he inquired.

With a nod, he prompted the detective to continue.

"When we traced the shoes to this Grey woman, it must have been close on ten o'clock last night," O'Connor went on. "We walked to the door and knocked. There wasn't an answer, so we tried the door. It was locked. I sent one of the constables downstairs to find the Chief and report. Then I rang for Colbert, the manager of these flats, and asked him to bring the master-key of the apartment. Inspector Read came along, and as soon as Colbert put in an appearance, we unlocked the door and went inside.

"The apartment was a sort of bed-sitting-room. It was empty so far as the occupant was concerned. The bed had not been slept in, but it was indented as though someone had been sitting or lying on it. In one corner of the room, just as if they had been kicked off in a hurry, were the shoes. The stains were still

showing on the soles. But there was no trace of the woman herself, although it certainly didn't look as if she'd cut and run."

Jeffery, who was following this recital closely, asked: "What makes you think that?"

Read interposed quickly: "There were a number of small points that suggested the contrary, son. This Miss Grey is a heavy smoker, according to manager Colbert. She is rarely without a cigarette. Yet her silver case, almost filled, was on her dressing-table. It seems unlikely that, if this woman had made a get-away, she would have left that case behind. Again, on the dressing-table was about five pounds in notes and change. She'd apparently gone away with only a few pence, unless, of course, she had more money on her person—which is unlikely, since she has been unemployed. And we could find no clothing missing nor anything that suggested she had gone for a long time."

O'Connor nodded. He eyed his superior for a moment, and as the Inspector was silent took up the story again.

"We took the shoes and made a thorough search of the apartment," the detective continued. "Nothing incriminating was further brought to light. Then we left, after putting two men to watch for the woman's return. About midnight she came back, and she hasn't left the apartment since. As we came up, our men reported that she'd been there all night, and she's still inside. The man on the door could hear her moving about in the room."

Jeffery turned to the Inspector. "Why not an arrest last night? You're taking a risk leaving that girl alone to destroy evidence, aren't you?"

Read took a turn up and down the room before he spoke. The indecision in his movements was mirrored in his voice as he halted opposite the young man. He spoke quietly.

"Honestly, son, I'm not satisfied. Why in the name of sanity should that woman, knowing that evidence like those shoes has hung people before now, leave them lying about quite openly for anyone to find? It's incredible! The first thought of even the most dull-witted person would be to destroy them, don't you agree?"

Blackburn nodded. As he did not comment, the Inspector went on:

"There's another thing, Jeff. It's only small, but sticks in my mind. When I went into the apartment last night with the boys, I wanted a match to search the cupboard. I hadn't any in my coat and looked about the room. There wasn't a single match to be found—not even a burnt end!" He held up his hand as Blackburn started to speak. "Yes, I know that it isn't unusual—but, remember, this woman is a heavy smoker. The room had that smell of stale tobacco-smoke and there were at least thirty cigarette-ends crushed out in the ash-tray on the table. But not a single match could be found in the entire

apartment!"

"Probably because she used a lighter," suggested Jeffery.

Read brought his fist down on the desk with a thump that emphasized his next words. "She did use a lighter! That's the queerest point of all. Colbert said that he could never remember this woman striking matches. She always carried a small silver and mother-of-pearl lighter. Now, although we ran a fine-tooth comb through that apartment, there was no trace of the lighter found." He paused and thrust his hands in his pockets.

"Here's what I've been leading up to. Why should a woman, who is a heavy smoker, leave her cigarettes behind and take the lighter with her—especially when she goes on an errand of such importance that even an habitual practice like smoking is driven temporarily from her mind?"

The young man considered for a moment. "There seems to be two explanations, Chief," he returned. "Either this lighter was in some way incriminating and therefore dangerous if left out of her possession—or else it must have had some important bearing on her errand. It may have actually been the cause of the hurried journey last night."

Read nodded doubtfully. "Then the questions arise: Firstly, what possible part could the automatic lighter have played in the murder of Sheldon? And secondly, how can the lighter possibly be more incriminating than the shoes, which weren't even concealed, let alone destroyed?"

Jeffery squared his shoulders. "The answer to both questions probably lies in Miss Grey's apartment. Shall we go?"

The Inspector nodded. He paused only long enough to pick up the shoes and hand them to Donlin. In a group, the four men passed out into the corridor and walked down toward a door at the far end. A constable stationed before it saluted as they approached.

"All correct, sir," he reported smartly to the Inspector, and stood aside.

Read advanced to the closed door and knocked authoritatively. Sounds of movements, heard through the flimsy partition, ceased abruptly. There was no answer. The Inspector rapped again and waited. Slow footsteps approached the door.

Read had time to whisper curtly to Donlin, "Keep those shoes out of sight until I tell you—"

Then the door swung back and a woman stood in the entrance, her face hard, surveying the party with eyes frankly hostile. "What do you want?" she demanded.

The Chief Inspector pushed past her and the men filed into the room. The woman closed the door and stood with her back against it, every line of her attitude resentful of this forced intrusion. Read gave a quick glance about the

apartment. His voice quiet and authoritative, he turned to the occupant.

"Your name is Grey...Miss Gloria Grey?" As the woman nodded curtly, he added: "We are investigating the murder of Sir Merton Sheldon. We should like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

The woman did not move. She braced her slender body as though against an attack, and an angry wrinkle marred her forehead.

"I do mind!" She flung the words at them, drawing a deep, hissing breath. "I want to know what right you have to break into my apartment last night and search through my personal possessions."

Her lips curled. "That's just what one might expect from the police! Why don't you go and arrest a man who can retaliate instead of frightening a woman?" She was breathing heavily, watching them closely.

Throughout this jeremiad, Jeffery was taking stock of Gloria Grey. He saw a slim, almost emaciated blonde woman closely approaching the dangerous forties, a blonde with thin, sharp features giving an impression of hungriness that even the hastily applied make-up could not conceal. A green peignoir was tied about her body, and her tiny feet were thrust into green slippers with enormous pom-poms. But it was the face that held his attention. The complexion was sallow, contrasting with the china-blue eyes, which protruded like those of a frightened child. As she talked, the woman revealed a number of teeth filled with gold. Her hair, cut into a boyish bob, was tangled and unbrushed, while the shadows beneath her eyes were painted there by sorrow and something darker. There was about her entire appearance an air of fugitiveness constantly maintained.

Read was speaking again, grimly genial.

"You'll do no good by taking that attitude, young lady. Because we're not trying to frighten. We are merely seeking information. There's no need to become abusive unless"—he paused momentarily and his eyes bored sharply into her face—"unless you have anything to hide!"

Gloria Grey came forward. She was plainly forcing herself to be calm, and sat down on the arm of a chair. It was a particularly stagy movement, and Jeffery expected her to cross her knees. She sat quietly, her face hard and her eyes defiant.

"I've nothing to hide," she said sullenly. "Get on with your business."

The Inspector nodded. "Where were you, Miss Grey, between the hours of eight o'clock and midnight on the night of the murder?"

It seemed as though the woman was not listening. Her eyes roamed the apartment as though searching for something. Jeffery, with quick intuition, came forward with open cigarette-case and a smile that was an invitation. Gloria Grey took a cigarette with fingers that trembled and placed it between

her lips. The Inspector repeated his question.

"I was here"—she waved the cigarette widely—"here in this room."

"All the time?"

"All the time," the actress repeated. With the cigarette, some of her self-control had returned. "I was reading a novel," she elaborated. "About ten-thirty I decided it was time for bed. So I undressed and went to sleep almost at once. Reading always makes me tired."

Jeffery smiled. "Probably a rather boring novel, Miss Grey. Could you remember the name?"

The woman flashed him a look. There was fear and suspicion in her blue eyes. "I—I'm afraid not. I never remember the names of books." She made a little helpless gesture. "They're—well—they're just books, and that's all."

The young man nodded sympathetically. But Read's tone was hard. "We understand, Miss Grey. Probably you had too much on your mind at the time. I take it there was no one in the room with you?"

"There was not!"

"Nor did you ring for service during that time?" And as the actress shook her head, Read clicked his tongue. "Then we have only your bare word that you were here? You have no other witnesses?"

Gloria Grey jumped to her feet. The abrupt movement almost upset the chair. "Say!" she demanded. "What is this? The third degree?"

Read shook his head. "No, my dear young lady. That is something from which we are trying to save you." With deliberate intent he ignored her, and his eyes wandered about the room. Through the open door of an ante-room, he noticed a locked and strapped suitcase. He nodded toward it. "Going away, Miss Grey?" His tone was suave.

Again for a moment, fear darkened her eyes. She nodded. "Yes. I've been packing all the morning. I told you I was busy. Got a job in Perth, if you must know—singing in prologues at a picture theatre."

Jeffery had taken a cigarette and placed it between his lips. Automatically his hands moved to his pockets for matches, sought, and sought in vain. He sighed, and began to move about the room. On an inlaid table close to the divan was a small silver lighter. He crossed, conscious that the woman's eyes were following his every movement. As he bent to pick up the lighter, the actress leapt from her position and almost snatched the toy from his fingers. It was not so much the movement as the ferocity of it that startled the young man. He stared at the woman, who stood with the lighter clutched against her breast. She faced him, pale with anger.

"God! But you've got a nerve!" Her tone was harsh, spitting. "Who d' you think you are—walking into a strange apartment helping yourself to other

people's property? And I suppose you'd call yourself a gentleman!" She was trembling violently, like one who has had a narrow escape.

"I'm sorry," Jeffery apologized. "After all, I merely wanted a light for my cigarette."

Her mouth was a bitter, sneering line. "Then get one from one of these policemen. But keep your damned paws off my things!" She wheeled about and walked into the smaller room. They heard the scrape of a drawer and the thump as the lighter was dropped inside. Then the woman returned and stood in the doorway.

"Are you finished?"

Read shook his head. "Far from finished, Miss Grey. Come in here and sit down. I'm afraid this is going to be rather a lengthy business."

The actress hesitated for a moment. She seemed uncertain whether to ignore the invitation or obey. Then she shrugged her shoulders and came forward, seating herself in the arm-chair.

The Inspector had not moved from his position. He asked quietly: "You knew Judge Sheldon, of course? Did you ever meet him or hold conversation with him?"

"Never!" She was lighting a second cigarette with a match taken from a cardboard holder. Her fumbling movements showed how unaccustomed she was to this procedure. Read waited for a moment and then took another line.

"Have you missed any piece of wearing-apparel lately? A dress, perhaps. Or a hat, or gloves or"—a significance crept into his tone—"a pair of shoes?"

The woman shook her head impatiently. "Of course not."

Read held out his hand to the plain-clothes man and, with an abruptness meant to be startling, thrust the shoes before her face. "Are these your property, Miss Grey?"

To the astonishment of the investigators, the actress nodded calmly. "Most certainly. I wore them yesterday." Her voice rose a key. "What right have you to take my—"

"Never mind that!" Read's voice rapped sharply. "Take those shoes and examine them, please. Do you notice the stains on the soles?"

Gloria Grey took the shoes and turned them over. There was an expression on her face that Jeffery, watching closely, read as part anger and part surprise. Certainly there was no trace of apprehension or fear. Either this woman is a remarkable actress, the young man told himself, or else this whole thing is mad...

After a short interval she spoke again, impatiently. "Yes. I see the stains. What about them—what are they?"

Like steel was the Chief Inspector's voice. "They are blood, young woman!"

Blood from the wound that killed Sir Merton Sheldon!"

There was a naked, quivering silence in the room, a concentrated electrification of the atmosphere that was almost too tense to be borne. It lasted but a few seconds. Then it passed. Bated breaths were released in long sighs, feet shuffled, hands were restless. The woman in the chair was staring at Read, and two daubs of rouge stood out vividly on her cheeks, giving mockery to her face instead of beauty. Yet there was something wrong, something that did not fit. Gloria Grey's whole attitude was that of a person stunned, not so much with guilty fear as with overwhelming astonishment tempered with anxiety. She had dropped her eyes and was staring at the shoes with rapt, fascinated stare. When she spoke it was as though every word was a painful effort. Those listening had the impression that she addressed herself rather than the detectives.

"But how could his blood have got on to my shoes?"

Read made an impatient gesture. He too sensed the anomaly before them. But where it made the younger man thoughtful, it irritated the Chief Inspector. He spoke harshly.

"I think it is only right to tell you, Miss Grey, that you are in a very serious position. The murderer of Judge Sheldon left a pool of blood at the door of the Sheldon inner apartment. Yesterday we found prints of those shoes you hold plainly marked in that blood. That is how the stains appeared on them. While you were away last night, my men searched your apartment and found the shoes, marked with blood as you see them now." His voice became hard and formal. "Have you anything to say before we arrest you on a charge of suspicion of being concerned in the murder of Sir Merton Sheldon?"

While he was speaking, the actress had half risen from her chair, her face paper-white and one hand at her throat. But as the Inspector continued, she sank back. An expression of relief crossed her face, leaving them hard. The eyes that met Read's were unwavering.

"Go ahead and arrest me," she said. "You'll be sorry, though, I warn you."

"You've nothing to say?" Read barked.

"Nothing whatever!" The tone held finality.

And in the awkward pause that followed:

"Not even if it would save the neck of your friend Mr. Torrance from the Tent Mission?" Jeffery asked quietly.

"Ah-h!..." Gloria Grey sprang to her feet and drew a long, sobbing breath. The horror had flooded back into her face, and she glanced from man to man like an animal trapped and cornered. Believing the woman about to break from the room, the detectives braced themselves to ward her off. Surprisingly, she did no such thing. She gave an inane choking giggle, her mouth sagged

vacuously, and she dropped to the floor. So unexpected was the movement that no man stooped to catch her; all remained staring at her in silence.

"Fainted, by Christopher!" exclaimed Read. "Here—O'Connor, Donlin! Carry her to the divan. That's it! Get that constable at the door to fossick out some brandy. Go on! Don't stand staring! And, Jeffery, pop into that other room and see if there's any smelling-salts on the dressing-table. Quickly!"

From chained astonishment, the apartment was quick with movement. Read was bending over the unconscious woman, massaging her wrists gently. Blackburn, emerging from the ante-room, held a green-stoppered bottle in one hand, and in the other a small object of silver and mother-o'-pearl. He handed the restorative to the Inspector and, moving away, began to turn the lighter over in his fingers.

It was, as far as he could see, an ordinary novelty of its kind, except that it was some inch and a half longer than the average toy. Rather bulky, Jeffery considered, especially for a lady. He pressed a thumb on the nickelled top and it shot up, to reveal a pale-yellow flame. This he extinguished and began a close examination of the casing. Upending the lighter, he attempted to prise out the reservoir that held the petrol. It was stiff and he broke a finger-nail in the operation. At length he managed to obtain a grip and tugged. The reservoir shot out abruptly, and with it came another tiny metal container that dropped to the floor. Jeffery bent and retrieved it, laying the remains of the lighter on the table.

The second container was about an inch and a half long, fitted with a close-fitting metal cap which needed his pen-knife to dislodge it. Tipping the open container, half a dozen tiny capsules fell into his hand. Jeffery's eyes narrowed. He crushed a pellet and poked his forefinger into the white crystalline powder, then straightened with a whistle in which enlightenment and surprise were blended. Holding the capsules carefully, he turned to the Chief Inspector.

"I've just discovered, Chief, why Miss Grey was so anxious to prevent alien hands being laid on her lighter."

The elder man, smelling-salts in hand, wheeled abruptly. "You have? And why's that?"

"Because," Jeffery told him, "she uses it to conceal her supply of heroin tablets!"

Chapter 8

HEROIN!

Chief Inspector William Read stared at his young companion, and his florid face paled. Few men knew better than the Inspector the dread ramifications of the drug traffic and the sinister fascination of this derivative of morphia which held tens of thousands of unhappy devotees in its grip. But Read's mind was racing, pursued by dark possibilities. What in heaven's name did this new discovery mean? Were they to be called upon to expose a drug racket as well as investigate a murder?

"You know, Chief," Jeffery was saying, "I should be kicked for not guessing before. Everything about this poor woman points to the protracted use of drugs. The sallow complexion, the bad teeth, and the excessive thinness—all are outward signs of the vice. And her nervousness, her frequent lapses into hysteria, her heavy smoking of cigarettes—see how it all fits in?"

"Does it, by God!" Read snapped. He was taking the brandy from the constable. "Damned if it fits in at all to me!"

Blackburn did not answer. He was refitting the lighter, minus the capsule-case. His movements were abstracted as though his mind was elsewhere. Donlin, who was wetting the unconscious woman's lips with the spirits, spoke from the divan.

"I think she's coming round, Chief."

They moved across the room. Gloria Gray was lying motionless, her long eyelashes sweeping her cheeks. As they approached, the lashes fluttered, parted to reveal dazed blue eyes. They moved from face to face and came to rest upon the lighter in Jeffery's fingers. The sight roused her; the blood flamed into her ashen cheeks and she half raised herself from the divan. Then, as if the effort was too great, she dropped back and closed her eyes again. Her breathing was deep and laboured.

"So"—it was little more than a hopeless sigh—"you've found..."

Read's face was very grave. He nodded. "Yes, Miss Grey. We've found it."

For some seconds the woman lay relaxed. Then with a sudden clenching of her hands she sat up. Her eyes were filmed and dark with tragedy. There was utter dejection in the sullen curve of her mouth, the droop of her shoulders. Jeffery found himself pitying her—so old, so tired and pitiful was her appearance. Defiance had dropped from her like a cloak; her surrender, complete and unconditional, revealed itself in her next words.

"Now that you've found out about the dope, you might as well know the rest. It can't matter now." Her tone was one of bitter resignation. "I've nothing to be ashamed of, although you might think differently. I'll tell you the whole

story."

She was leaning forward now, elbows on her knees, eyes fixed on the door. After an interval, the woman continued:

"I lied when I told you that I hadn't moved from this apartment last night. I lied again when I told you I had never spoken to Sheldon. I've spoken to him too often—known him and feared him." Her voice climbed a key. The hatred that burned darkly in her eyes seemed to rack her whole wasted body as she screamed:

"He's dead and I'm glad! Glad—d' you hear? Glad! The dirty rotten damn' dope-pedlar!"

From something approaching frenzy, she quietened, lapsing again into hopeless apathy, eyes moodily on the carpet. Her words, however, caused a mild sensation in that room. Read started and glanced toward Jeffery, who was nodding to himself in mute satisfaction. The two plain-clothes men stared at the actress, incredulity written large upon their faces. The Inspector bent down and touched her gently on the shoulder.

"You're speaking metaphorically..." he began.

Gloria Grey roused herself. The face she turned toward him was bitter. "Metaphorical hell!" she sneered. "Sheldon has been supplying heroin to at least a dozen women, including myself, for the past six months to my knowledge." As Read started to speak: "Oh yes, I know it sounds far-fetched, but that was the beauty of his rotten schemes. Who was likely to suspect a High Court judge of peddling dope to women? And we wouldn't talk! No, sir! Why should we? We were sure of getting a regular supply without risk. That was all that mattered..." Her voice trailed away. The effort seemed to exhaust her. She leant back panting, with eyes closed.

Read nodded to Donlin, who poured the remainder of the brandy in a glass and placed it in the actress's hand. She sipped at it thankfully without moving her position.

Jeffery took the Chief Inspector aside and a whispered conversation took place.

"Don't you see how perfectly it all fits in now?" the younger man was saying. "The continued visits of the women, the secrecy about the room with its one key and its locked windows, the long periods of silence on the part of Sheldon, probably when he was allocating the drug. It all dovetails completely. No wonder he paid Hoskins to keep quiet about the visits of the women! He wasn't taking any chances, you see?"

Read nodded sombrely. "It's incredible—but it must be true, Jeff. Remember how that Sheldon girl spoke of her stepfather's secret vices? She'd apparently heard rumours about this business." He broke off as an idea struck

him. "But—son. If Sheldon kept this dope in his apartment, how was it that we discovered nothing when we searched the room?"

Jeffery's eyes were gleaming. "That's a most important point, Chief. It may be that the dope is still there, hidden—let us say in some secret drawer. But I think there's more to it than that." He took his companion's arm. "I believe that, in some way, Sheldon had a bad fright on the morning of his murder. Remember what Hoskins told us about the Judge's movements that afternoon—how he heard Sheldon's pacing up and down, and how nervous he looked when he came out of the room? I believe he gave that manservant the evening off—not his customary evening, remember—with deliberate intention. "He wanted a clear coast to remove all traces of his horrible trade. You see, Chief, he couldn't destroy anything in that apartment...there was no fire-place for one thing. And we mustn't forget that mysterious telephone call received by Val Sheldon. That must have some important bearing on the case."

The Inspector grunted. "Seems to me that the further we probe, the more complicated it gets. We'd better see the Commissioner about this drug business." He shook a foreboding head. "There's going to be quite an amount of dirty linen washed before this case is finished."

He moved back to the divan, to find Gloria Grey sitting up. The inevitable cigarette was between her lips and she seemed to have recovered her poise. Read drew up a chair opposite her and sat down. His voice was kindly, but firm.

"Now, Miss Grey. We want the whole truth about your movements on the night of the murder."

The actress shrugged her shoulders, eased herself to a more comfortable position, and drew a deep preparatory breath. "Okay," she replied, and her tone held something of her former animation. "But it's a long story and I'll have to go back three months before the murder to make everything clear to you."

She paused to draw on her cigarette.

"It was about that time when my contract with the Honeymoon Hotel company ran out. Things being tough in the legitimate, I found another job hard to get. I had got into the—er—habit some two years before. There's no game on earth so wearing as the stage racket—no time for meals and little time for sleep, grinding all the morning at rehearsals and trying to appear fresh and bright at matinees and evenings. Two years ago, I was doing second lead in 'Hollywood Girl,' and it was either dope or go under. I took the easiest way. On top of losing my job, I had another bad blow. The man who regularly supplied me disappeared"—she snapped her fingers—"just like that. Then it was that another girl in the company introduced me to Sheldon, and from then on it was just the matter of a weekly visit.

"So three months ago, I found myself a lady of leisure. But I dare not take

the risk of leaving Melbourne to look for an opening. For one thing, with the Centenary celebrations coming, the managers were casting several new shows. But, most important, I wanted to be near my source of supply. For two months I hung about the agencies. All I got was the usual hooey—oily smiles and promises. Then I determined to risk all in a gamble. I knew the value of a good address, so I took rooms in this place. It was handy to my source of supply, too. But it was devilishly expensive, and even a few weeks were sufficient to burn a hole in my wad, which, believe me, was mighty slender."

She paused. Reaching over to brush the ash from her cigarette, a crooked smile played about her lips. It faded as she continued.

"Matters came to a head about two weeks ago. My money had just about run out. I was thinking of packing my grips, when an agency rang me to say that they had a job. Would I take the chief solo part in a choir for a Tent Mission? They were rather apologetic about it—it was a come-down, but the money was good and steady. I needed that cash, needed it like hell! So I jumped at the chance and made an appointment straight away to meet my new boss, who, they said, was an evangelist by the name of Torrance.

"I went down to see him that afternoon. He had just arrived in the city and turned out to be a stocky little man with a long black beard—a real Child of Israel. With him was another, a nasty-minded scarecrow named Hillier. They looked me over, heard me sing, and after the try-out I was engaged. I had to sing three solos every night. So I signed the contract in true legal style and went out of the evangelist's hotel thanking my stars that I'd fallen on my feet. It gave me a kick, too. Imagine it—me singing sacred solos in a Tent Mission!"

She flashed them a bitter smile. No one spoke, except that Jeffery nodded gravely.

"At the end of the first week," the actress went on, "I began to suspect that Torrance was taking a deeper interest in me than mere business called for. From the first performance, he insisted that I take supper with him in his tent. Then he began to buy me little presents. At the end of the first week he was ringing me up in the morning asking to take me to lunch and dinner. I didn't mind that. He was mealy-mouthed, dirty, and not too mentally balanced—but his money was as good as any other man's. So long as he didn't want what every sugar-dad wants sooner or later, it was all right with me. And when he came to the pawing stage, I meant to put this small foot down once and for all!

"Last Sunday night—that's six days ago—matters began to move in a direction I didn't like. We were sitting in Torraftce's tent having supper after the choir when suddenly he grabbed me and started playing catch-as-catch-can all over the divan. What annoyed me was the fact that he wouldn't come out in the open with it—he kept on mumbling about the Song of Solomon and

how I was young and fair and was born to be his handmaiden. I began to get frightened, for this Israelite had the strength of an ox. Just as I was about to scream for help, the skeleton-faced Hillier walked into the tent. He gave one look and scuttled out of the tent as though devils were after him."

Inspector Read put a quiet question when she paused. "You say, young lady, that this Torrance was a strong man? Would you say that he was stronger than the average man?"

"I certainly should," the woman replied promptly. "Look here!" She pulled back the sleeve of her gown. On her upper arm were a number of small bruises. "See that? It's where he grabbed me—and those bruises are a week old."

She readjusted her sleeve, and Jeffery prompted: "What happened after Hillier saw this episode?"

Again that hard smile shadowed her lips. "It shook Torrance more than my most fervent remonstrances," the actress told him. "He dropped me and sat back, mumbling about how he loved me and why couldn't we be married and carry out the great work together and so on until I felt absolutely sickened. I'm far from being a saint, but this hairy-chested old hypocrite just brought out the worst in me! I jumped up and bawled at him. 'I'll tell you why we can't be married,' I told him. 'Because the like of you would spit on a girl if you knew the truth about me.' Then, because I had absolutely lost my head, I told him about the dope. But it only made things worse. He fell on his knees, he raved and moaned and beat his head until I was afraid to stay in the tent. I slid off and hurried back to this place, where I sat down to do some pretty fast thinking.

"My first thought was to keep as far away from the mission as possible. Then I realized that Torrance couldn't sack me until my contract was up. Sleeping on it made a difference. Next morning I determined to see it through. When I put in appearance at the mission, however, Torrance was busy. I ran across Hillier in his tent, and he began putting the kind-father stuff over on me. I told him to mind his own business. Then he turned and began to abuse me—called me names that no woman would stand. I gave back as good as I got and there was a fine old scene. It ended with Hillier swearing that he'd have me stoned from the camp.

"I wasn't sitting down under that! I'd tear up my contract first! I rushed into Torrance's tent to tell him so. But he was surprisingly humble about it. Begged me to stay on—offered to raise my contract salary—promised to make Hillier apologize to me. He seemed so genuine that I relented, for, after all, breaking my contract meant going back on the bread-line. Then Torrance asked me to have lunch with him. He was so decent about it all that I couldn't refuse. That

was a stupid decision. No sooner had we sat down than he began his old ravings. Told me that I was a brand to be plucked from the burning. Swore he would find out who was supplying me with the drug and smite him with the Vengeance of the Lord! Vowed that he would cleanse my body and soul—and then, carried away by his eloquence, he grabbed me in his arms and began pressing kisses all over me."

Gloria Grey broke off with a little shiver. Blackburn was following her recital closely, and he found himself stirred to something akin to pity. This woman, hard, bitter, and even immoral, was certainly no credit to her class, yet there was no doubt that her story was sincere. She was moving on, speaking in short staccato phrases that were unusually vivid.

She wiped her mouth with a quick trembling gesture.

"It was terrible," she whispered. "He held me close—so close I could not move. His lips were wet, drooling. My face was crushed into his beard and it smelt of stale oil. His fingers were twined in my hair. He was beside himself with, his own crazy passion. God knows what would have happened to me. Suddenly he relaxed and I twisted free just as he was trying to strip my blouse from my shoulders. I was mad with fear and rage. There was a large china vase filled with flowers on a cabinet near the couch. I broke from him and ran to it. He came after me, shoulders hunched, arms groping. With all my strength, I brought this vase down over his head, and it smashed into half a dozen pieces. Torrance dropped in his tracks—black-out! I grabbed my hat and pulled my dress into some kind of order and beat it from that tent as fast as I could. I didn't rest until I'd got in here and looked the door. I just dropped on to the bed crying with fear and exhaustion and horror. I felt sickened, revolted, as though I'd been mauled by some slimy reptile..." She broke off, panting a little. Her cigarette burnt away unheeded in her trembling fingers.

There was a silence. Read was first to speak.

"Was that the final break, Miss Grey?"

The actress nodded. "On my part—certainly!"

"And when did this take place?"

"Last Monday morning—five days ago."

Read nodded. His voice was quiet. "Thank you. And what happened then?"

Gloria Gray closed her eyes as though trying to arrange her thoughts.

When she spoke again, her voice was steadier and more controlled.

"I didn't hear another word from Torrance until Wednesday morning—the morning of the murder. I was taking breakfast in bed about nine o'clock when the telephone rang. I answered it. Torrance was at the other end! But it was not that so much as what he said that made my heart go tipsy. He told me he had found the source of my drug supply and that he was going to save me in

spite of myself. I was horrified. I begged him not to be stupid—but he had rung off. You can imagine my feelings! Once Sheldon realized that someone else knew of his trade, it would be the end of my supply. I didn't care a damn for the man's reputation—the swine used to bleed us white with his prices. But I just had to have the stuff. After what I had passed through during the last few days, I should have gone crazy without the drug to steady me.

"All that morning I lived through an utter hell of suspense. I couldn't think what was the best course to take. Then I made up my mind to warn Sheldon. About eleven o'clock I rang his rooms. He wasn't there. I tried his club, found him, and told him what had happened. He was furious and slammed the receiver down without even a word of advice. Next I thought to reason with Torrance. I 'phoned the mission—only to learn that he had gone out that morning raging like a lion. Then I knew that he meant to kill Sheldon! God grant that I never pass through an afternoon like that again. I paced up and down, up and down, making schemes and discarding them. I must try and protect Sheldon, but how was I to do it?

"And then came the night."

The woman's tone dropped and fear shadowed her thin face darkly. She had crushed out her cigarette and spoke with her eyes fixed on her clenched fingers, twined tightly in her lap.

"Dinner was served at seven. But it was a mockery of a meal to me. After it was over, I lay down on this couch and tried to read a novel. It was useless; I couldn't concentrate. Once Torrance got religion into his head, he was mad enough to do anything. At nine o'clock I could stand it no longer. I knew that if Torrance made an attack, he would choose Sheldon's apartment across the corridor. I felt I must warn Sheldon to keep away from there. But how was I to give that warning? Perhaps Torrance had already struck—if so, I dare not take the chance of being seen near the Sheldon apartment. Then it was that I decided to ring. I did, but there was no answer. Then the girl on the switchboard told me that Sheldon had gone out just after dinner and, to my horror, she finished, 'I'll call you when he comes back, Miss Grey.' She had recognized my voice—the very thing I wanted to avoid! Now, if inquiries were made, I was sure to be implicated.

"But I was relieved to find Sheldon away. If only he would stay away for to-night, I could see Torrance in the morning and talk him out of his crazy ideas. But the Judge might return! The more I thought of it, the more I realized I must warn Sheldon not to come near his apartment to-night. I could 'phone his home. But I dare not use the room telephone a second time—the switch-girl would be listening. So I threw on a few clothes and walked down Elizabeth Street to the booths in the post-office.

"I rang the Sheldon home, and a voice, obviously that of the maid, told me Sheldon was not at home. Then another voice—I recognized it as Miss Valerie Sheldon's—spoke to me. I had met her once or twice in the Judge's apartment. I dare not take the chance of her recognizing my voice, so I adopted an old stage trick and dropped my tone to a harsh baritone. To make the business more puzzling, I pretended to confer with somebody in the booth. I delivered the warning, hoping against hope that it would be of some use. As I came out of the booth, the clock in the tower chimed nine-thirty."

Inspector Read exchanged a quick glance with Jeffery. The woman did not notice it. Her dark eyes, staring into space, were dilated, and she was obviously living over the events of that night. Her tone was little more than a whisper when she continued.

"I walked slowly back to this building. It must have been almost ten minutes to the hour when the lift-boy brought me upstairs and I began to walk down the corridor. Just as I was about to enter this room, I glanced down at the Sheldon apartment. I went cold all over! The bedroom door of his apartment was open and there was a light shining behind it. Then all my warning had been for nothing—Sheldon had returned and was actually in that room. In that moment I thought of nothing save one final effort. I must get him away before it was too late. I crept toward the bedroom door. Just as I stood outside, a horrible thing occurred. The door began to open, slowly, cautiously. The next moment, a face was thrust out. I had a second's glimpse of a tangled black beard and a pair of wild, staring eyes! Then it vanished and the door was slammed again.

"I almost fainted on the spot with sheer horror. How long I stood staring at that closed door I don't know. It must have been only a few seconds, but it seemed like years. One thought hammered at my mind. I had to know what Torrance had done. Without stopping to think, I pushed open the door and walked into the bedroom. Everything seemed all right there. The door of the inner apartment was open and the lights were blazing. I crossed to the door and halted in the opening."

Dramatically she paused and turned her wide eyes to the listening men.

"That room was empty of any living soul! I can swear to that on any Bible! It seemed unbelievable, incredible! Ten seconds before, I had seen that man standing at the door, and now the room was empty. Then I saw Sheldon. He was sitting behind his desk, his body limp and his head lolling forward on the glass top. For one moment I thought he must be asleep. Then it came to me that this pose was too rigid, too unnatural even for sleep. Sheldon was dead! And Torrance had struck him down! With a cry, I turned and flew out of the room and into this apartment. Dragging off my clothes, I slipped into pyjamas

in case the alarm should be raised. But I couldn't sleep. I spent the night walking and smoking. I felt too weak and ill even to cry. I had been through too much!

"I stood the suspense until morning. I took a cup of coffee for breakfast, then dressed and went down to the mission. They told me that Torrance had not been seen since the morning of the previous day. I spent all the morning trying to trace him, and early in the afternoon returned to the mission. I went straight to Hillier's tent and faced him with the fact that I had seen Torrance's face in Sheldon's bedroom the night before. We quarrelled about it:" She raised her eyes, glanced from Read to Jeffery. "We were at it when you gentlemen came to the tent.

"There isn't much more to tell. I spent all yesterday afternoon trying to find Torrance, but it was useless. Returning home about midnight, I found that somebody had been through my rooms. But I was too tired to worry—I dropped into bed and slept like a log. But the search had frightened me badly. I woke early and packed my trunk, intent on getting away as soon as possible." Again her eyes flitted from face to face and dropped. "Yes. I lied about that Perth job. God knows I wish it were true!" Abruptly her voice broke. She was crying softly.

A sympathetic silence brooded for some minutes. Jeffery was scribbling in his notebook. At length the Inspector gave a short cough.

"Thank you, Miss Grey," he said gently. "You have cleared up quite a number of points. Now, there are just a few questions..." He paused. "When Torrance rang to say that he had discovered the source of your drug-supply, he did not actually mention the name of Sheldon?"

Gloria Grey wiped her eyes with a furtive gesture and made an attempt to regain her self-control. She shook her head. "No. But I naturally took it for granted that he meant Sir Merton."

Read nodded thoughtfully. "And you could not swear, feature for feature, that the face you saw in the doorway of the bedroom was that of the evangelist?"

She shook her head. "No...I couldn't," she admitted. "Except for the beard and moustache, of course, You see, I only glimpsed the face for a split second before he slammed the door."

"And the shoes? I take it you had no idea that there were bloodstains on the soles until we pointed them out to you? Didn't You notice that you were standing in a pool of blood when you looked into that inner room?"

The actress shuddered. "Thank God—no! That would have been the last straw. As it was, I was so upset that such a thing never occurred to me. When I came back to my apartment that night I just kicked them off and left them

lying on the floor." She looked up rather timidly. "Sorry I was so hipped when you came in—but I'd been through hell. I didn't feel like being over-polite to anyone, let alone the police."

The Inspector received her apology with a quiet nod. Jeffery, notebook in hand, came forward.

"Would you mind checking over the time element in your story, Miss Grey?" he asked. "It's really most important." He handed her the note-book, and the woman ran her eyes over the pencilled lines.

TIME ELEMENT

(Night of Sheldon Murder)

9 a.m. Torrance rings Miss Grey to say that he had discovered source of drug supply. Threatens trafficker.

11 a.m. Miss Grey rings Sheldon's club to warn him.

11.5 a.m. Miss Grey rings Tent Mission to learn that Torrance has been missing since morning.

7 p.m. Dinner.

9 p.m. Miss Grey rings Sheldon's apartment to warn him to stay away.

9.28 p.m. Miss Grey rings Sheldon home. Miss Val answers telephone.

9.50 p.m. Miss Grey returns to apartment.

9.52 p.m. Miss Grey sees face (assumed to be Torrance) in doorway of Sheldon's apartment.

9.55 p.m. Miss Grey enters apartment, sees Sheldon's body, returns to her own rooms.

The actress nodded and handed back the book. "That's correct," she told the young man. "Although, of course, all those times are approximate—say within a few minutes either way." That crooked smile returned. "Naturally, I didn't wait to clock myself with a stopwatch."

Jeffery nodded, slipping the book into his pocket.

Read took up the questioning. "We progress," he announced, rubbing his hands. "When you saw the body of Sheldon behind the desk, were the windows open or shut?"

"They were shut."

"And the body lay with its head fallen forward on the desk?" He thrust a finger at the woman. "You're positive on that point?"

"Absolutely!" She gave a shiver. "I'll never forget that horrible picture!" As she spoke, it seemed that the events of the night swept before her again. Lassitude gripped her and she lay back with closed eyes. Her face was haggard. "I'm very tired, gentlemen. Do you mind if I rest? I've told you everything I

know."

"Thank you, Miss Grey. I think that will be all." The Chief Inspector was scribbling on one of his cards. "You will, of course, hold yourself in readiness in case we want you." He looked up and gave her one of his rare smiles. "And, because you have helped us, I want to help you." He passed across the card.

The actress took it and read the inscription. "Dr. Vernon Montrose. Collins Street." A sudden enlightenment flashed across her face. The blue eyes sparkled, and in that moment Gloria Grey looked almost pretty. Her voice was choking, husky. "You think he can—can...?"

Read nodded gravely. "He has cured many cases," he told her. "I think you can hope for the best. Even now it is not too late."

In a group, the men moved toward the door and out into the corridor. There Jeffery halted, turned back into the room. The actress was staring at the card, her blue eyes filmed with tears. But there was a light in her face that had been missing for many months. The young man gave an awkward little cough. Gloria Grey looked up.

"Pardon my persistence," Jeffery smiled, "but there is one last point I'd like clear. You said that in some way Torrance had discovered the source of your supply. Have you any idea how he could have discovered this?"

The woman shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't help you there," she said.

"Was there any other person besides yourself and the other women who knew or suspected that Sheldon was peddling heroin?"

Gloria Grey did not answer immediately. She seemed rather reluctant to speak, but at length:

"Only one other person suspected, as far as I know."

"Ah! And that was...?"

The actress rose to her feet. "It was the Judge's own daughter—Valerie Sheldon."

Chapter 9

"IT'S ABOUT time," announced Inspector Read, "that we called a temporary halt to see just where we stand in this case. Don't you think, son?"

He addressed Jeffery Blackburn, who was sprawled in one of the deep arm-chairs in the Sheldon apartment. The time was early afternoon. After leaving Gloria Grey, Read had set about putting out a widely flung net to trap the evangelist Torrance. O'Connor and his men were dispatched on a similar errand to round up Valerie Sheldon for a second interrogation.

The Inspector settled his bulk squarely against the desk. In his hands he held a thick wad of papers, bound together with a paper-fastener. He flicked over the neatly typewritten notes.

"We have as our victim in this case an apparently highly respectable and greatly honoured judge in the high court of law," he began, "one Sir Merton Tenison Sheldon. This gentleman occupies a town apartment away from his own home, which is some miles from the city. On the morning of Thursday, he is found dead in this city apartment. Alarm has been given through the fact that Sheldon's telephone-receiver has been unhooked for some hours. Medical examination proves that the victim has been stabbed in the back with a sharp, thin steel instrument, the weapon penetrating the heart and causing almost instantaneous death. This weapon, later proving to be a paper-file prepared for the purpose, is found in the drawer of a cabinet, where it was, presumably, tossed by the murderer or murderess.

"But there are a number of highly mystifying points about the murder of this man. The room is situated on the eighth floor of the building. The windows, which are locked on the inside, look out on to small balconies hanging over a sheer drop of ninety feet to the ground. One of the victim's ears has been removed by a different weapon. And—most puzzling of all—the door is locked on the inside and the only existing key of the apartment is found in the dead man's top-waistcoat pocket."

The Inspector paused. Jeffery was lying back in his chair, eyes closed. Only the ceaseless tapping of his foot showed that he did not sleep. "It's a pretty problem, isn't it?" he murmured. "And it shows one thing plainly. That's long and careful premeditation—a planning as careful and meticulous as a novelist who plots a fictional murder." He gave a little sigh. "But go on. We'll come back to that in good time."

Read rustled his papers. "Dr. Conroy's evidence places the time of the murder within the vicinity of ten o'clock on the previous night," he continued. "Now, from the evidence of the desk-clerk downstairs, we learn that a few minutes after nine o'clock on that night Sheldon came into the building with a

black-bearded man, who, for the purposes of simplification, we will call Blackbeard. We have the testimony of the lift-boy that he took both men up to the Sheldon apartment; from the same source comes the information that Blackbeard was seen to go downstairs at twenty past nine. At a quarter to ten, Sheldon, very much alive and apparently in the best of spirits, talks to his stepdaughter on the telephone. Now, though we have reason to suspect that Miss Valerie Sheldon is not quite as blameless as she tries to appear, we have corroboration of this telephone call by a surprising story that comes to light from the actress Gloria Grey.

"In view of this woman's story, a number of apparently irrelevant and isolated factors begin to fall into place. As we know these points, it is unnecessary to categorize them. Instead, let us attempt to reconstruct the murder of Judge Sheldon and the events which led up to it from the information we have in hand."

The Inspector tossed the typewritten notes on the desk and, thrusting his hands in his pockets, began to pace about the room. Blackburn, from his chair, followed the movements with half-closed eyes.

"Sheldon was supplying heroin to a number of women, among whom was Miss Grey," Read went on. "She, in the meanwhile, has consciously or unconsciously attracted the amorous attentions of her employer, an evangelist named Alfred Torrance. According to her story, she tries to repulse him by telling him that she is a drug-taker. Torrance learns, presumably from Val Sheldon, that her stepfather is the source of the actress's drug supply. Just why Miss Sheldon should tell a complete stranger this startling information is answered by the fact that Torrance is, presumably, not a stranger to the girl. He may be her own father, believed to be dead in the war. This, however, is mere conjecture at the moment. To return to our evidence, the evangelist swears to protect Miss Grey even to the point of destroying the source of her drug supply, and all our reasoning points to the inescapable fact that if Torrance did not actually murder Judge Sheldon, he is the only person with sufficient motive to have done so."

"Objection!" called Jeffery smartly from his chair. "Dozens of 'em, in fact! But to take the simplest—why should Torrance murder Sheldon with a paper-file, of all things?"

The Inspector shrugged his broad shoulders. "How should I know? Perhaps it was lying on his desk. Perhaps it was the first weapon handy. Perhaps—"

"Perhaps, perhaps, always perhaps," sighed the young man. "Ignore my censure, Chief. Go on."

The Inspector gave his barking cough.

"Leaving the business of the paper-file out for a moment, let us follow out

the other conclusions. On the morning of the murder, when Torrance rings Miss Grey with the information he had found who was supplying her with the drug, the actress communicated with Sheldon. Now, from that point we can build our reconstruction of what must have occurred.

"At the time of the communication, Sheldon must have been at first annoyed, then anxious. Anxious not for his life—for he had no idea that the evangelist had any personal enmity toward him—but for his reputation, since he was sure that Torrance would inform the police. We can visualize the Judge going to his apartment straight after lunch, locking himself inside and spending the afternoon pacing about, making plans and rejecting them. He must dispose of his stock before the police make any investigations. Once that move was completed, he could laugh at Torrance, for who could possibly suspect a man of Sheldon's standing without evidence to back up the charge? Eventually he arranges for some as yet unknown person to take the drug off his hands. Sheldon gives his man the evening off to prevent interruptions, packs the heroin, and goes out after dinner to meet this dealer. From the packet of banknotes found in his possession, we may presume that cash was paid for the transaction."

Read halted before the desk.

"Sheldon returned to this apartment a few minutes after nine o'clock. He was accompanied by a bearded man, evidence so far pointing to Torrance as this individual. Remember how Blackbeard was heard to say, 'I won't keep you long. It's a matter of utmost importance'? Where Sheldon met Torrance and what the Judge did between the hours of seven o'clock and nine o'clock must remain a matter of conjecture. In any case, such information is not strictly important at this time.

"Accompanied by Torrance, Sheldon came upstairs and entered this apartment. Ten minutes later, Torrance was seen by the lift-boy to start walking downstairs. But we have no evidence that he continued to walk down into the foyer! Bear that in mind. In the meanwhile, Gloria Grey was putting her call through to the Sheldon home, which, in turn, was the cause of Val Sheldon ringing, her stepfather at a quarter to ten. Now"—Read picked up the sheaf of papers and thumbed them rapidly—"here is our time schedule. Listen.

"9.5. Sheldon and Torrance enter this building.

9.10. Sheldon and Torrance enter this apartment.

9.25. Torrance is seen by lift-boy on top of circular staircase.

9.28. Gloria Grey rings Sheldon home.

9.41. Valerie Sheldon rings Sheldon apartment

9.43. Valerie Sheldon finishes 'phone conversation."

The Inspector looked up and stabbed a forefinger at Jeffery.

"Torrance must have crept back into the bedroom while the Judge was speaking to his stepdaughter. As soon as Sheldon replaced the receiver, he called the Judge over to the door and stabbed him in the back with the paper-file."

Jeffery leapt up from his chair. "Objection! Objection!" he cried. "No, Chief! It won't do." He walked across to the elder man. "Take a look at this room. This desk is twenty feet away from the door. If the paper-file was standing on the desk, how on earth could Torrance reach across that distance?"

Read frowned. "It may not have been on the desk, son. Torrance might have brought it with him."

Jeffery made an irritable little gesture.

"No. That's hardly possible. Oh, hell!..." He paced the room for a minute, then dropped back in his chair. "You see, Chief, the very unconventionality of that weapon is annoying. It confutes all arguments." He leaned forward. "For instance, if Torrance had crept in here with premeditated intention of murdering Sheldon—and this whole business was carefully premeditated—he would have brought a knife, a revolver, or a bludgeon. Anything but that damned paper-file! Even if Torrance committed the murder in a heat of passion, he still wouldn't have stabbed the Judge with the paper-file. If he saw it lying there and picked it up in a rage, his impulse would be to swing it like a bludgeon and attack with the weighted end. But we can entertain none of these theories, because not only the crime but the actual stabbing was cool and calculated. Remember Dr. Conroy's evidence."

The Inspector made a gesture of helplessness. "Point waived for the moment," he muttered. "Where were we? Oh yes..."

"After the stabbing, Sheldon dropped in the doorway. It was then just after nine-forty-five. Torrance, for some reason, wishes to leave a false trail and make us believe that the murderer entered by the window. He carries the body to the desk, plumps it down into the chair, lifts the desk and pulls the carpet aside, and is about to place it in position covering the bloodstains, when something disturbs him. He hears footsteps coming down the corridor and they halt outside the bedroom. It is Gloria Grey returning to her apartment after the telephoning, although Torrance does not know this.

"He drops the carpet and stands motionless. The seconds pass. Has the intruder gone? He must know! Cautiously he tiptoes to the bedroom door, opens 'it, and peers out. Gloria Grey is standing there, and he realizes that the woman has recognized him. He slams the door and hides, presumably in the bedroom, which would offer ample concealment. Miss Grey enters, crosses the

bedroom, and looks into this apartment. She sees the body of Sheldon behind the desk, then turns and runs back to her own apartment.

"Torrance believes that she has gone to raise the alarm. He must work fast! He moves back into this room, drags the carpet to cover the bloodstain at the door, sits the corpse upright in its chair, and drops the weapon in the cabinet drawer. All this could be accomplished in a few minutes. Then, because he wants to make us believe that the murderer came by the window, he goes to open that window behind the desk. But..."

The Chief Inspector broke off and faced Blackburn. He was frowning, and the bewilderment on his face was reflected in his moody tone as he continued.

"But he didn't open that window. Before he had time to reach it, an interruption came. An interruption so startling and so unexpected that it put every thought save flying from this room out of his head. Now, figure that out!"

Jeffery nodded. His eyes were gleaming. "I have figured it out, Chief. I can tell you that it was an interruption that came from within this very room. And it was of the duration of about one minute. It couldn't have been a sudden momentary shock. It must have occupied our murderer's time for at least sixty seconds—if not more."

"How d' you know that?" Read barked.

The young man rose. "Listen, Chief! Gloria Grey was waiting in her room, ears tuned to catch every movement in this apartment. If the interruption came from outside—a knock or a voice calling—she would have heard it, together with the footsteps approaching the door. But she heard nothing of these things. Therefore the interruption must have come from inside this room." And as the Inspector nodded: "The second theory is more intricate."

Jeffery was standing, his hands making jerky demonstrative movements. "Remember, our murderer was in a hurry. Imagine his state of mind! The actress, he believes, is raising the alarm downstairs. He is caught in the room with the body of his victim. He must fly before it is too late! But first to open that window, which is an essential part of his plan—so essential that he must do it! Now, if that interruption had been a momentary shock it would not have prevented him from reaching the window, opening it, and still having time to escape! But this interruption delayed him for so long that, after it had ceased, so much time had elapsed that he was afraid to linger in this room a second longer. And, finally, this interruption somehow conveyed a disturbing message—a message that frightened the murderer so much that he rushed from the apartment, every thought of false trails driven from his mind by this ominous warning!"

Jeffery paused and drew a deep breath.

"In some way, Chief, a voice spoke to the murdered in this room. A voice without a presence! A voice that gave the murderer a message so unnerving that he ran out in blind panic without waiting to complete his plans."

Read was staring at the young man with wide eyes. The scorn on his face was tempered with an expression that almost approached fear. Then he shrugged his shoulders and snorted violently:

"Tripe! Tripe! At least keep witchcraft out of this thing, son." Jeffery paused in the act of lighting a cigarette. His eyes were mild.

"You scoff at the very idea of disembodied voices, yet you have been listening to them every day for the past ten years." He smiled. "You hear one every time you answer the telephone!"

There was a silence. Read stared fixedly at Jeffery. "So!" He drawled the word slowly. "So that's what you mean."

Jeffery nodded. "Of course, Chief. There's only one way that our murderer could have heard a message in this room that night—and that was over the telephone-line." His voice became animated. "Can't you see? The man knows he has only a minute or so to make his getaway. He starts to cross to the window, when the telephone-bell rings—loudly—insistently. Immediately he is in a panic. Any person may hear it. For a second he stands irresolute. Then, moving to the desk, he picks up the telephone and answers the call.

"Then, across the wire, the unknown speaks and delivers a message so startling that the murderer drops the telephone in sheer terror and rushes out of the room without waiting even to pick up the instrument from the floor."

Silence. The two men measured each other with a long, quiet stare. Read dropped his eyes and turned away.

"The door was locked on the inside," he pointed out.

"Point waived for a moment," retorted Blackburn. "At this time, we're more interested in that message. It must have been something pretty startling. Our murderer, remember, is a callous, cool-headed creature. It would take something very outlandish to frighten him into a panic, you know."

The Inspector said tartly: "Perhaps you can tell me the actual wording, since you know so much?"

Jeffery smiled. "Not the actual wording, Chief. But I think I can get something approaching it. When the murderer picked up that telephone and put the receiver to his ear, a deep, sonorous voice spoke at the other end. And it said something like this:

"Many eyes are watching you! Your wickedness is known to all! Beware! Retribution is close at hand and may strike you even as you stand!"

Read nodded. "I can well imagine anyone who had just committed a murder getting the wind up over a message like that," he admitted. "But—this

is the whole point of the matter—who could have possibly seen Torrance commit the murder?"

"Nobody saw him commit the murder."

The Inspector's jaw hardened. "Say," he rumbled, "just what are you trying to do to me?"

"Oh, Chief, can't you see?" Jeffery was at the desk, thumping his fist on the glass top. "Can't you see what I'm driving at? That message over the telephone was meant for Sheldon!"

"What?"

"It was meant for Sheldon," the young man continued. "It was a call from someone who wanted to frighten the Judge, from a person who had been brooding all day on the fact that Sheldon was a dope-pedlar, and who adopted the sonorous voice and the lateness of the hour to put the fear of God into the Judge." He stood back and thrust his hands in his pockets.

"In other words, my dear Chief, the person who rang the Sheldon apartment a few minutes after ten o'clock on the night of the murder was our evangelist James Alfred Torrance!"

The Inspector's jaws dropped. In the tense silence the chimes of the clock were heard, thin and far away, striking the hour of three o'clock. Read drew a whistling little breath, then, taking his handkerchief from his sleeve, passed it over his ruddy face.

"Then this bearded man—the murderer in this room...?" He broke off helplessly and glanced at Jeffery.

"The murderer in this room was no more James Alfred Torrance than it was yourself," Blackburn finished quietly.

When he spoke again, his tone was lighter. "But we've got a start! Now let's try to prove beyond all doubt that Torrance could not have been in this room on the night of the murder."

He crossed to the desk telephone and put through a call to the foyer. "Would you ask Miss Meynell to step up here, please?" he asked. He hung up the receiver and spoke to Read. "You've got that enlargement of Torrance's photograph, Chief?" And as the other nodded and handed the print across Jeffery pushed the Inspector into a chair. "Just sit down there and let me do the talking."

When the desk-clerk appeared, the young man greeted her with a smile. "We'll not keep you long," he promised. "Remember your evidence about the bearded man who accompanied Judge Sheldon on the night of the murder? Would you take a look at this photograph and tell us if this is the same man you saw?"

The girl took the print and scanned it. She looked up and shook her head.

"No. That's not the man." Her tone was assured. "The person in this photograph is older than the man I saw that night. And shorter—more stockily built." She stared at the print again, then handed it back with a decided shake of her head. "No. They are two different men altogether."

"You're sure?" Jeffery pressed.

"I'm sure," Miss Meynell said shortly.

Blackburn dismissed the girl with a word of thanks and put through a call to the telephonist in the desk downstairs. Was she on duty on the night of the murder?

Yes.

Could she remember if a call came through for the Judge shortly after ten o'clock.

Yes. A call had come through, and Sir Merton had forgotten to replace his receiver. She had flashed his apartment at intervals through the night without result. In the morning she had reported the matter.

Blackburn hung up and turned to the Inspector. He spread his hands. "There you are, Chief. Just as simple as that. And you were going to hang the crime about the neck of an innocent man."

The Inspector thumbed at his pipe. "It's all very ingenious, son," he admitted. "But where does it get us? We're right back where we started. Admittedly, we've smoothed out a few wrinkles, but we've formed others in their place. We're still face to face with the fundamental problems of the murder. Take the four outstanding questions. How did the murderer leave a room that was locked on the inside? How did the key get into the Judge's pocket? What's the motive for all this? Why was Sheldon's ear taken?"

Jeffery shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Something of the Inspector's discouragement had communicated itself to him, and just in time he checked the sharp remark that rose to his lips. The pause was interrupted by the entrance of O'Connor, who strode into the apartment with frowning face. He crossed and nodded to Read.

"We've landed that evangelist, Chief," was his greeting. "But if you want to question him, you'll have to take a ride. He can't be shifted."

The Inspector jumped to his feet. "What do you mean—can't be shifted?"

"We discovered him in the Sisterhood of Light hospital," O'Connor explained stolidly. "About ten o'clock on the night of the murder, he was stepping out of a telephone-booth and started to cross the road, when a motor-car smacked him. Broke both his legs. They drove him to the hospital and he's been there ever since."

Jeffery Blackburn spoke quietly. "Where was this telephone-booth?"

"It was down at St. Kilda beach."

"And almost four miles away from the scene of the crime." He turned to the Chief Inspector. "It looks as though our main suspect is definitely out of the running." He smiled wryly at his friend.

"Don't let anyone tell you, Chief, that there is no such thing as a perfect alibi."

O'Connor gave a perfunctory little cough and jerked his head in the direction of the bedroom.

"We picked up that Sheldon dame," he said to Read. "She's waiting out in the corridor now. Want her in here?"

Read nodded. The detective moved out of the room to reappear a moment later with Valerie Sheldon. A leather driving-coat with a heavy furred collar was belted about her. Without waiting for an invitation, she crossed the room and sat down in a vacant chair, pulling off her driving-gloves. Her eyes moved from face to face. They came to rest on the Inspector.

"Well?" she asked calmly. "Aren't I off your suspected list?" Read faced her. Abruptly he asked:

"Is Alfred Torrance your father, Miss Sheldon?"

The girl raised her eyebrows. A slow smile broke across her face. She began folding her gloves in a neat pair on her lap.

"So that's it?" Her voice was level, controlled. "I thought that you would probably unearth something in that direction. One of the disadvantages of a murder investigation is the complete impossibility of having any private life. Every small action, no matter how simple or trivial, is spied upon and dragged out for public autopsy."

"All this is scarcely an answer to our question, Miss Sheldon," Jeffery reminded her.

"Yes—come on!" The Inspector was in no mood for evasion. "Was Torrance Lady Sheldon's first husband?"

Valerie Sheldon raised her eyes. "No. He was not!" She threw the words at them one at a time. "Mr. Torrance is a complete stranger to our family."

Read shot a forefinger at her. "Then what is your photograph doing in his tent?"

"Oh—that?" The girl shrugged her shoulders. "I gave him that photograph to see if it could recall any recollection of his past. And that was why I visited him at the mission. You see, I thought there might be a chance of his being something connected with the family history." She shook her head. "But it was a failure." Again the smile shadowed her lips. "However, I'm just as glad. As a father, I should say Mr. Torrance would make a very good evangelist."

Jeffery nodded. He asked quietly:

"But why should you go on believing that your father is still alive, Miss

Sheldon? Surely you didn't conduct this search on the mere suspicion that his reported death was a mistake?"

The girl took a cigarette from her case and lit it. She pulled off the tiny beret that had clung to one side of her head, and settled herself more comfortably in the chair. "I'll tell you everything," she said, after a pause. "Whether it will help you with your investigation, however, is another thing.

"I don't exactly know why it was that Mother clung to the idea that my father's death was wrongly reported. To my mind, there was something psychological about it. Mother received such rotten treatment at the hands of Sir Merton that she simply had to have a refuge, a sanctuary. She made this the idea that some day her first husband may return and deliver her from the hell that was her life. Not that she really believed it—rather, she made herself believe it. That's my explanation, anyhow. You can supply your own.

"But the idea, right or wrong, was merely passive until twelve months ago. Then something happened that made it an active force in Mother's life. One night, for the fun of the thing, she and I visited a spiritualist. We had a sitting, and during the seance, the medium told Mother that her husband was not dead, that he would return to her within the year." Val Sheldon frowned over the recollection.

"Looking back on it, I suspect deliberate trickery. The medium must have learnt of Mother's unhappy life and manufactured this information. However, false or true, it made a great difference to Mother's existence.

"From being merely a vague longing, the idea of Father's return became an obsession with her. She began living for the day when such an occurrence actually came true. And she spent a small fortune on attempting to trace him. Private agencies were employed. Every missing person advertised in the newspapers was followed up. I begged her to give up the scheme; but it was too deeply ingrained. An *Idee fixe*. And then, about six months ago, we happened to read that a man who had lost his memory in the war was coming back to his home in Victoria, searching for his family. That was enough for Mother. She was positive it could be only one man! She began to count the days until that man arrived in Melbourne."

The girl paused and made a little gesture with her cigarette. "Well, he did arrive. Mother dare not do any inquiring on her own, so I had to do it for her. I wrote to Torrance and asked him to meet me, saying that I believed he could throw some light on our family mystery. Three days later, Torrance rang me, telling me to come to the Mission Camp. I went, taking with me a photograph of Mother and one of myself. We stayed talking together, Mr. Torrance and myself, took lunch together, and I left about six o'clock in the evening. Although I was satisfied that this man was a complete stranger to our family, I

determined to give the business a final test. I would take Mr. Torrance to our home next morning to meet Mother.

"The meeting next morning was a complete frost. Mother gave not the faintest sign of recognition. A half-hour's talk convinced her, too, that this man was a stranger. I drove Mr. Torrance back to the encampment. And that, gentlemen, was the last I saw of Mr. Torrance."

The Inspector nodded. "Thank you, Miss Sheldon." He thrust his hands in his pockets and jingled his keys for a moment, then turned back to the girl. His tone was cautious.

"There is another rather unpleasant little matter that has come to light regarding your stepfather. It has been proved, only too conclusively, that he was carrying on a rather shameful traffic. A traffic in drugs."

Val Sheldon gave a quick intake of breath, then bit her lip. It was obvious that this last information had at last pierced her armour of self-control. She played with her gloves with nervous, uneasy fingers. "So you've found that out, too?" she said softly.

It was Blackburn who answered: "You knew—of course?"

The girl raised her eyes. "I've known for months," she told him.

Read put the question: "In some way, Miss Sheldon, we believe that Torrance also discovered it. Was that through anything you might have inferred?"

"I suspected that he knew," Val Sheldon replied. "He must have heard it from one of the women whom my stepfather was supplying. But he did not know conclusively. During our conversation Torrance asked me, quite abruptly, if it was true that Sir Merton was dealing in the drug-traffic. I was so horrified that he must have read the truth in my face. Then I began to deny the accusation so emphatically that I'm afraid I only convinced him the more."

She gave that old crooked smile. "And now that I've been so frank I might as well tell you the rest. Remember how I came into this room on the morning of the murder discovery? You probably wonder what brought me here?"

"You came to see if the police had unearthed the family skeleton, didn't you?" Jeffery asked quietly.

"Yes! When I heard that the police were actually in my father's apartment, I was frantic with anxiety. I was sure that a search would reveal the drugs. I just dashed away from home without any fixed plan. I thought I might get a chance to remove the drug before the police found it. Or, at the worst, I would know if the police had discovered it. You thought I was callous, didn't you? You didn't realize how I was holding myself in under tremendous strain. That if I let myself go, I'd just have a screaming-fit!"

She rose to her feet, crushing out her cigarette. "And added to this was a

cold, bitter rage against my stepfather for the rotten mess he had dragged the family into. I meant every word I said in that direction." She began pulling on her gloves. "I know that it's wrong to bear malice, but before you slap the handcuffs on that murderer, I'd rather like to shake his hand." She paused and added: "Will that be all now?"

Read's voice was very quiet. "Yes, Miss Sheldon. That will be all for the time. And thank you."

They watched her as she walked from the room, very neat and self-assured. The Inspector turned back to Jeffery. "A remarkable young woman," he commented. "I can't make up my mind whether I like or dislike her. One thing I know. I shouldn't care to have Valerie Sheldon for an enemy. She has a quick tongue, that young woman."

"And a quick brain," added the young man. "You've never read her detective-stories, I take it? Her plots are amazingly ingenious. It must take her months of careful plotting and planning to work them out. She's an expert at the 'perfect murder' theory."

Something too subtle to be called an expression crossed the Chief Inspector's face. "Just what do you mean by that, son?"

"Who knows?" The young man spread his hands. "But we've got to remember and consider every possibility, Chief. And there's another thing."

"What's that?"

"We've spent too much precious time working on the theory that murder is man's work alone. I wonder why our minds leap to the conclusion? We rarely think of cold-blooded murder in connection with a woman. And yet our drama, our history, and our criminal records are studded with female assassins. Take Lady Macbeth and Luceriza Borgia. You can't draw hard-and-fast rules when it comes to murder, Chief. Murder is an abnormality, and the abnormal mind cannot be measured by known standards."

He was standing by the desk. The contents of Sheldon's wallet, returned from headquarters, lay on the desk. Jeffery was turning over the different articles. He paused with the newspaper-cutting in his hand, was about to replace it, when something caught his eye. He examined it closer, turning it over in his fingers. Then he gave a low whistle of surprise and faced Read.

"Take a look at this cutting, Chief," he said, passing it across. "What do you see?"

Read glanced at the report. "I see a slip of newsprint about seven inches in length, a report of Torrance's arrival, that has been folded in four places."

"But you're missing the most significant fact," Jeffery pointed out.

"Remember that newspapers, for the purposes of economy, are printed on both sides." He took the cutting from his companion and held it up.

"Notice how the report of the evangelist's arrival is folded on the outside and is so worn that it is almost illegible through contact with the wallet? Now, we agreed that the report printed on this slip must be of interest to Sheldon, otherwise he would not have kept it. Therefore, Chief, if that Torrance report was so important to the Judge, would he not have folded that report on the inside to protect it from wear and tear? But, in this case, we see it folded on the outside.

"Consequently, the Torrance report could not have been the important thing. It was the report folded on the inside that interested the Judge—this report that is almost as fresh as the day on which it was printed!"

The Chief Inspector crossed to his side as he straightened out the cutting. Together they scanned the story printed on the back of the Torrance report.

OSCAR DOWLING DEAD!

GUARD FINDS BODY

Strange Wounds on Throat

Following the report was a single-column photograph, a horrible image of pale, staring eyes looking out from a face seared with lines of cruelty and passion. Blackburn shook his head slowly.

"Definitely a criminal type. Look at that shortened skull—brachycephalic!" He began folding the cutting. "Now, why should the Judge cherish a six-months-old report of the death of a criminal lunatic? And how strange that this death should be reported on the same day as the arrival of the evangelist!"

Read flung himself down in a chair. His face was dark and frowning, his tone moody.

"I'm sick of it, Jeff," he confessed. "Heartily sick and tired of it! We've been forty-eight hours on this crime and we're no nearer the solution than when we started. Every time we make a move it's in the wrong direction. Every time we discover a lead-line it brings us up against a dead wall! Honestly, son, I'm beginning to despair of ever getting to the bottom of this damned business."

Chapter 10

MISS BERTHA FENTON lived in an apartment in a block of flats, "St. Ives," situated on the Dandenong Road.

It was nearing twelve-thirty when Bertha drove her two-seater car into the garage at the rear of the building. A Saturday afternoon free from office duties is a luxury for those who work upon a weekly paper, but this woman was a privileged person. She seemed very satisfied with herself and hummed a tuneless lay as she climbed out of the car, collected her bag, and slammed the

door of the garage. A few minutes later she was letting herself into her apartment.

The woman crossed to the bed and dropped her bag and hat on the satin coverlet. From here she moved to the tiny kitchenette and, opening the door of the ice-chest, peered inside. It was almost empty. Bertha gave an ejaculation and glanced at her wrist-watch. Twelve-forty-five!

Hastily she smoothed her greying hair and walked outside.

Glancing right and left, she began to make her way across the road. She had reached the opposite side when her eyes lighted on a familiar figure. Some yards ahead of her and carrying a small black bag was a man she had seen on the morning of the Sheldon murder. Bertha had the true journalist's memory for names and faces, and even as she stared at this man's retreating back his name came to her. It was Hoskins, the Judge's personal man. Whatever was he doing down here? Standing at the edge of the pavement, her peering little eyes followed him. He was walking quickly, clutching the black bag close under his arm. At an intersection he paused and looked up and down the street. In a few moments he was joined by a second man.

The woman strained her eyes to recognize the newcomer. But he was standing with his back turned. The two men talked animatedly, and the second individual was obviously asking a question, since Hoskins nodded and tapped the bag under his arm. The men moved off and were lost in the crowd. Bertha stood frowning for a space, then, dismissing the matter temporarily from her mind, she turned her attention to more pressing business.

The windows of the shops gleamed like ice and silver in the reflected sunlight. Groups of shoppers passed and repassed along the footway. Miss Fenton halted opposite a greengrocer's shop where the piled fruit made gay splashes of colour against the sombre green background of leaves and ferns. A carefully laid out pattern of fat and juicy sugar-pears attracted her.

Have I time to slip in? she wondered. The grocery store was some distance down the street on the opposite side of the road. She crossed to the pavement edge and from here could see the doors were still open and a steady trickle of customers moved in and out. She nodded and walked into the fruiterer's shop.

Then she saw it! She clung to the counter as the shag swam in a mist before her eyes.

Bertha Fenton had long prided herself on her perfect control, her unshakable equanimity. But in that awful moment, horror drained her body of strength and her mind of coherent thought. She who had sneered at any feminine weaknesses came as near to swooning as had ever been her experience. Every nerve in her body seemed throbbing in wild protest against this terrible sight; there was a drumming in her ears, and in her stomach a

black nausea rose. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she belched and felt better.

For some seconds she stood clinging to the counter with eyes tightly shut. Then, opening them, she leaned forward and took a second look at the body, holding her breath as though doing some unholy thing. It was a man, she could see that, although the face was partly turned away, and the body was mutilated beyond description. She wormed her way around, still clinging to that solid counter, until she could take in the details of those half-hidden features. In that moment recognition came.

The dead and mutilated body belonged to Ted Biggs, the cheerful, florid-faced, good-naturedly vulgar Ted Biggs, owner of the shop!

Now that the first shock of horror had passed, Bertha could look upon that torn and crimsoned body more calmly. The curious position of the right arm caught her eye. Her glance travelled down from shoulder to elbow...from elbow to wrist...and there it halted, frozen...

The right hand was missing! The arm finished in a stained pulp at the end of the wrist!

In the flash of that discovery, all her horror returned, all her sickening panic. The nausea in her stomach rose uncontrollably, surged into her head, blinding, throbbing. With a harsh scream Bertha Fenton rushed from the shop, and was violent and undignifiedly ill in the street outside.

Chapter 11.

TEN O'CLOCK on that Saturday morning saw Martin Yates sitting in the untidy room that the Associated Press dignified with the name of an office. He was seated at his desk, staring thoughtfully at the littered pigeon-holes before him. In a small ante-room, his assistant rattled a rusty typewriter. She lifted her fingers from the keyboard as Yates called from his office.

"Give Chief Inspector Read another ring, Miss Routledge, please."

For the tenth time that morning the young man dropped his eyes to the dirty crumpled sheet of paper on the desk before him. It was a section of manuscript paper, and upon its surface were pasted strips of typewritten cable. This cable was ten years old, but it was not its antiquity which caused the reporter to handle it so carefully. Once more he smoothed the surface and read the information contained in those typewritten lines.

Unparalleled scene Sy P C to-day Rudolph Heulier sentence 12 months hd lbr attack Rosa O'Malley Drssmkr threaten Ch Jus Sheldon dock after sentence Heulier scream dock quote you pay for this if I wait lifetime Ill have revenge unquote off prvt dmnstn court just time Heulier carry screaming dock quote you wait my time will come unquote Heulier religious fanatic thn fcd wild eyes blvd attack O'Malley BCS street wkr.

For the benefit of the Chief Inspector, Yates had ordered his assistant to retype a more lucid construction of the cable. This he placed on top of the ancient document. The translation read:

An unparalleled scene was witnessed in the Sydney Police Court to-day when Rudolph Heulier was sentenced to twelve months' hard labour for an attack upon Miss Rosa O'Malley, a dressmaker. Heulier made threatening statements from the dock toward Chief Justice Sheldon, who had passed the sentence upon him.

"You'll pay for this!" he screamed from the dock. "You'll pay for this if I have to wait a lifetime! I'll have my revenge!" The court officials managed to prevent a demonstration just in time. The prisoner was carried screaming from the court. Heulier, who is believed to be a religious fanatic, is a thin-faced man with wild eyes. His attack on Miss O'Malley was unjustified, as he accused her of being associated with street-walkers.

As Martin Yates raised his eyes from the printed lines:

"The Chief. Inspector will be right over," came Miss Routledge's voice.

The young man thanked her, and, reaching across his desk, pulled a sheet of paper toward him. Picking up a pencil, he tapped it idly for a moment. He

wrote quickly:

Hillier

Hoskins

Val Sheldon

Gloria Grey

Torrance

?

He was still frowning over the names when Miss Routledge announced the Chief Inspector. Read, his figure moulded inside a well-tailored grey double-breasted suit, his moustache clipped against a face rather paler than usual, entered and nodded as Martin rose to his feet.

"Sit down, Mr. Read," the young man invited. "You'll be interested to know that I've run across something in this office which I believe may have an important bearing on the Sheldon murder."

The Chief Inspector took the proffered chair. Martin pulled out his pipe and began to fill it. Read sat with fingers clasped about his crossed knees. Yates spoke again, raising his eyes over the pipe-bowl.

"One of the first jobs I tackled was the cleaning and sorting of a quantity of old cables that had been filed away in dusty corners. I was finishing off the business this morning when I ran across a file marked 1925. I glanced through the collection, and one particular cable happened to catch my eye."

He broke off and pushed the sheet of paper across to the Inspector. "I sorted it out from the others. Here it is. I think you'll be interested."

Read glanced at the paper, frowned, and looked up. "What is it?" he asked gruffly. "A code?"

"Sorry." Martin pushed across the translation. "That's Press economy in cable-sending. This will make it easier."

The Chief Inspector began to read, perfunctorily at first and then with deep interest. Yates sucked at his pipe, his quiet eyes on the other man's face. At length Read looked up.

"Well?" he demanded.

Martin shrugged. "You've got to supply the answer to that." Read dropped his eyes to the paper on the desk. "Ten years ago," he murmured. "A thin-faced man with wild eyes name Heulier..."

"Or Hillier," suggested Martin quietly.

Read stretched his long legs and sat back, tossing the paper on the desk. "But where does it get us?" he wanted to know. "Certainly it gives us suggested motive. But the whole case reeks with suggested motives. Assuming

that Rudolph Heulier is our evangelistic Hillier, he may have killed Sheldon out of revenge, just as Val Sheldon may have murdered her stepfather out of sheer hatred. For the same motive, Alfred Torrance may have engineered the murder, although we know that it was impossible for him to have actually committed it. What we lack is a definite centralized motive! Once we can find that, we can get a start from that point."

"I quite agree," Yates nodded. "All the same, it wouldn't do any harm to check up on Hillier's movements on that night."

Read sat up. His voice had taken a grim note. "I'm going to. I'm going to get the movements of every person who entered or left that apartment within twelve hours before or after the murder." Abruptly he leaned forward and fired the question at Martin.

"Where were you, Mr. Yates, on the evening of the Sheldon murder?"

The young man's mouth gaped. His pipe dropped on to the desk and scattered a shower of sparks. He stared at his companion in amazement, then a slow smile broke over his face. "What is this, Inspector? The theory of the least-suspected person?"

The severe lines of the Inspector's face did not relax. "I asked you for an account of your movements on the evening of the murder."

Yates flushed at the inflexion in the voice. Then he shrugged his shoulders and picked up his pipe. "You'd better get your handcuffs ready, Inspector," he said wryly. "I spent the night walking about the streets, and I passed within range of the Oates where Sheldon was murdered perhaps half a dozen times." He paused, to add quickly as Read opened his mouth: "No, I was unaccompanied and I met no one whom I knew. In other words, you have only my bare statement that I did not go into the Carnavon."

"Just a bare, unsubstantiated statement?" There was an odd note in Read's voice.

Martin's teeth bit on his pipe-stem. "Yes," he said measuredly, and was silent. And as the Inspector continued to stare at him, he took the pipe from his lips. His voice, touched with anger, leapt a note.

"Well—what are you going to do about it? I've told you the truth! I'd like to be able to prove that I was in hospital with broken legs like Torrance, or playing bridge at home like Val Sheldon, or conducting a meeting before seventy witnesses like Hillier—but I can't. I was walking those streets alone because I had been working inside a stuffy office all day! Now, make a case out of that if you can."

"Listen to me!" Read shot out a forefinger. "That murder was committed with a paper-file—a paper-file that was specially brought to that apartment for the killing. I don't forget that reporters use paper-files, and I'm not going to

forget that reporters can commit a murder just as easily as they can report one." He rose to his feet. "I think that's all, Mr. Yates."

"Just a moment!" Yates was on his feet. "An accused man always has a chance to prove his innocence, I believe? Well, I'm going to turn detective! I've been thinking pretty deeply over this thing and I've come to one definite conclusion." He picked up a slip of paper from the desk and thrust it before the Chief Inspector. "The guilty person is somewhere among those people. And I'll prove it to you!"

Read ran his eyes down the six names, and his lip curled. "So you've actually come to that conclusion," he said pleasantly. "The killer is among that list." He nodded with an expression too benign to be genuine. Abruptly it was wiped away.

"Listen, you!" he barked. "Go ahead and nuzzle about for yourself. But if you print anything without our official sanction, the great God help you!" He gave the young man a stiff little bow and walked out. Martin heard him slam the door of the office. He shrugged his shoulders again and pressed the bell on his desk.

Miss Routledge pushed a long face around the door. "You rang?" she said.

Martin nodded. "Miss Routledge," he announced solemnly, "you see standing before you the cruel and bloodthirsty slayer of judge Sheldon. At any tick of the clock stout gendarmes may manacle my wrists and I may be dragged down this corridor to the scaffold!" His face broke into a smile. The expression on his secretary's face was too amusing.

"Really, Mr. Yates." Miss Routledge's tone was profoundly disapproving. "Such foolishness, indeed!"

"In this mad maze, who can say which is foolish and which the sane?" quoted Martin. "But I really called you in to ask you to get Wilkinson of the 'Courier' on the telephone for me. I must tell him to cook up a good alibi for the night of the murder!" He grinned again. "And then you can go home."

Two minutes later Miss Routledge called. "Mr. Wilkinson is not in his office. Any message?"

"No thanks. You might try Gilbert Lascelles at the 'Globe' office."

"Very good, Mr. Yates."

Two minutes passed. Then: "Mr. Lascelles is out too!"

Martin clicked his tongue impatiently. "Good lord! What it is to have a job on a daily! All right, Miss Routledge, let it go. You can toddle off now."

"Thank you, Mr. Yates."

Somewhere a clock struck the half-hour. The young man heard his secretary bustling about as she tidied her desk and prepared to depart. He answered her good-bye rather absently, for his mind was busy with the Chief

Inspector's suggestions. From there his thoughts moved to his secretary's reports, and abruptly he leapt to his feet. His pleasant face was grey. Then he shook his head.

For some seconds he stood there undecided. Then with a swift movement he crossed to the pegs and slipped on his brown coat and hat, and locking the office door behind him strode off down the corridor.

Chapter 12

THE BUSINESS of the late Edward Biggs was a double-windowed shop with a frontage of some twenty feet on to the footpath. Entrance was made through swing-doors, narrow-panelled, with centres covered in with wire gauze. At one side of the shop a small alley ran to a blind end. It was here that the market carts unloaded the fruit and vegetables for the business, and these were taken in through a side door that led from the shop into the lane. The proprietor lived on the premises, occupying rooms built on to the back of the store. As was later ascertained, Mr. Edward Biggs was a bachelor, forty-five years of age, and well liked and respected in the neighbourhood. He had a reputation for honesty and for being generous to the children. He had no enemies, having lived an obscure and quiet existence that rarely took him outside his shop. Hobbies he had none, recreations but few, and among these might be classed a fondness for detective-stories, an occasional glass of ale and stout, and an infrequent visit to the talking pictures. Summing up, Mr. Biggs was an unobtrusive, pleasant gentleman leading an unobtrusive, pleasant, and methodical existence. He was certainly the last person in the world one would have imagined to meet his end in such a brutal and horrific manner.

Three o'clock on that fatal Saturday afternoon found the little store besieged by an army of the morbid-minded numbering such strength as would have appalled the limelight-shunning Mr. Biggs had he been alive to see them.

Inside the dark, green-smelling shop, Jeffery Blackburn and Chief Inspector Read stood talking quietly together in the shadows. They were watching the precise movements of Conroy, who was kneeling beside the body with sensitive nostrils wrinkled in distaste. Read tugged nervously at his moustache, and his florid face was almost as grey as the bristling adornment. He kept glancing uneasily and frequently at the younger man, almost as if he expected censure from Jeffery's lips. Blackburn stood with folded arms, his thin lips set and his eyes shadowed with horror. His long fingers tapped restlessly on his upper arm.

The plain-clothes men were there, silent like their superior. O'Connor, Donlin, and a Detective Bartlett made an awkward triangle just inside the door. In another group stood the reporters: Bertha Fenton, her pallid face almost green in the reflected light and her eyes red-rimmed with tears produced by the shock of her discovery, Martin Yates, Gilbert Lascelles, and a grey-haired man from the 'Courier,' relieving Wilkinson on his day off duty. There was a heavy, swollen silence, something approaching the hush of death, yet too electrical and lacking the resigned reverence of that state. It was an atmosphere strangely in contrast with the snapping efficiency that opened the

discovery of the Sheldon death. So quiet was it that Jeffery's tapping finger, beating against his arm, could be plainly heard...tap...tap...tap...

Martin Yates moved closer to Lascelles and whispered: "How did you get in on this?"

"Bertha put me wise on the 'phone." Gilbert's lips barely moved. "I was back in the office. I tried to get you, but you were gone."

"I was down at the detective office. Sheerest stroke of luck. Popped in to inquire about the Sheldon murder. Just as I got inside the door, I heard them talking about this, and—"

"Sssh!" Gilbert hissed a quick warning. Martin, glancing up, saw the Chief Inspector, his face dark, glaring across at them. There was silence for a few moments. Then Gilbert murmured:

"This business seems to be getting the old man down. He came over to my office this morning and practically accused me of murdering Sheldon. Wanted to know my movements on the night of the murder and did I have a perfect alibi, and if not, why not?"

Yates smiled with tight lips. "The worry seems to have turned his head. He came to me with the same request, and I told him—"

Before he could continue, Read wheeled sharply. "If you can't stop that whispering, get outside!" he snapped. "And don't come back!"

The reporters looked suitably abashed. At that moment Dr. Conroy rose to his feet. Hands on hips, he stood looking down at the body, shaking his head slowly.

"Messy job!" He spoke quietly, as though to himself. Glancing up, he saw the collective eyes upon him. He addressed the Chief Inspector. "When you clap the irons on this beauty, I'd like to have his brain for my research work. Your killer looks like a case for the psychiatrist rather than the hangman."

Read's rejoinder was almost a snarl.

"Optimist, aren't you, Conroy? First catch your hare..."

"Pretty beastly, isn't it?" Jeffery spoke from the shadows.

Conroy inclined his head. His voice, whether by accident or design, was flat and unemotional. "I have counted fifteen stabbings," he reported primly.

"There may be—probably are—more. The greater number are inflicted in the region of the stomach and the groin. From a cursory examination, I believe the majority were inflicted after death. I may be able to tell you more about that after the autopsy." He made a pernickety gesture of distaste and turned away to face the detectives. "This is not borne out by a close examination, gentlemen, but there is one rather interesting fact about the murder. I believe that that unfortunate man was killed in much the same manner as Judge Sheldon—by a strong upward knife-thrust which found the heart first time!"

There was no comment. Strangely enough, no one felt surprised. Read shrugged his shoulders. There was a certain hopelessness in his voice as he asked: "What of the other wounds, Doctor?"

Conroy linked long white fingers. "Inflicted with a similar instrument to that which made the initial thrust—a long, thin, sharp weapon. I should say that this man was stabbed from behind and his body fell to the floor. The murderer must have knelt over it and stabbed away in blind fury." He paused.

"Death took place instantaneously—within a few seconds of twelve-thirty."

A mild commotion agitated the quiet air. Read spoke quickly.

"But without an autopsy, Doctor, how can you possibly—?"

The medical examiner's tone was dry as he interrupted. "No autopsy needed to fix that point, Read. Just taking a leaf out of your own book. See this?" He bent down and lifted the left hand of the body. "A wrist-watch. Smashed as he dropped to the floor. Hands point to half past twelve."

Jeffery came forward. "The most important point, Doctor, is whether, from your examination, you can say if this crime has anything to do with the Sheldon murder, or if it is a separate killing. Can you?"

Conroy clasped his hands behind him and swayed on his toes.

"That's hardly my work," he said testily. "Anyhow, here's your points of similarity. Method of killing, pointing to knowledge of anatomy. Wounds made by weapon similar to that used to remove the Sheldon ear—looks like a scalpel. And don't forget that in this case the right hand is missing." He was looking down at the body. As Read gave a thin sigh, he glanced up. "Odd, isn't it?"

"Anything else, Doctor?" queried the Inspector.

"Only a small cut on the lower portion of the chin, at one side of the lower lip. Little more than a scratch really. Made by some sharp object pressed tightly and breaking the skin. That abrasion might be, and probably was, caused by a ring on the murderer's little finger. When he pressed his hand over the victim's mouth to prevent an outcry, the ring scratched his skin. That's all at the present." A struggling at the door attracted his attention. "Here's my boys now, Read. Can we shift the remains?"

Read nodded. At a signal from Conroy, two men came forward and placed the body on a stretcher, covering it with an oilskin. With three constables clearing the way, they shouldered their way through the crowd, and with difficulty slid the stretcher into the waiting police-ambulance. Inside the shop no one moved until the hum of the receding vehicle died away.

The Inspector turned to O'Connor. His orders snapped like whip-cracks. "Get a policeman to cover those bloodstains. Where's that fat woman from next door—the one who had so much to say when we came in? All right, get

her in here! Listen, you reporters! I want to see every line of that stuff before it's printed. Understand?"

Gilbert Lascelles looked pained.

"But we print in half an hour, Inspector, and—"

Read fixed him with a basilisk glare. "You heard what I said r If you don't like it, get outside!" He turned away as Jeffery touched his arm. "Well? What d' you want?"

"I'd like to poke about the shop," the young man asked. "May I go ahead?"

"All right. All right! You don't want written permission, do you?" Jeffery made a tiny grimace to the reporters and began picking his way through the cases of fruit, pausing every now and then to examine some object more closely. He was in the far corner near the side door when Mrs. Myrtle Minnick entered.

The term "buxom" really applied to Mrs. Minnick. Everything about her was plump, from her swollen-veined ankles to her double-chinned face. The Chief Inspector addressed her sharply.

"You are the owner of the confectionery shop next door?"

The woman smoothed her apron and nodded three times. Her fat chins quivered. "That I am," she responded. "Though how long I'll own it, with young Bert smokin' the profits and the kids stealin' from the ha'penny tray—"

"There, there!" Read snapped at her. "Save your sales-talk! We didn't call you in to listen to that. I want to hear about this man you saw in this shop shortly after noon to-day."

Mrs. Minnick flung up her head. She was plainly on her dignity. "What about him?" she said stiffly.

"All about him—all about him! What was he like? What did he do?"

The woman opened her mouth twice before words came. "If you mean that he had anything to do with poor Mr. Biggs' murder, you're wrong," she brought out. "With my own eyes I saw him standin' by the door talkin' to Mr. Biggs, 'n' then he walked off down the road."

The Inspector was pulling at his moustache. "You mean that Biggs was still alive after the man had left?"

"Mister Biggs," replied Mrs. Minnick, with faint emphasis on the title, "was alive." She paused, and, as the man opposite her obviously expected more information, she added: "From quarter to twelve until close on one o'clock I was standing outside my shop. No one else went into this place after that man went away. If they had, I would've seen them." Her tone added silently: "So there, Mr. Rudeness—!"

Read stared at her keenly for some seconds. "Let me get this thing clearly," he said slowly. "You say that a few minutes after twelve o'clock to-day you saw

a man come out of this shop with Biggs, stand talking to him for ten minutes or so, and then move away, while Biggs re-entered this shop? From that time onwards, no person entered this place?"

"You 'ave it right," Mrs. Minnick assured him.

The Inspector shot out a stabbing forefinger.

"Then how come that he was found brutally murdered half an hour later?"

The large woman collapsed on to an empty fruit-case, her massive bosom heaving. "Lord bless me! I don't know." She stared at him with wide china-blue eyes. "You surely don't think...Why, we've been best o' neighbours for years, we have. Never a cross—"

"Of course—of course!" Read wiped her trembling remonstrances aside with a gesture. "What did he look like—this man?"

"That I can't say very well. He had his back to me all the time an' he walked in the opposite direction to what I was. But he wore a brown suit and was clean-shaven, I could see that."

"And did you hear what they were talking about?"

Mrs. Minnick hesitated. "Well," she admitted, "as a matter of fac'..." And then she stopped. But the expression on the Chief Inspector's face spurred her on. "Not that I'm a woman to listen to what's a private conversation, but there was a lull in the traffic once and those two were talking pretty loud. That man was saying to Mr. Biggs: 'I say you're just a fool. He won't even stop at murder!'—"

"What?" Read barked.

The woman nodded complacently. "Them's the words," she repeated. "Just as I heard them, plain as plain!"

"And what time did this man leave Biggs?"

"At exactly quarter past twelve," came the prompt answer.

"Oh." The Inspector was savagely genial. "So you happened to see his wrist-watch?"

"Indeed!" Mrs. Minnick rose, not without difficulty, from the fruit-case. "I know because I heard the whistle at the Woollenside Mills just as he left. It always goes off at quarter past twelve on Saturdays."

The Chief Inspector raised his voice. "Any questions, son?"

From his position by the door, Jeffery called: "Did Mr. Biggs have an assistant, Mrs. Minnick, or did he manage his business on his own?"

At this unexpected voice from the shadows, the woman wheeled. But Jeffery came forward and smiled disarmingly. "It's rather important," he added.

The big woman thawed under Jeffery's smile. "He did," she replied. "My own boy Bertie use' to come in an' give him a hand on Friday afternoons and

Saturday mornings. That was the busy times, you see."

"Then why wasn't your son in the shop at twelve-fifteen?"

"Young Bert finishes at twelve, when the rush is generally over," Mrs. Minnick told him.

Jeffery thanked her and moved back to the door leading into the alley. Read nodded curtly to the woman. "That's be all now. And keep quiet about what's been said in here—understand?" He turned away. Myrtle Minnick rolled with rather unwieldy dignity toward the door, paused to sniff disparagingly, and then disappeared.

"Chief!" Blackburn called suddenly.

Read moved over to the alley door to find the young man pointing to the Yale lock fixed to the inside of the jamb. He turned as the Chief Inspector approached. His voice was very quiet.

"Do you believe in coincidence?" he asked. "Perhaps it may be something deeper. Anyhow, you've heard the evidence up to date, Chief. Now, take a look at this door. Notice that it's locked on the inside!"

"H'm."

"Doesn't anything strike you about this murder?" Jeffery asked. "Mrs. Minnick was watching the front of the shop, therefore our murderer could not have entered that way. This side door was his only means of entry, and that is locked on the inside. In other words, this murder was committed in a locked room from which every entrance was barred!"

Read snapped his fingers. "Exactly the same layout as the Sheldon killing."

Jeffery nodded. "Of course! Is it coincidence? Has the apparent success of that crime inspired another on similar lines—or is this the work of the same person? Remember the taking of the hand and Conroy's evidence about the method of killing?" He paused. "What do you think?"

The Chief Inspector flung up his hands.

"What am I to think? Although these crimes parallel in some ways, in others they're Poles apart. Take, for instance, the social positions of the victims—one a knight and the other a tradesman. Again, while Sheldon was anything but a saint and probably brought about his killing through his shady dealing, nothing like that applies to this man. He was a quiet, insignificant little unit without an enemy in the world. The two crimes can't possibly be connected—unless the murderer is a homicidal maniac..." He broke off as Jeffery gave an ejaculation of impatience.

Read turned away. He called to O'Connor, telling him to bring in the boy Minnick. As the big detective moved away on his errand, the Inspector turned to Jeffery. The young man, cigarette between his lips, was staring at a large bouquet of blooms hung near the door. His forehead was creased in a puzzled

form. The elder man, who knew the signs well, said curiously:

"What's biting you now, son?"

Blackburn did not move. "Chief," he said quietly, "why should our unfortunate shopkeeper—a gentleman, remember, who has a splendid reputation for honest business methods—sell tarnished camellia flowers?"

Read said tartly: "Come back to earth, son! What's that got to do with this murder?"

"I don't know," Jeffery admitted. His tone was worried. "If I did, I'd feel easier in my mind." He broke off to gesture upward at the hanging bunches of white camellia flowers. "Take a look at those blooms, Chief. Lovely specimens, aren't they? Yet some are tarnished about the edges. Not all, certainly—but a few in each bouquet."

He moved closer. "And they're fresh to-day. See, the stems are wet from the picker's basket. And they can't possibly be damaged stock, since they're marked, 'Prize Camellias, sixpence each.'" Jeffery drew thoughtfully on his cigarette. "It can't have anything to do with the murder, as you say—and yet, how could Biggs ever hope to sell tarnished blooms at that price?"

"Don't ask me—I've got other things to think about." Read was walking back to the front door. "Besides, I'm not a horticulturist. The only thing I can tell you about camellias is that you can't touch the petals without—"

"Ah!" Blackburn interrupted. It was a sharply drawn breath that caused Read to wheel about. The young man was standing with clasped hands, his face shining. "That's it, Chief! That's the answer! You can't touch the sensitive petals of the camellia flower without turning the edges black! Why didn't I think of it before?"

"But what is that to do with...?" the Inspector began.

"Everything," Jeffery told him. "It might even give us the answer to the greatest question." He was staring at the blooms. "Imagine it—a crime as carefully planned as this one—shot up in the air by the petals of a camellia flower. Who was it, Chief, that said no murderer could ever guard against the unforeseen detail?... " He broke off as O'Connor entered with a young lad about sixteen years of age.

"Here's the boy you wanted, Chief," the detective announced.

Jeffery grasped Read's arm. "Let me do the questioning of this lad. I've got the craziest idea at the back of my mind. But first I want to satisfy myself on one small point."

He crossed to the alley door, opened it, and peered out into the lane. Returning, he pushed the door shut. The spring lock shot into place with a soft click. Jeffery stood for a moment turning the brass knob of the lock backward and forward, watching the lug sliding in and out. Then he nodded. Hands in

pockets, he strolled over to where the boy was standing watching the proceedings with wide eyes.

Blackburn smiled. "Nothing to be afraid of, Bert. We won't eat you." He ran his eyes over the lad's gangling figure. "You were Mr. Biggs' assistant yesterday afternoon and this morning?"

The lad nodded. "Yessir."

"And you were here this morning from what time?"

"From eight o'clock sir, when Mr. Biggs opened up this shop."

"Good! Now, Bert, did your employer get in a fresh supply of camellia flowers this morning?"

"That's right," young Minnick replied promptly. "Yessir. They come in about nine o'clock. I helped Mr. Biggs check em' off. Six bundles with twelve in a bundle, sir."

"Admirable," commented Jeffery. "I don't suppose any of those flowers were tarnished when they were brought in here? None had their petals blackened at the edges?"

"No, sir!" The lad shook his head. "Mr. Biggs—he was most careful about that. Used t' look 'em over very closely, he did. Wouldn't take a flower with the tiniest marking on it. Why, sir"—Bert elaborated, warming to his subject—"he wouldn't even let me hang up the flowers—said I'd be sure an' spoil them."

"Most unjust, I'm sure," The young man nodded gravely.

"Those flowers, I believe, hung near the door that opens out on to the alley?"

"That's right."

"Now, come over here, Bert." Blackburn led the way to the door and gestured toward the hanging bouquets. "Those are the blooms that came in this morning?" And as the boy nodded, he reached up and took down a bunch, pointing to three tarnished flowers. "Then, my Bert, how do you account for these damaged blooms?"

Bert Minnick stared at the disfigured petals. "Coo, sir. Jus' look at them. They weren't like that when they come in this morning."

"You're sure of that?"

"Pos'tive, sir! I had a look at them flowers before I left the shop at twelve o'clock. They was all right then, too."

"Ah!" Jeffery pursed his lips for a moment. He moved on toward the door, nodding to himself. "This side door, Bert—it's always kept locked, I take it?"

The lad nodded.

"'Cept when the carts bring the fruit in, sir. That's about half past eight or nine o'clock. I go t' help unload th' carts and bring the cases in through this door. Then it's locked f'r the day. Spring lock, y' see, sir. If you slam it, it locks

itself."

Jeffery spoke quietly.

"And you're absolutely sure that you locked that door after the fruit was taken in at nine o'clock?"

"Yessir! I locked it an' Mr. Biggs went an' had a look f'r himself. He was always particular about that door, sir. 'Fraid someone might come in an' pinch the till." Bert was very serious over this possibility.

"Were those camellia flowers touched after your employer hung them in position? Were any sold to customers?"

Again that positive shake of the head. "No, sir. I didn't sell any and I would have seen if Mr. Biggs had of."

"Then tell me, Bert, how do you account for the fact that, although those blooms were untarnished when they were placed in their position—although, as you say, they remained untouched during the entire morning, those flowers are now turning black from careless handling?"

Bert Minnick said simply: "I dunno, sir."

There was a baffled silence. Disappointment was plainly written on Jeffery's face. He lit another cigarette and turned away. He paced up and down the narrow shop for some moments, Bert Minnick following his movements with astonished gaze. Presently a thought seemed to strike him. Jeffery turned back to the boy.

"During the morning," Blackburn said slowly, "was there any time when this shop was left empty? When both Mr. Biggs and yourself were away at the same time?"

Again the lad shook his head. "No, sir. There's too much of a rush on Saturday morning for anything like that. The busy time doesn't slacken off until about eleven o'clock—that's when Mr. Biggs used t' have his morning tea." Bert paused and continued: "He used t' boil the kettle on the gas-ring in the kitchen." He gestured to the rear of the building.

"Then you were alone in the shop for—how long?"

"Between ten minutes and a quarter of an hour, sir."

Blackburn levelled a finger at the boy. His tone was measured.

"Now, Bert—think carefully! While your employer was out of this shop, did you leave it at all? Even for a minute?"

Bert Minnick spoke promptly. "No, sir. You see, I was serving a customer all the time Mr. Biggs was away. He came in just after Mr. Biggs 'ad gone out and he wanted t' see some nice bananas. Bought six of them an' then..." The lad broke off, and a startled expression flashed into his eyes.

Jeffery cried impatiently. "Yes, yes! What about him?"

Young Minnick looked uncomfortable. "By Golly, you're right, sir! I did

leave the shop, The chap I was serving gave me a five-pound note to pay f'r the six bananas, an' as we'd run out of change I had to slip into Mum's shop." His eyes sought Blackburn's eagerly. "But I wasn't away more than a minute, sir."

Jeffery brought his fist down with a thump on the counter.

"At last," he murmured. Slowly, admiringly almost, he shook his head. "God! What a brain!" He glanced at Read. "And you, Chief, talk of homicidal mania!"

The Chief Inspector grunted. "At least I talk sense," he snapped. "Where's all this getting us?"

"To the identity of the mysterious banana-purchaser who wanted to be alone," Blackburn retorted. He turned back to the lad. "Now, Bert, I want to know everything about this customer."

Minnick screwed up his eyes in an effort of concentration. "Well, sir, it must have been a few minutes after eleven when he comes in. Mr. Biggs was in the back o' the shop. This man stands for a moment lookin' round. 'Want somethin', sir?', I says. 'Yes,' he said. 'I want t' buy some fruit f'r a sick friend, but I don't know what kind.' So he starts t' walk aroun' the shop, lookin' in all the cases. I called out, 'The bes' fruit's over on these Stan's' sir,' and so he comes back t' th' counter and finally decides on th' bananas.

"When I puts 'em in th' bag, he gives me this five-pound note. 'Got anything smaller?' I say. 'Sorry, no,' he says. 'Then you'll 'ave t' wait while I go out an' change it,' I tells him. Hardly gone a minute, I was—and when I got back th' customer was waiting at the door o' this shop. I gives him his change and he goes off down the road. An' what d' you think 'e did with those bananas?" Bert paused impressively. "He gives them to some kids playing up the street."

"So?" Jeffery was drumming his long fingers on the counter. "Can you give us a description of this customer—what he looked like? You saw his face' of course?"

Bert Minnick looked doubtful. "Well, sir, I did and I didn't' if you understand. He was wearing a long overcoat and he wasn't quite as tall as you. But as for his face..."

"Well?"

"You really couldn't see much of it at all, sir. This chap had a curly black beard and moustache that just about covered it."

Blackbeard!

At the mention of that name which automatically sprang to the lips, a ripple of excitement vibrated the tense atmosphere inside the shop. Here was incontrovertible proof that the same dread hand that had struck down Sir Merton Sheldon had shown itself for the second time. But with this

confirmation came the realization of dismay. For this evidence served only to fog the situation to a greater extent. Now that a definite connection between the two crimes had been made, the dark enigma of the whole business weighed on the investigators like a mocking incubus.

Chief Inspector Read came forward and nodded to the boy. "And that's all you can tell us about this customer?" he asked. His bulldog manner had dropped from him. It was succeeded by a hopelessness, almost an apathy, that contrasted strangely with his former behaviour.

Young Minnick, impressed by the sensation he had made, was only too willing to continue in the spotlight.

"That's all about him, sir. But the other man—the one who came down to see Mr. Biggs after I'd gone, sir—I think he rang up yesterday afternoon."

"You were here?"

"Yessir. About four o'clock I answered the telephone and a man's voice wanted t' speak to Mr. Biggs. He went t' the 'phone, and they talked for a few minutes. I heard Mr. Biggs say, 'Yes, I was foreman on that job.' After a while Mr. Biggs said, 'Better make it after twelve t' morrow. I won't be so busy then.' With that, he rang off."

"Anything else?" Read demanded.

"Only that Mr. Biggs sent me up t' the 'Courier' office for some newspapers, sir. He wrote some dates down on a piece of paper and gave me three shillings. Told me t' be sure an' get the right ones. 'Bout half a dozen papers, there was, sir. When I got back, he took them into the back rooms and began to read them."

Jeffery spoke quickly. "Where are those newspapers now?"

"They were in the dining-room when Mr. Biggs made 'is tea this morning," the lad replied. "I saw them there."

"Good!" Blackburn seemed pleased. "Would you slip in there and see if they're still available? If so, bring them out here."

Young Minnick moved away. The Chief Inspector glanced at Blackburn. "I suppose you've reason for all this madhouse business, son," he muttered. "Personally, it gets crazier every minute for me. I've got to the stage when I expect to find our murderer flying out of an apple in the form of a codlin moth!"

The young man smiled faintly. He crushed his cigarette-end under his heel. "It's not quite as fantastic as that, Chief," he said. "And all those crazy questions of mine have brought out one definite point. We do know how Blackbeard entered this shop. He came back about a quarter past twelve, after the first man in the brown suit had left Biggs. But Blackbeard couldn't walk in through the front door, because Mrs. Minnick was watching and would have

seen him."

"Then how in Thor's name did he get in?"

"He came in through that side door leading from the alley."

Read stared at the young man. "You're mad," he said simply. "Quite mad. Didn't that young lad tell you the door was locked from nine o'clock until we came along after the murder?"

"So was the door of the Sheldon apartment," Blackburn pointed out. "But that didn't stop Blackbeard. Nor did it in this case—because that side door wasn't locked all this morning. Blackbeard opened that door ready to slip inside when he was left alone in the shop!"

The Chief Inspector started to speak, but Jeffery stopped him with a gesture. "Come across to the door," he invited, "and I'll show you just how it was worked."

Taking the elder man by the arm, he crossed to the side of the shop, halting before the door. He began to speak quickly, making swift, flying gestures to demonstrate various points.

"This side door was locked at nine o'clock this morning when the fresh camellia flowers were brought in," Blackburn explained. "It is a spring-lock, as you see, with a small button that can be pushed up and down to hold or release the steel lug of the lock. Right!"

"Now, we must bear in mind that there was nothing haphazard or unprepared about this murder. It was planned and executed with the same careful skill as was shown in the Sheldon killing. Blackbeard probably made a survey of this shop days ago. He then realized that entrance through this side door was not only the safest way, but also the most baffling. For this creature, Chief, plans his murders with the direct intention of putting every available obstacle in the way of the police.

"Blackbeard comes down to this shop shortly after eleven o'clock. He sees that there is only a boy in the shop, but to arrange for his mysterious entrance an hour later he must have the place empty. So he works the trick of the change to get young Minnick out of the way—even for sixty seconds. That was quite long enough to accomplish what he had to do."

"Well, what did he do?"

"He crosses swiftly to this door," Jeffery went on, "and, screwing back the steel lug of the lock, presses into position the button that holds the steel lug into position and prevents it from catching the lock! He then closes the door, which does not lock, wedging it into position so that it cannot blow open and give his scheme away. All this, bear in mind, could be accomplished in five seconds. His only reason for anxiety was the make of the lock, since, if it had not been a Yale, he could not have fixed it so. But he found that out when he

first came into the shop. Remember how he wandered about on the pretence of examining the fruit. Really, he was examining the lock. However, the door fixed and entrance made easy, he crosses to the front door and waits for the return of young Minnick."

Jeffery paused and eyed his listeners. He dropped his voice a tone as he continued.

"At a quarter past twelve he returns to this shop. He creeps down the side alley and slips in through the unlocked side door. Biggs, in the meanwhile, is saying good-bye to the first man outside the shop. Blackbeard has seen this as he approached, and it is an unforeseen hitch to his plans. What if this first man and Biggs decide to re-enter the shop? Concealment is necessary, and what better position could there be than behind this pile of fruit-cases near the door? But Blackbeard has overlooked one thing. Hanging behind the cases near the door are a number of camellia blooms. When the murderer crushes himself into this confined space, his head presses against the petals. We know the result.

"Now, Biggs and his companion were talking fairly loudly—so loudly that Mrs. Minnick, standing a dozen feet away, could hear part of their conversation. And Blackbeard, less than that distance, probably caught every word. As soon as Biggs leaves the first man and re-enters the shop, Blackbeard is upon him! In a few moments the unfortunate man is dead.

"Then the murderer crosses to the side door, pushes the metal button on the lock back into position so that the lug is released, passes through and slams the door after him. The side door locks. And we are faced with another apparently inexplicable murder in a locked building."

There was a silence. Read nodded. "Sounds feasible," he admitted.

"It's the only possible explanation," argued Jeffery. "The murderer couldn't have entered by the front without Mrs. Minnick seeing him. Therefore the side door must have been used. Since neither of the legitimate occupiers of this store had touched it, some unknown agency must be responsible and have tinkered with that door unseen by the occupiers. When young Minnick told me of the shop being left empty, it was the second step in the process of reasoning. The tarnished camellias, hanging about the height of the man's head from the floor, were the first. And the identity of the mysterious customer definitely clinched the scheme of reasoning."

"Well, that's that!" announced the Chief Inspector. He turned to where Bert Minnick stood waiting with a bundle of papers under his arm. "You've found them? Good! Put them on the counter and then you can go along."

As the lad obeyed and vanished through the swing-doors, Jeffery crossed and began to spread wide the newspapers. "Almost a year old,," he

commented. "They're the papers giving an account of the trial of Oscar Dowling. Remember it?" He was running his eyes down the printed columns, thrusting his dark head close to the lines of small type. Suddenly he gave a low whistle of astonishment. He straightened and turned toward the watching group.

"We're getting hot," he announced. Excitement trembled in his tones. "God! What does it all mean? Where is it leading us?"

He faced them squarely. "I've just realized what 'job' it was on which Biggs was foreman. And instead of simplifying matters, it only serves to complicate them all the more." He paused.

"For that 'job' was the trial of the criminal murderer Oscar Dowling. And Edward Biggs was foreman of the jury."

There was not a sound in the dimly lighted shop. Jeffery waited for a moment, then added slowly:

"And Chief Justice Sheldon passed sentence upon the murderer!"

SOME HOURS later, Jeffery Blackburn and the Chief Inspector were seated before the fire in Read's cosy cottage-flat overlooking the river. Dinner over, they were taking coffee in their chairs and reviewing the events of the day.

Read waved his pipe at Jeffery. "You scoff at the idea that the murderer is a homicidal maniac, son. I disagree with you! The motiveless lust for destruction that marks the crimes of a maniac is surely uppermost in these murders. They can't be explained any other way. Why, here are two men at the opposite end of the social scale killed without rhyme or reason."

"But there is reason, Chief," Blackburn objected. "There's too much reason."

"You might call it a bloody version of 'The House that Jack Built,'" said Jeffery. "Only in this case it would be framed differently." He began to chant slowly: "This is the man who murdered his wife who lived in the House that Jack built. This is the Judge who heard the evidence that sentenced the man who murdered his wife who lived in the House that Jack built. This is the Foreman who told the Judge to sentence the man who murdered his wife—"

He was interrupted by a roar from the Chief Inspector.

"Say! What are you getting at now?"

Jeffery clasped his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. His voice was very quiet.

"I'm going to talk, Chief," he said. "You can listen or you can doze off to sleep in your chair. I've got a dozen ideas seething in my brain that must be whipped into some coherent order."

"Go ahead," invited Read grimly.

"Firstly," began the young man, "we must consider the surprising evidence that turned up this afternoon. It's important. It's put our inquiries on a completely fresh line. Consider it! A malignant criminal, certified by prison doctors to be insane, is sentenced to life imprisonment. Later this man escapes, is tracked down, and his dead body discovered by warders. Months later, the same judge who pronounced sentence upon him is murdered. And when the body is found, one of the ears is missing—the right ear!

"A fortnight later, the proprietor of a greengrocer's store—a stolid, kindly man with no enemies—is found murdered in a manner so particularly revolting that a hardened medical surgeon inclines to the theory that the killing was done by a maniac. And the foreman's right hand is missing. It has been hewn off in exactly the same manner as the dead judge's ear. Now, Chief, does this suggest nothing to you?"

The Chief Inspector shook his head.

"It does to me," the young man continued. "It suggest something very sinister. It's partly an echo of my Court days. When we consider that the foreman of a jury raises his right hand to give the fatal verdict to the judge, who has been listening to the evidence, we get a recurrence of that dark rhyme I spoke about. And if we can use our imagination sufficiently to peer into the perverted, twisted brain of a maniac, these conclusions must throw some singularly lurid light on the removal of these portions—the ear that heard the evidence and the right hand that helped to sentence the criminal! Do you follow me thus far?"

"It holds water," Read assented doubtfully. "But you're not going to suggest that the spirit of Oscar Dowling, whose corporeal frame we know to have been underground these past six months, is flitting about creating mayhem and bloody murder among his enemies?"

"I'm not suggesting anything of the kind," retorted Jeffery amiably. "It isn't possible for the unpleasant Oscar to wield a power from beyond the grave, while a quick Mr. Dowling is just as ridiculous. For one thing, apart from the fact that his death completely satisfied the criminal authorities at Greycliffe, his appearance is so striking that—even had some hitch occurred in the burial—he must have been recognized and apprehended before now. I'm coming back to this important point in a moment. But what we have now to consider is that Oscar Dowling had two brothers and a sister. And the younger of the two brothers was a medical student. All three, if you remember, were bitterly opposed to the sentence placed on their elder brother by Judge Sheldon. Now, what is more likely than the inference that one of these relatives is carrying on this vendetta?"

Jeffery paused. Read, however, merely nodded from behind his pipe.

"Now, there is another point to bear in mind," the young man continued. "In spite of what Hoskins said, I firmly believe that Judge Sheldon had received anonymous letters threatening his death—letters that he connected in some way with Oscar Dowling. It's a psychological point, based on pure surmise. It gives one explanation why Sheldon carried that cutting relating to Dowling's death about with him. May we not assume that, allowing for these threatening letters, Sheldon carried that slip of newsprint about with him as a kind of assurance that the vengeful convict was really past harming him?"

"H'h," the Chief Inspector grunted doubtfully. "Then you must assume that these vindictive relatives were responsible for the letters?"

"For the moment, we may take that view."

"Then, admitting that premise, these people must also be touched with the family insanity that wrecked Dowling's life."

"Only periodically," Jeffery explained. "Because, at certain times, I believe that this man or this woman has long periods of normality he or she behaves as an ordinary individual. During these sane periods, he or she can go among his or her fellows without arousing the slightest suspicion as to a mental kink." Blackburn sat up suddenly and faced his companion.

"Chief! Even you and I have been deceived!"

Read's jaw gaped and his pipe almost dropped from his lips. "Do you mean to say that we have actually met and talked with this person?"

"I believe we have." Jeffery tossed his cigarette-end in the fire. "Because that person must be among the people we have questioned in regard to these murders." He paused. "More than that, the murderer is an individual known to sight by at least one or more of these people who have been under our investigation!"

The other man frowned. "That's a pretty fantastic statement, son. How do you figure that out?"

"If we analyse the facts of the Biggs murder, we can face no other conclusion," Jeffery assured him quietly. He lit another cigarette and resumed his position of clasped hands behind his head. "Now, listen carefully, Chief.

"You recall my reconstruction of how the murderer of Biggs fixed that door at eleven o'clock so that he could enter soon after noon to-day? I came to a conclusion that Blackbeard had chosen the alley door merely to baffle the police, since Mrs. Minnick was watching the front entrance. But when I came to think about it, there was a weakness in this scheme of reconstruction that caused the whole thing to topple to the ground. Blackbeard, remember, fixed that door at eleven o'clock. At that time, he could not have possibly known that Mrs. Minnick would be watching in front of her shop an hour later! Now, bearing this in mind, let us follow out a logical chain of reasoning. If Blackbeard

did not know of Mrs. Minnick's intention to stand outside her shop, why trouble to fix that side door? Why could he not have planned to enter the front doors of the shop? Because the presence of that woman, together with her evidence that no one entered the front doors of the shop, made it tantamount to a locked-room murder, the killer could not have known that it would appear so. Then why all this preliminary scheming to unbolt that side door?

"There can be only one reason, Chief! The murderer wanted that side door unlocked so that he could enter the fruit-shop after the front doors were locked! That is, after one o'clock to-day. In other words, Chief, Blackbeard, meant to murder Biggs later on in the afternoon! Then the tradesman's body would not have been discovered until Monday at the earliest." Jeffery leaned forward. "These crimes are so carefully planned that Blackbeard needs at least twelve hours to cover his tracks! That's why he chooses this locked-room idea. It gives him plenty of time before the alarm is raised to create watertight alibis and cover all traces of his connection with the crime!

"In the Sheldon murder, he obtained his twelve hours and destroyed the vital clues so thoroughly that we were baffled. But in this case we've forestalled him! He hasn't had time to clear away his incriminating trail and perhaps we'll be able to take advantage of this lead."

Read bent down and thrust another log on the fire. "Clever son," he admitted. "Deuced clever! But I can see one serious flaw in your theory. If Blackbeard planned to commit the murder this afternoon—why the devil didn't he?"

"Because he had to strike before he was ready!" Blackburn's eyes gleamed over his cigarette. "Because, Chief, someone forced his hand by discovering who the next victim was to be! Blackbeard had to work fast or he was lost. So he took a chance."

Jeffery leaned forward, elbows on knees, clasped fingers supporting his chin, staring into the fire. He was talking animatedly.

"Yes, Chief. Someone had penetrated the Blackbeard mystery to the extent of knowing who the next victim was to be! And in some manner the murderer discovers this—don't ask me how, at the moment.

"Now, consider Blackbeard's position! He has planned to kill Biggs this afternoon; he has set his stage to achieve this murder successfully. But now he realizes that he cannot wait that long! The tradesman, warned by this unknown but astute person, may go to the police for protection. But that is the least important point. This does not concern Blackbeard so much as the disturbing suspicion that this unknown person knows of the murderer's true identity! He may even inform Biggs—and if this occurs, Blackbeard is lost. So he determines to strike at once, without a moment's delay, before the

unknown person can get in touch with the tradesman. Shortly after noon he moves down to the Biggs shop, this time without his black beard!

"Now, this is an important point, Chief. In the light of what I am going to explain directly, it proves that the murderer could not have known the identity of this person who went to warn Biggs—until he saw him talking to the tradesman outside his shop. Now, there are two points that prove this. If Blackbeard had known that this warning individual could recognize him, he would have worn his disguise of the beard. Secondly, and more important, if he had known the man's identity, he would have struck down the man who threatened his secret instead of the tradesman. Follow me? Biggs was, at that time, quite unaware of his danger. He would have made no attempt to escape Blackbeard's vengeance. But the murderer would have certainly done everything possible to prevent this unknown individual from meeting and warning the tradesman—and possibly divulging the identity of Blackbeard!"

Jeffery paused for a moment as though to assemble his ideas.

"This afternoon, Chief, I assumed that Blackbeard—when he made his second appearance shortly after twelve o'clock—slipped in through the side door because he saw Mrs. Minnick watching the front of the shop. But I was wrong! Blackbeard used that side door because the unknown individual was talking to Biggs in front—and he would have instantly recognized the murderer! This man who warned Biggs must have prepared a list of suspects, and among those is the true Blackbeard. He knows that this killer means to strike at Biggs. Naturally, if one of those suspects walked into the greengrocer's shop just at that time, this unknown individual's suspicions must crystallize into certainty. Remember, the murderer was without his disguise.

"Therefore, when he saw and recognized this warning individual as a person he knew well and who was quite familiar with him, the murderer dare not take a chance of being seen. That was the reason he used the side door."

Read was listening carefully. As the young man paused, he said slowly: "That's good reasoning, son. But why did Blackbeard go through the side door after he had committed the murder? He could have walked through the front doors, because he was still unaware that Mrs. Minnick was watching."

"I think he was afraid to chance the fact that the unknown man might still be watching around the shop," Blackburn replied. "Because he did not see these two actually part. He had slipped into the shop before they took leave of each other."

He paused and tapped the arm of his chair impressively. "But the value of all this reasoning, Chief, is most important. If the murderer was a complete stranger to the warning man, he needn't have feared recognition. He could have passed Biggs and his companion quite openly. Because he dared not do

this, we have the first real lead in these murders since the investigation began. Blackbeard and the unknown person who warned Biggs of his danger must have met under circumstances in which they became very familiar with each other!

"Now, there are a certain number of suspects in these murders, and they are people who have come into contact with each other in the course of our investigation. For one thing, they were brought together at the inquest. Let us consider these names." He held up one hand and began to check the names off on his fingers. "They are the man-servant Hoskins, Miss Val Sheldon, the actress Gloria Grey, Alfred Torrance, Ernest Hillier, and Lady Sheldon. Now, with our search narrowed to that extent, it is merely a question of a close scrutiny of alibis."

The Chief Inspector sat up and tapped out his pipe in the ashtray. "Leave that to me," he announced. "On Monday morning I'll have every single person concerned in these crimes at headquarters, and I'll wring them dry!"

Jeffery shook his head. "No, Chief. We can't afford to wait until Monday. That's thirty-six hours away." He rose to his feet and stood looking down at his companion.

"Don't you realize what has happened? There's a man wandering somewhere loose in this city who knows too much for the murderer's peace of mind. And Blackbeard, who recognised him outside Biggs' shop, knows his true identity! We've got to find that man, Chief, and insist on his taking police protection! Because Blackbeard will stop at nothing to close his mouth!"

Scarcely were the last words out of his mouth when the brass knocker on the door of the Read flat sounded. The Chief Inspector rose, and as both men stood eyeing each other, the summons was repeated.

"Someone in a deuce of a hurry," Jeffery remarked. He walked into the hall and swung the door open. A young man almost fell across the entrance, a man with a grey face and fear-stricken eyes. He recovered himself quickly, seized the door, and slammed it shut. His breath was laboured and tiny beads of perspiration dewed his forehead. His brown suit was dishevelled as though he had been running. Blackburn stared at the newcomer, and in that moment recognition dawned. It was one of the reporters who had been in the fruit-shop that afternoon.

The visitor seemed to have recovered some of his self-control. He stood motionless by the door, as though listening. Then he straightened and gave a half-hearted grin. He was breathing more freely.

"Excuse the hurried entrance," he murmured. "But I think I was followed here. My name is Yates. Martin Yates of the Associated Press." He gave another glance at the closed door, and for an instant dark fear showed in his

eyes. "And I think I came pretty near being chosen to add to your quota of murders to-night. But a miss is as good as a mile!" He drew a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his face. "I did that last quarter of a mile in record time," he muttered apologetically. "My wind isn't what it used to be."

Blackburn said quietly: "You must have something rather important to tell us, Mr. Yates." He paused, staring at the visitor with new interest. "A brown suit..." he murmured. "So you were the man who warned Biggs of this danger this morning!"

Martin's pleasant face broke into a wry smile. "And I thought I was miles ahead of you in this investigation! It looks as if I've put my head into a pretty tight noose for no reason at all—seeing that you know practically all I'm going to tell you."

Read was calling from the sitting-room. "Who is it, Jeff?" Jeffery gestured in the direction of the voice. "Better meet the Chief," he said. "Come along."

The young reporter followed him into the sitting-room and, after his greeting to the surprised Read, took the chair that Jeffery indicated. As he sat, his hands were trembling noticeably and Blackburn brought him a stiff drink. Yates sipped it thankfully. After a short silence he looked up to find the two men looking at him curiously. The young man drained his glass and sat back.

"I suppose you're wondering why I knocked you up so late in the evening?" he said. "I couldn't wait any longer to tell you the information that I've dug out. It's rather fantastic, really."

Jeffery said quickly: "I should say that the true identity of the mysterious Blackbeard is anything but fantastic. Because that's what you've come to tell us, isn't it?"

Mat tin Yates threw a half-glance at the shadowed window behind him and crouched closer in his chair. His voice was scarcely above a whisper.

"Yes," he said. "I think I know his real name—and so do you!"

With a second drink in his fingers, Martin Yates lay back in the arm-chair. He did not speak for almost a minute, and the two investigators did not urge him. Directly he squared his shoulders and faced them.

"You can thank Inspector Read for what I've done," he said with a faint smile. "Because after he came around to see me it put me on the defensive and I determined to have a try at probing this queer business myself. Anyhow, I made out a list of persons who were under suspicion, and this morning in my office I went over each one carefully. All at once I remembered a chance phrase dropped by one of these people—and the whole thing became as clear as daylight! The more I thought about it, the more assured I grew. Then it was that I realized who the next victim would inevitably be. So I hurried down to warn poor Mr. Biggs. But my warning was useless, as you know."

Martin paused to sip his drink.

"Leaving the Biggs murder for a while, let me tell you about certain conclusions I have made regarding the Sheldon killing. In both these murders it has been shown that a fair knowledge of anatomy was required. Add to this the fact that a surgeon's scalpel was used to amputate the ear of the first victim and the hand of the second—and one definite point is established.

"Continuing with the first murder, we are faced with what appears to be an insurmountable difficulty—that the murderer seemingly vanished from a room in which all entrances were locked on the inside! Now, I ask you to recall the lock on the door of the Sheldon apartment. It was not a Yale lock—one that automatically locked when the door was slammed. Such was the case of the lock on the door of Biggs' shop. But the lock on the door of the Sheldon apartment was of the ordinary type in which a key had to be turned in it before it locked. But everyone seems to have overlooked one important point. That the door of the Sheldon apartment could be locked from the outside as well as the inside!"

The speaker broke off and looked interrogatively from face to face.

Read was first to speak. "But if the door was locked on the outside, how is it possible that the only existing key was found in the dead man's pocket?"

Yates sat up. "There is only one way in which the key could have been found there," he said quietly. "It was placed there by the murderer."

He paused. In the silence the flames growled and muttered about the logs. An uneasy wind had sprung up—a wind that shivered the windows in their frames and brushed the doors of the building. Jeffery gave a low whistle of surprise. "Clever," he murmured. "Go on."

Martin, his fingers about his glass, leaned forward. "Let us suppose, gentlemen, that the man who murdered Sheldon that night searched the body for the key of the apartment, found it, walked out of the room and, closing the door, locked it behind him. Now, the murderer is a person whose business makes it necessary for him to be first on the scene of any murder! When the alarm over the Sheldon killing is given, he is naturally called. He brings the key of the apartment with him. When he gets a chance, he slips the key into the dead man's pocket! When it is found by the detectives, everyone concludes that the key has been in the dead man's pocket overnight!"

Yates paused triumphantly and looked at each man in turn. Jeffery was nodding to himself. After a while the young reporter went on.

"The cleverness of his move would never be suspected. Who would ever dream that this man could possibly be the murderer when his very duty..." He broke off with a gasp. A sudden crash shook the pictures on the walls. A violent gust of wind had blown open the front door. Yates started abruptly at the

sound and his fingers, contracting about the thin glass, shattered the top. Jeffery gave an ejaculation of annoyance and, striding along the hall closed the door with a slam. When he returned, Martin was dabbing at his fingers with a crimson-flecked handkerchief. The fragments of glass had pierced the skin and the cut was bleeding freely. The young man looked up as Blackburn entered.

"Sorry," he said briefly. "My nerves are shot to the devil." He wound the handkerchief about his fingers while Read mixed him another drink. Jeffery was looking into the hall with puzzled eyes. "Strange about that door. I could have sworn that I shut it."

The Chief Inspector came across with a fresh glass. "Now that we've cleared up those points," he announced, "there's only one more mystery." He placed the glass in Yates' hand. "Who is Blackbeard?"

The reporter did not answer. Instead, he reached into his pocket with his bound finger and drew out a blank envelope. "The name of the killer is written inside here," he said quietly. "I'm not going to divulge that name until I've made a little experiment to-night. At present I've no definite proof—only suspicion. To-night will prove beyond all doubt if that name is correct. I want you to promise me that you won't open that envelope until I ring you on the telephone tomorrow morning."

"Then why write it down at all?" Read demanded. "Why not wait until to-morrow to tell us the man's name?"

A curious expression crossed the reporter's face.

"Because, Inspector, to-morrow I may be dead! If I haven't 'phoned you by three o'clock tomorrow, you have full permission to open the envelope and read the name!"

There was a hushed silence broken only by the sighing of the wind.

Jeffery asked: "What is this experiment?"

"It's childishly simple," Yates explained. "When I went down to warn Biggs this morning, I believe the murderer followed and recognized me. He also believes that I know his identity, and I'm certain he followed me to this place to-night. I was afraid that he would strike before I could get this envelope into your safe keeping." He paused and handed the envelope to the Chief Inspector. "Now, this person is certain to have another attempt to close my mouth. But forewarned is forearmed! I know in which direction the danger lies." He lowered his voice. "There is only one way to trap this murderer. That is to catch him red-handed. I want him to come after me—I want him within reach of my hands so I can rip off that black beard and see his true features. Then I'll know whether that name on the paper is correct!"

Yates rose to his feet as he spoke. He began making preparations for his departure. Jeffery, however, seemed far from satisfied. He watched the

reporter with worried, anxious eyes.

"But the risk!" he muttered. "We can't let you do this thing. You're not dealing with an ordinary murderer. You're putting yourself in the hands of a maniac who will stop at nothing." He turned to the elder man. "Chief, you must arrange police protection for Mr. Yates."

Martin shook his head quickly. "No, no! Don't you see, Mr. Blackburn, that such obvious protection would ruin everything? This murderer is cunning personified—he'd never venture near me if there was a police uniform in sight!" He shook his head again. "It's a risk, I know. But think of the months of work it will save if I manage to grab that beggar red-handed! Once we get him behind bars, there's enough evidence to hang him a dozen times over!"

"You're armed, of course?" Read asked curtly.

Yates smiled and tapped a bulge in his pocket. "I may be reckless—but I'm not a fool. It's loaded in every one of the six chambers, and I won't hesitate to use it, believe me!"

He nodded to Read and moved outside. With Jeffery at his side, the two men reached the door. They shook hands and Blackburn watched the reporter as he moved cautiously into the darkened street. In a few minutes the shadows swallowed him and he was lost to sight. The young man shook his head slowly. "There goes a very gallant gentleman," he murmured, and closed the door. The tall clock in the hall struck ten o'clock.

Jeffery returned to the sitting-room to find the Chief Inspector turning the blank envelope over in his fingers.

Chapter 13

BEFORE BREAKFAST on the following morning, the telephone in the Read cottage rang urgently. Jeffery jumped out of bed to answer 'it. His first thought was of Martin Yates, but it was Bertha Fenton on the other end of the line. She had rung up to tell young Mr. Blackburn that a few minutes before her discovery of the body of the tradesman, she had seen the Judge's man, Hoskins, on the Dandenong Road. He had carried a black bag under his arm and had met and talked with a second individual whom she had not recognized. Bertha then apologized for her tardiness in forwarding this information—the shock of her experience had temporarily driven it from her mind. During the night, however, she had remembered the incident—hence the early call.

Jeffery nodded over the instrument.

"That's all right, Miss Fenton. Thanks for your trouble. You can't recall having seen this second man before?"

Bertha explained that she had seen only a glimpse of his back—a view much too limited for recognition. On this slight identification, the man had certainly appeared a complete stranger to her.

With a request that if she, by chance, could recall having met the unknown man, she would ring him immediately, Jeffery hung up. Slipping into dressing-gown and slippers, he walked into the sitting-room, opened the door of the book-case, and peeped inside. Satisfied, he prowled into the Chief Inspector's bedroom. That gentleman yawned mightily and raised himself on one elbow.

"Who's ringing at this unearthly hour," he demanded. "That damn 'phone woke me! Don't people realize that Sunday is a day of rest—even for policemen?"

Blackburn drew his dressing-gown about him. "No rest for the policeman to-day," he announced briskly. "We've got to work—and work fast." He looked about the room. "Where did you put that black-list—the list of telephone-numbers?"

Read yawned again. "In my wallet—inside breast pocket in the grey suit." He eyed the young man speculatively. "D' you mean to get those people down here to-day, son?"

"This morning," Jeffery corrected gently. He was at the wardrobe, running his hands over the suit. "And in answer to your earlier question, that was Miss Fenton on the wire. You remember that funny old dear who found Biggs' body." In a few words, he told the other of Bertha's message.

The Inspector received it with a grunt. "Thought it might have been that young reporter." He sat up and searched for his dressing-gown. "I'm worried

about that chap," he admitted. "Had a funny dream last night, too." He stroked his moustache into place. "Black beards and knives and envelopes all mixed up. I don't like it!"

Jeffery walked from the wardrobe with a slip of paper in his hand. "You're getting nervy," he said calmly. "By the way; while I get through to these people, would you put the sturdy O'Connor on the trail of Hoskins? I'd like to know what was in that black bag he hugged so securely."

Read nodded and set off in the direction of the bathroom. Jeffery made his way to the sitting-room, and five minutes later, a cigarette between his lips and the "black list" in front of him, he was dialling numbers on the small ebonite telephone.

Shortly after ten o'clock the knocker on the door thumped twice. Young Mr. Blackburn, clothed, breakfasted and almost at peace with the world, opened it to meet the first arrival. Gloria Grey stood outside.

"How can I help you this time?" she asked.

"We just want a few minutes of your time," the young man explained. "If you'll come inside..." He stood back to allow her to enter. As they walked toward the sitting-room, Jeffery could not help but notice the change in her appearance, even in this comparatively short space of time. The blue eyes were clearer and her nervous, uneasy fumbings had disappeared. Evidently the cure was obtaining results.

Jeffery said quietly: "We want to know your movements between the hours of ten o'clock and three o'clock yesterday afternoon, Miss Grey."

For just an instant that old haunting fear flashed into her eyes. Then her face cleared.

"I see," she spoke softly. "It's about the fruit-shop murder, is it?" She lifted her head. "I went to see a talkie yesterday morning, Mr. Blackburn. Dropped into the"—she mentioned a well-known Bourke Street theatre—"about eleven o'clock and came out about half past two."

The young man raised his eyebrows. "Oh?" He pursed his lips. "Did you go alone?"

"Yes."

"You didn't think to keep your ticket stub, I suppose?"

The actress shook her head. "I can't afford seats that require ticket stubs," she returned quietly. "I went into the cheapest seats where they sell you ordinary tickets off the roll at the box-office."

"And you saw no one who could identify you?" pressed Jeffery. "Perhaps the girl who showed you to your seat...?"

The woman sat up in her chair. Her eyes, frank and level, sought his. Her voice was as level as her gaze.

"I know you've got to do this kind of thing, Mr. Blackburn, and I'm not annoyed. I only wish I could be of some help to you. I haven't forgotten what you and Mr. Read have done for me. But I can't tell lies—I've finished with all that kind of thing. When I tell you I went to a talkie theatre yesterday morning, it's the whole truth. I bought an ordinary ticket off the roll, and found my way to my seat by groping about in the dark. During the entire programme I saw no one I knew. Coming out, I took a tram to my new boarding-house, getting back about half past two." She rose from her chair. "That's all I can tell you, though it may incriminate me again. But it's the truth!"

Jeffery nodded slowly. "I believe you, Miss Grey—although you have ruined a very promising theory by your frankness." He smiled. "I don't think we will have to worry you again." He was shepherding her into the hall. By the entrance, he paused. Gloria Grey had given a little start of recollection. She turned to him. "Mr. Blackburn, I think someone did see me as I came out of that theatre."

"Who was that?"

"Valerie Sheldon. As I began to cross the road, she drove past in her car, coming from the bottom end of Bourke Street. I don't know whether she saw me, but I recognized her all right."

Blackburn was staring at her.

"You're positive of that, Miss Grey? Because Miss Sheldon told us that she would be out of town over the week-end."

The actress set her lips. "She certainly wasn't out of town at half past two on Saturday afternoon, anyhow," she returned.

Blackburn did not press the point. He said good-bye to the woman and turned away, closing the door.

"So Miss Sheldon wasn't out of town at all on Saturday," he murmured. "'Oh, what a tangled web we weave...'"

Still murmuring to himself, he sought out the Chief Inspector, who was finishing a belated breakfast.

The step-daughter of the late Sir Merton Sheldon was the next visitor to the cottage. She drove up after lunch, thumped on the brass knocker, and was admitted to the living-room. She wore her leather driving-coat and small beret. She entered apologizing for her lateness.

"I had to drive all the way from the country," she said, as she seated herself. "Mother didn't deliver your message until close on eleven o'clock."

Jeffery's face expressed polite surprise. "Did you drive home again yesterday afternoon, Miss Sheldon?"

A faint expression crossed the girl's face, leaving her eyes hard and suspicious. "Yesterday?"

The young man nodded. "Of course. You were in town yesterday afternoon, weren't you? Driving down Bourke Street about half past two?"

"Why—yes." Again that fleeting expression of fear crossed her face. Like lightning, it flickered and was gone. Now her voice was perfectly controlled. "I came down to visit the Melbourne Public Library."

Yet you were going to lie, Jeffery told himself. But no suggestion of this reached his tone when he echoed her words. "The Public Library?"

"Exactly!" Sharpness edged her expression. "I am working on a new novel while staying with Mother, and it so happened that I required some data relating to poisons. I drove down to the city, reaching here about ten o'clock. From then onward until two o'clock I was sitting reading in the library."

Read, openly suspicious, snapped: "What was the book?"

The question was clearly unexpected. Valerie Sheldon stared at the Chief Inspector. After a momentary hesitation, she replied stiffly: "It was Benedikt's 'Der Raubthierypus am menschlichen Gehirne.' I wanted a confirmation on the effects of solanine, a particularly rare poison distilled from—"

Read's bark cut into her explanation. "Did a librarian find the book for you?"

The girl measured him with a frigid stare that would have been like a cold douche to a more sensitive person than William Jamieson Read. "He did not!" Deliberately she turned away from the Chief Inspector and addressed herself to Blackburn. "It wasn't necessary. I'm almost as familiar with the criminology section of the library as I am with my own room. I went straight to the shelf and took down the book myself."

The young man frowned. "Unfortunate," he murmured. "Then, since you are a rather frequent visitor to the Public Library, surely it is strange no one saw you there. You surely recognized somebody you knew and who knew you?"

Valerie Sheldon shrugged her shoulders. Her tone had the faintest hint of condescension. "My dear man, when I get hold of Benedikt, the Prince of Wales could sit next to me without my noticing him!"

This facetiousness stung the Chief Inspector. He stood up, looking even taller than usual. There was no humour in his words when he spoke. "And so, young lady—"

But Val Sheldon, springing to her feet, interrupted him.

"Go ahead!" Her face, always austere, was rigid and pale as marble. "And so, as you have no witnesses, we have only your bare, unsubstantiated statement that you spent the time as you say!" Her speech was a sarcastic parody of the Inspector's words. She faced him, her head high. "Isn't that how it goes? I've written the same sentence half a dozen times in my own

manuscripts!"

Read took a step forward. "This is no time for fooling, young woman," he said sharply.

"And it's no time for blind, senseless accusations!" Her eyes were blazing, and she swept from the room. A slam of a door and the angry hum of a starting car and she was gone.

Even as the sound of the car died away, there came a sharp summons at the door and the young man sprang to open it. He found O'Connor on the step, and the burly detective was in a state of high excitement.

"It's Hoskins, Mr. Blackburn!" he cried. "That's your man! He's made a dash for it. When we got down to his rooms we found the whole place turned upside down. His landlady said that he packed his bags and left for the station yesterday afternoon!"

He paused and drew a deep breath. "And that ain't all, sir. Take a look at this!" He reached down and picked up a small black bag. "When we searched the rooms, we found this hidden away in the corner of a cupboard. Guess what's inside?"

Holding the bag under Blackburn's nose, he sprang it open. The young man took one glance and almost recoiled.

Inside the bag lay a human hand, a right hand that had been severed at the wrist!

For a full thirty seconds Jeffery stared at this grim relic as though he could not believe the evidence of his own eyes. Hoskins! Back into his mind flooded the words of Martin Yates: "The murderer must be a man who was first on the scene of the crime." Hoskins had discovered the Sheldon murder! He was "on the scene" when the door of the inner apartment was broken down.

Of course! Hoskins!

For a brief space elation flooded his heart. Then abruptly it died. Jeffery shook his head. "Come in and see the Chief," he invited.

The detective, needing no second bidding, almost ran across the hall and into the sitting-room. Jeffery, following more slowly, could hear his voice raised in triumphant recital. As he entered, O'Connor was saying:

"He won't get far! The landlady told us that he left about six o'clock yesterday afternoon. That's too late for the express and there's no boats in port. He must be hiding away somewhere, waiting his chance. We've got a drag-net out that'd trap a greasy pig! He can't possibly get through!"

Both men looked up as Blackburn entered. The young man threw himself down in a chair and drew his hands wearily over a face that had suddenly gone worried and grey. Presently he looked up and shook his head.

"It isn't natural, Chief. I'm sorry to be a wet blanket, but it's useless to go

on fooling ourselves. No man is going to leave a damning piece of evidence like that behind him." He made a wide gesture with his hands. "Here we have a careful, cautious murderer, a man who has such a grasp of his wicked game that he plans his moves days ahead. And you ask me to believe that such a man could possibly leave evidence like that"—he indicated the bag—"behind him. Why, it's an absolute fingerpost to his guilt!"

O'Connor was plainly disappointed at this reception. "Every criminal makes at least one mistake, sir," he pointed out. "They all slip up some place."

"Admitted! Admitted!" Jeffery jumped from the chair and 'began to pace the room. "But if our man does make one mistake, it won't be a childishly stupid piece of negligence like that! To leave that severed hand about is tantamount to pinning a visiting-card on the bodies. I just can't believe it!"

Read said quietly: "Perhaps Hoskins had to leave it somewhere, son. It may be that he hadn't time to destroy it."

At the other end of the room Blackburn wheeled. "Then why didn't he bury the hand? Or weigh the bag with stones and toss it into the river? Or parcel it up and leave it somewhere 'to be called for'? He could have done any of these things quite easily. Can you imagine for a moment that the murderer's first thought wouldn't be to get rid of that thing as quickly as possible—instead of hugging it to his breast like a keepsake?"

He was standing in the centre of the room. When he spoke again the frenzy had left his tone and it was quiet by contrast.

"No, Chief. Our murderer left that bag in Hoskins' rooms. But the servant had taken fright over something and run away. Why? Where is he now? How did the murderer contrive to plant that bag? Questions—questions—there's no end of them!" He broke off suddenly and glanced at his wrist-watch. "It's four o'clock, Chief—which brings us to the most important question of all: where is Martin Yates?"

The Chief Inspector sprang to his feet. As he moved, the telephone at his elbow shrilled impatiently, and Jeffery, his face alight, stepped forward. But Read was before him. The big man grasped the receiver. "Yes—yes," he barked. "Chief Inspector Read speaking...what? Oh, God!"

His voice choked suddenly. The two men watching saw the high colour ebb slowly from his face, leaving it paper-white. The hand that grasped the receiver was trembling. In the silence, the unintelligible scratching voice at the other end was audible. Then Read spoke a few husky words into the instrument and replaced the receiver. When he turned his face was that of an old man.

"You asked, son, where is Martin Yates." His lips, tight and pale, barely moved. "They've just found him over by the river with half his head blown off. That was Dr. Conroy on the wire...he's gone back there. Fixes the time of death

at about ten-thirty last night." He seemed to choke on his words. "Must have got him just after he left this room."

Jeffery, sunk in the lethargy of despair, buried his face in his hands.

"The third!" he muttered. "What fools we were ever to let him go! We should have forced police protection on him. That insane experiment..."

Abruptly his voice splintered. He sprang to his feet. "Chief! That letter! Yates' sealed letter!"

Read was already at the book-case, dragging at the glass panels with fingers strangely clumsy. The younger man could have shouted in his impatience as the Inspector fumbled among the books. At last he had the required volume; he opened it, and took out the envelope Jeffery reached out his hand. Read, however, was crouched before the panels, staring at the corner of the page.

"What's the matter?" Blackburn cried impatiently.

"Everything! Last night, son, I placed this envelope in the book, taking particular care to notice the number of the page. You say you haven't touched this letter?"

"No, no! Why?"

"Because," Read answered slowly, "this envelope was in a different page from the one I placed it next to last night."

A silence, tensed with a dozen unanswered questions, quivered between them. Jeffery drew a deep breath and spoke in a whisper. "Open the letter...quickly!"

The Chief Inspector ran a heavy forefinger under the gummed flap and extracted a piece of ordinary paper, folded four times. He opened it, spread it wide, and Blackburn, with O'Connor peering over his shoulder, read the two typewritten lines:

"The body of Martin Yates will be found near the Thatched House on the southern side of the river."

And the note was signed:

"Blackbeard."

Chapter 14

IT WAS A VERY silent party that moved along the green slopes bordering the river ten minutes later. There was no need to search about for the location of the latest murder. The Thatched House, standing against a background of trees, with its rustic seats and tables for the convenience of picnickers, was a well-known landmark along the river, and this afternoon it was all the more conspicuous by the crowds moiling about it. The smooth banks of the Yarra were popular as strolling-grounds on a Sunday afternoon, and even in the most uninviting weather the winding paths were dotted with couples. On this particular afternoon, however, the sunny skies had brought out crowds expecting nothing more than a pleasant walk among the flowered beds. And they had found that most dramatic and fascinating of all attractions—murder! Small wonder that the launches, the gardens, and the itinerant bands were forgotten in the mad scramble to satisfy the morbid craving of the inquisitive mind.

Fortunately the police had been early on the spot and had roped off a considerable area that took in the Thatched House and the lawn for many yards. It was over this hempen barrier that the Chief Inspector, Jeffery Blackburn, and Detective O'Connor climbed, pushing their way ruthlessly through the crowds and walking to where a group of plain-clothes men had gathered about the rear of the tea-house. The men stood aside as the investigators came forward. Dr. Conroy advanced to meet them.

He nodded curtly. "Is this thing ever going to stop, Read? They're getting worse as they go on, you know." As he spoke, he was leading the three men forward. They halted near the back wall of the house, where a sheet concealed the body. Conroy bent and whipped it aside.

Jeffery took one look and turned away.

The Chief Inspector, after a moment of revulsion, did not flinch. The body lay sprawled at the bottom of the wall—the body of Martin Yates dressed as they had last seen him. The brown suit was stained and dyed with blood from a great wound that had almost pulped the top of the head and the upper part of the face. The unfortunate man lolled like some grotesque marionette, both arms outflung, palms upward as though defending himself. A revolver lay on the grass near by. Blackburn, steeling himself to look again, recalled the weapon that the young reporter had carried on the previous night. Detective Donlin, seeing the young man's attention, came forward.

"That's his gun, Mr. Blackburn," he volunteered. "His fingerprints are on

the butt. One bullet fired from the chamber too. Looks as if the poor chap made an effort to save himself."

Jeffery caught his breath. "Horrible!" he muttered. At that moment all personal interest in the case seemed lost; he was filled only with a vast and nauseating horror at the brutal murder of this young man, who had gone to his death merely because he was cleverer than the police. He turned away and crossed to where Read and Conroy were conversing in low tones.

"Blown the top of his head almost off," the doctor was saying. "You see that, Read! A wound of such nature could have only been caused by a shot-gun—a twelve gauge, I should say, and fired at close-range. Say about six feet away. It would take a twelve-gauge cartridge with a number two, or three, shot." He stared speculatively at the corpse. "There's only one other weapon capable of making a hole like that—that's a rifle. A Winchester or a Remington with a hollow bullet, say a twenty-two or a forty-four. But it wasn't a rifle." He paused and, feeling in his pocket, produced a screw of paper. Opening it, he exhibited a number of small stained shot.

"I picked these out of the wound with tweezers," he explained, proffering the screw for Read's inspection.

That gentleman glanced at them and nodded. "Death, of course, was instantaneous?"

"Well—I ask you!" Conroy gestured toward the body.

The sarcasm in the little doctor's tone nettled Read. "No need to be funny," he snapped. "I'm not asking questions for my health. If this chap's death was instantaneous, how about that revolver? There's a shot fired from the chamber. He couldn't have done that after he was dead!"

Dr. Conroy, his face flushing, drew himself up stiffly. Jeffery, sensing the dangerous atmosphere, interposed quietly: "He was probably holding that revolver, Chief. Remember, Yates knew that someone was dogging him, and he was shaky when he left us last night. When he got out on to the road, he probably drew his revolver and walked with it at full cock. When the charge hit him, the shock would cause his finger to tighten on the trigger. That's how that shot was fired."

There was a pause while Conroy cleared his throat.

"Besides the rifle," he said primly, "the murderer used his scalpel again. It's the lips this time. Both the upper and lower lobes have been cut out in a neat ellipse..."

Another silence, broken only by the uneasy murmuring of the crowd. Jeffery spoke with the tonelessness of despair.

"The ear that heard the evidence, the hand that passed the sentence—and now the lips that would have betrayed! It fits exactly—damnably so!" He

moved over, and conquering his repulsion, stared down at the body. His eyes hard, he took in every detail from the grass-stained soles of the shoes to the dangling ornament on the watch-chain slung across the slumped stomach. Suddenly Jeffery's eyes narrowed. For a moment he stared unbelievably at the body, then dropped on his knees beside it. Then he straightened with a low whistle of surprise, and thrusting his hands in his pockets walked slowly up and down.

Read, meanwhile, had been talking to Donlin. The plain-clothes man nodded and, walking round the house, returned with a scared looking young man. He was accompanied by a girl, her eyes scarlet with weeping. The Chief Inspector, hands behind his back, stared at the couple with a frowning, official eye. He addressed the man.

"So you found the body, Mr...?" he paused interrogatively. The young man started and fumbled nervously. "William Baily, sir. That's my name. I'm a clicker at the Wearwell Boot Factory in Fitzroy—"

"Never mind about that! How did you come to find the body?"

Mr. Baily glanced rather helplessly at the girl, who appeared about to dissolve into a fresh flood of tears. "Me and Flo, here, we thought, the day being fine, we'd like a stroll along the river. Flo's inside all the week an'—"

"Confound Flo!" snapped the Chief Inspector. "Get to the point!"

"Yes, sir." William Baily swallowed something. "Well, we caught the tram to the city an' got to the bridge about three o'clock. We walked for an hour or so, an' then Flo wants a cuppa tea. So we came across here t' give our order, sir."

At this point, the girl began to heave and dab at her red eyes with a damp handkerchief. Read glared unsympathetically and her escort hurried on.

"The place was pretty much full, so I suggests we takes our tray out in the garden here. We starts out, an' as we rounds the corner we ran slap-bang into—into..." Baily swallowed again, went pale, and his voice trailed off. A glance at the Inspector's truculent eye spurred him on. "Gawd! But it gave us a turn! I drops the tray an' Flo screams and everyone comes rushing up."

"You didn't touch the body?"

Mr. Baily shuddered. "Gawd, no, mister!"

Read dismissed him. He turned to Donlin.

"Nothing in the footprints, I suppose?" They were moving back to the body. The Chief Inspector examined the ground with a hard eye. "Looks as if a herd of cattle have been trampling about the place!"

The plain-clothes man was apologetic. "Sorry, Chief. We roped off the area as soon as we got here, but that was twenty minutes after the body was found. Meanwhile, every person near the river seems to have had a peep."

O'Connor, who had been searching among the trees, came toward them.

Read greeted him with a curt monosyllable.

"Well?"

"Looks fairly open-and-shut," the big detective reported. "There's only one set of tracks from the road up through the trees. They end here, trodden out by other footprints of the crowd. That trail is Yates' prints all right. The murderer must have come along the gravel path in front of the tea-house—to avoid leaving prints—slipped round this side and waited with his gun. Yates, who was walking forward with his revolver ready, got the charge full in the face as he stepped from the trees."

Jeffery, who had joined the group, was listening intently. He nodded to himself as though pleased about some point. The Chief Inspector was staring at the trodden ground.

"Did anyone find the cartridge-case from the shotgun? No? That's queer."

Conroy, fingering his beard, spoke crisply. "You may be sure our murderer kept it, Chief. He's too careful to leave any clues about, excepting those he manufactures himself. He ties his loose ends very neatly:"

Donlin came forward, holding in his hand a number of objects wrapped in a handkerchief. He opened it for Read's examination. "They mean to shift the body, Chief, so I'm taking these along to headquarters." He displayed the initialled watch, business cards, addressed envelopes, a cigarette-case with "Martin Yates" engraved on the lid, and a wallet, besides some loose change. Read nodded, lifting his eyes to where two men were loading the body on to a stretcher. When they were gone, he turned to Jeffery.

"This is where I hand in my resignation," he said slowly. There was no humour in the sombre tone. "This thing's too much for me, son. It's got right out of hand."

Blackburn gripped his arm. "Don't be ridiculous, Chief! I don't want to raise your hopes—but in the black fog of this thing I can see the first tiny patch of blue sky." He nodded at the eagerness that flooded his companion's face. "Yes. For the first time during these long weeks I think we're on the right track!"

"But—?" began the Chief Inspector.

Jeffery held up his hand. "Not another word. I can't say more, because even this time I may be wrong." He dropped his voice. "And this time, Chief, we can't afford to make a mistake!"

Five minutes later, they were seated in the police-car skimming towards the city. Read sat with folded arms in one corner. Jeffery, in an effort to divert his mind, picked up a day-old paper that he had found on the seat and began to turn the leaves idly. Suddenly he brought the printed sheet closer and read with interest. Then he glanced at the date line showing that it was of a Saturday edition. Jeffery folded the paper so that the printed paragraph

showed on the outside and handed it across to the Chief Inspector.

"Here's something to occupy your mind," he said. "Also notice that the paper is yesterday's edition."

Read took the paper and dropped his eyes to the paragraph indicated by the young man's pointing finger. He read:

CLOSED FOR CLEANING

The annual cleaning of the Melbourne Public Library will begin from today, Saturday, when the library will be closed to all visitors until further notice. It is anticipated that the library will probably reopen for the public within the next three days.

The Chief Inspector dropped the paper on his knees and looked up at his companion. He nodded slowly, dangerously. "So much for Miss Valerie Sheldon's perfect alibi," he commented.

As they walked into Read's private office, the constable on duty in the corridor came forward with a letter in his hand. "Came for you about ten minutes ago, sir," he reported. "Brought by special messenger."

The Chief Inspector walked into his office, holding the letter as though he expected it to explode. Tossing it on the desk, he examined it closer, and relief lighted his face. "Thought it might be from the Commissioner," he grunted. Dropping into the swivel chair, he ripped the envelope. Jeffery moved away to light a cigarette and stare at the view from the window with vague, disinterested eyes. An exclamation from his companion caused him to turn. Read was frowning over the sheet of paper he had removed from the envelope.

He raised his eyes and waved the letter. "Take a look at this, son."

Jeffery crossed and took the paper. The address, printed in the top right-hand corner, caught his attention.

Cairnside Mental Hospital.

Chief Inspector Read.

Dear Sir,

I wish to bring under your notice a rather peculiar circumstance in which you may be interested.

About six months ago we received into our home a patient who had been found wandering on the main Express line between Adelaide and Melbourne. He was a young German who later gave his name as Hans von Rasch, and he had received a blow on the head which temporarily deranged his mind.

At first it seemed doubtful that the patient would live through his injuries.

However, he rallied after the first week and has since been convalescing in a darkened room. He was, of course, allowed to see no one or have contact, in any way, with the outside world. This treatment proved successful, and gradually the young man's mental faculties became stronger.

About two days ago we believed that our patient was sufficiently advanced on the way to recovery to receive mental stimulus in the shape of outside impressions. To this end, we provided him with a number of illustrated magazines and current newspapers. Among the latter were three giving accounts of the terrible crimes now agitating the Commonwealth. These accounts excited our patient almost to a frenzy. He insisted that he was in the position to provide a valuable clue to the murderer.

At first we put his statement down to temporary hysteria, believing it would pass in the night. But this morning the patient insisted on seeing me. He has told me a most remarkable story—a recital so strange and bizarre that I am still doubtful whether to accept it or not. Therefore, I am taking the liberty of writing to you.

I honestly believe that the young man has certain information that can assist you in this investigation. His manner impressed me deeply and I feel that, in justice to yourself, you should see this patient and listen to what he has to say.

Yours faithfully,

Harris Talbot.

(Lay Superintendent)

Jeffery handed back the letter. "Remarkable," he commented. "I wonder what's behind it?"

Read took the letter, crumpled it in his hand, and tossed it into the waste-paper-basket. "That's what I think of it," he snorted.

"Every murder committed brings in letters like that from crazy lunatics who either want publicity or auto-suggest themselves into, confessing the crime. That won't get us anywhere."

Blackburn shrugged. "Perhaps not. Still, it wouldn't do any harm to have a word with young von Rasch."

"Then you go ahead," retorted the other. "At present I'm more interested in Miss Sheldon's 'perfect alibi'." His voice slowed. "I never did like that clever young lady."

Jeffery bent and rescued the crumpled letter from the litter in the basket. As he straightened, the constable knocked and entered.

"A Mrs. Bowes to see you, sir." He addressed the Chief Inspector. "Says she's the landlady of the rooms where a Mr. Hoskins used to stay. She has

some information for you."

As Read nodded, he moved out, to return almost immediately with a middle-aged woman. Her neat black dress set off the thin, refined face. Jeffery pushed forward a chair, and after introductions were performed she began to speak.

"Your detective came down to see me this morning," she explained. "I could tell him very little at the time. But since, I have found out more details that may interest you." She paused and fingered the black beads at her throat rather nervously.

"Mr. Hoskins left my rooms, as I told your man, about six o'clock yesterday afternoon. Almost an hour later, two people rang the bell and asked for Mr. Hoskins. Connie, our maid, answered the door. She told them Mr. Hoskins had left. The couple then asked if they could see his room. Connie, believing that they wanted to rent the apartment, allowed them to go upstairs. They came down about five minutes later. Connie heard them talking, but, when she went to let them out, they had gone."

Read nodded quickly. "Did your maid describe this couple?"

"Only very vaguely," the woman replied. "I could get nothing more than the fact that the man wore a blue suit and the lady looked 'kinda uppish', as Connie put it. But as they came down the stairs, my maid heard the man say to the girl: 'There's nothing to be afraid of now. The thing's in the bag.'"

"What?"

Mrs. Bowes nodded quietly. "I know what you're thinking. You know as well as I do what your man found in that room. He showed it to me and asked me about it." The woman's voice trembled for a moment, then she mastered herself. "I was out of the house when that couple called yesterday. It was only when I told Connie of that horrible bag found in Mr. Hoskins' rooms that she remembered the man's speech and she told me. I hurried down here at once to tell you."

"Your maid is positive she has those words right?" asked the Inspector.

"Absolutely! I made her repeat them several times." She rose from the chair. "Just one last request, gentlemen. My boardinghouse is my living. It's all I have. You realize that any unwelcome publicity would—would..." She hesitated and went on: "...Would give my house a bad reputation. Just now it's packed with holiday visitors, and for the first time in many months I am making a little money." She gave them a fluttering, tremulous smile. "I'm sure you understand."

Read inclined his head. "Of course, madam. We will be very discreet. And thank you."

Scarcely had the door closed behind her when the Chief Inspector swung

round in his chair. "So the girl was 'kinda uppish,' was she?" he said savagely. "Well, Miss Val Sheldon has been 'kinda uppish' too often for my liking." He rose and pressed a bell on his desk. "Perhaps she'll drop that grand manner when we put the screws on her." The door opened and the constable entered. "Send O'Connor to me as soon as he gets in," he ordered.

The man saluted and disappeared. Read came around the desk, rubbing his big hands. "I'm going along to prepare for Miss Sheldon's reception," he said. "Are you coming along, son?"

The young man shook his head.

"Go and dig your own grave," he returned. "But don't expect me to help you. I've worries enough of my own at the moment."

Nine o'clock on that never-to-be-forgotten Sunday night found Chief Inspector William Read curled up in an armchair before his cottage fire. He was reading "Monsieur Venus", and paused from time to time to chuckle over the sly writing. Evidently this official gentleman was feeling pleased with himself. The fire blazed brightly, and outside the house the wind was springing up in a rehearsal of the previous night, rattling the windows and stroking the doors. Presently there came the sound of a car driven up; within a few minutes Jeffery strode into the room and, tossing down his driving gloves, spread his hands to the fire.

Read glanced up from his page. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"About and about," the young man replied. He began to slip out of his overcoat. "Been busy since this afternoon. What's the latest bulletin on Hoskins and his partner in crime?"

The elder man carefully marked his place in the book and laid it on the arm of his chair. "They're bringing them in now," he said. "Both of them. O'Connor caught them up at a service station about three miles out of the city." He sat back in his chair. "I'm letting them stew for a night behind bars to loosen their tongues."

Jeffery bent and picked up the book.

"Chief, I'm willing to bet every penny I own that Hoskins and Val Sheldon had no more to do with these murders than you did."

"All right—all right." Read shrugged a good-humoured shoulder. "You go your way and I'll go mine. Another bit of blundering can't make the situation any worse."

"But it can, Chief!" Jeffery dragged an empty chair opposite the Inspector and sat down. "Because the real murderer hasn't finished his work."

It was the young man's tone rather than his words that caused Read to stare at him. He did not speak, for the other was hurrying on.

"Don't you see. This man's mind is dominated with the one insane idea—to

get rid of every person responsible for the imprisonment of Oscar Dowling. That's why he chose to strike during the Centenary celebrations, when these people would be sure to be gathered together in the city. He's scored with Sheldon and Biggs, but the killing of Yates was a necessary incidental. For a moment he was diverted from his main task by the dictates of safety. Now he must be getting ready to strike again." Jeffery paused.

"Imagine it, Chief! Murder en masse! Murder on such a scale that our killer must have spent months planning every move. Planning for the Centenary, when he could strike again and again! Imagine the intellect of such a creature." His voice dropped. "And then you waste time over people like Hoskins and Val Sheldon!"

"But—" Read began.

But Jeffery's flow of words drowned his half-formed rebuttal.

"It stands to cold reason that the girl can't be guilty," the young man continued. "Remember, the person who came to this room last night, who must have shadowed poor Yates here and watched where we hid the envelope, knew definitely and absolutely where the body of that reporter was to be found. Yates was already dead when these envelopes were changed! In other words, the person who crept in here last night was our murderer!"

"Remember, it must have been well past midnight when this person entered, since we did not retire until twelve o'clock. At that time, Val Sheldon was driving her car toward her home at Greenacres—almost seventy miles away from here."

He paused. Outside, the wind had risen and moaned about the walls. Jeffery leaned back in his chair, his eyes half closed.

Read looked uncomfortable. "Maybe you're right, son," he muttered. "But what can that girl be doing hanging about with a man like Hoskins? And, don't forget, she was actually seen with the man who admitted to putting that severed hand in the bag!" He glanced across at the younger man. "Have you any other ideas?"

Jeffery nodded.

"Yes. There's an almost connected string of ideas running through my mind," he said lazily. "But half-way along that string, there's a tangled knot. And it's holding me back. I can't tell you anything definite until I've straightened out that tangle."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Without moving from his position, Jeffery replied: "Going to do a spot of mental wrestling, Chief. Now, complete silence while the medium goes into a trance."

In the hall the clock ticked away the minutes. They lengthened into an

hour, into an hour and a half. The Chief Inspector turned page after page. But it was easy to see that his mind was not fully upon his reading. From time to time, he glanced up at Jeffery's long body sagging ungracefully in the arm-chair. A cloud of grey smoke hovered about his head and writhed to the ceiling in slow spirals. The young man was lying back with closed eyes, and he might have been asleep except for the restless tapping of one long finger on the arm of the chair.

Eleven o'clock struck. Outside the wind had risen. Read gave a little grunt of impatience, closed the book, and placed it on the small table. "I'm going to bed, son," he said.

Jeffery did not open his eyes. "Go ahead," he murmured. "I'll probably be here all night."

And in that moment, it happened. The Chief Inspector had just risen from his chair when the front door blew open with a crash that rattled the windows. In that hushed room the sound was detonating. Jeffery almost leapt from his chair, and the cigarette went flying from between his lips, scattering sparks like a miniature rocket. He began to stamp wildly on the carpet. The crash had startled Read too. He moved into the hall and shut the door with a slam. Back in the room, he stared at the groping Jeffery and shook his head.

"Must get that door fixed," he muttered. "And as for you, son—you ought to take things easy. Your nerves are worse than poor Yates'..."

He broke off in astonishment. Jeffery had risen to his feet and was staring at him. There was an expression on his face that was surprise, wonder, and enlightenment mingled. For some seconds he held his gaze, mouth wide, eyes vacant. Then abruptly, his face blazed with excitement.

"I've got it!" His voice was shrill. "By the Great Living God! It must be right!" His lean body was trembling with eagerness and he gripped the table to steady himself. "A door slams back and in comes truth! The whole wonderful, amazing truth! Can't you hear it, Chief? The room's ringing with it—ringing with one name!"

"Well—out with it." Read himself was on tiptoe with the wild excitement.

Jeffery had sobered. He shook his head and crossing to the divan, struggled into his overcoat. "No, Chief. It wouldn't be fair. You'd laugh...Even to me, the idea seems too fantastic for consideration." He was fumbling with his gloves, muttering to himself. "And yet, I must be right. I must! It's mad—mad—but there's no other possible explanation that can cover all the facts."

"The name," Read was roaring at him. "Hillier? Hoskins? Who can it be?"

The young man, with a cheerful wave of his hand, was moving through the door.

"You might at least tell me where you're going!" the Chief Inspector yelled

after him.

"Down to see your crazy loon in the Cairnside Mental Hospital," the answer floated back. But Jeffery Blackburn himself had gone.

Chapter 15

FOUR O'CLOCK ON the following afternoon found Miss Bertha Fenton hunched untidily over her portable machine in the small cubicle bearing her name at the "Informer" office. With a cigarette between her lips, she was wrestling with a "fill-up" special—one of those incredible pieces of journalistic insanity which the reading public accept as part of the weekly newspaper.

She was at work on her last slip of copy when a boy tapped on her door, entered, and deposited on her table the latest edition of the "Courier." Bertha pushed back her typewriter with a sigh of relief and picked up the newspaper.

The first page, devoted almost exclusively to the Yates murder, was merely a journalistic rehash of the morning papers' report. The woman crinkled her little eyes wickedly. "It's got them beaten—the whole thing," she muttered to herself. There was almost a note of savage satisfaction in her voice. She glanced down the paper and her eyes contracted. Set in the centre of the sheet was a story that commanded attention—a double-column report bearing the photograph of a young foreign-looking man. Bertha held the paper closer to her eyes and read.

NEW WITNESS IN MURDER MYSTERIES

FORMER MENTAL PATIENT MAY PROVIDE VALUABLE CLUE

The "Courier" announces the discovery of a new witness in the sensational Centenary murders that are at present agitating the Commonwealth. This is a young German medical student, Hans von Rasch. For the past six months, following an injury that he sustained, this young man has been confined to the Cairnside Mental Hospital undergoing treatment.

Two days ago he learnt of the murders through an old newspaper and immediately asked leave to come to the city, as he had, so he said, an important clue in his possession that would identify the murderer.

Herr von Rasch, who will arrive in the city late this afternoon, has booked rooms at the Britannia Hotel. Here he will start to interview the Chief Inspector Read who has been investigating this series of horrible crimes. The witness will return to the hospital by special police-car early to-morrow morning.

Bertha Fenton crumpled the paper in her strong fingers. She sat staring before her for almost a minute. Then, glancing at her wristwatch, she rose, and, crushing her hat on her head, walked quickly from the room.

In his bedroom at the Britannia Hotel, Hans von Rasch sat reading.

He was sitting in a deep chair, his legs stretched toward the gas radiator. His thin, fair face had that fine pallor that comes to a skin long denied the

sunshine. The hands that rested on the book were white and slender as the sticks of an ivory fan. From time to time the young man raised his eyes from the printed page and glanced up at the clock on the mantel, a merrily ticking time-piece showing close to eight o'clock. Then he would drop his eyes to his book again.

Silence in the room—a silence made all the more oppressive by the subdued background of small sounds: the whisper of the gas fire, the rustle of a turned page, and the cheeky chirruping of the small clock.

Half an hour passed. Von Rasch began to yawn, casting envious glances toward the old-fashioned though undeniably comfortable bed. He made an effort to overcome the advance of his weariness, but he realized he had been reading without his mind taking impressions of the printed words. Once the book almost slipped from his fingers. He roused himself to glance again at the clock. Eight-thirty. His interview with the police was arranged for nine o'clock. Perhaps, if he set the alarm for that hour, he might doze a little. The room was comfortably warm, the chair was cosy, and he was so tired.

He raised an indolent arm, reached over; and set the alarm. Rising, he walked to the door and turned the key in the lock. His next move was to the window, locking the panes together. Turning out the light, he resumed his seat by the fire, snuggled down, and closed his eyes. Within a few minutes, deep, regular breathing announced that he slept.

A deeper silence settled on the room. The clock ticked on with cheerful disinterest—a mechanical thing of tin and brass and cardboard aloof from the dark emotions of mankind. The whisper of the blue fire crawling about the white cylinders seemed to have taken on a sinister warning note.

Ten minutes passed.

From the direction of the door came a slight rustling sound, a soft scuffling. The handle of the door turned...to the right...to the left. It creaked as though some heavy body was placed against it. A pause and the rustling sounded again. This time its origin was revealed. Under the door, between the woodwork and the oilcloth, a sheet of paper was being inserted from outside—slowly, cautiously...A soft rattling from the lock and the key fell from its position, to drop on to the paper with a soft thud. Quickly the paper carrying the key was whisked under the door.

Von Rasch stirred slightly, but he did not awaken

Again the silence. It was deeper this time, more tense, as though the inanimate objects in the room waited and watched. Minutes passed.

Once more the knob of the door began to turn. Slowly, inch by inch, the door began to open, and now a slim white hand insinuated itself around the edge—a sensitive groping hand. The door opened wider; the next moment a

figure was in the room—a figure dressed in a long dark overcoat that hung to the knees, its face hidden behind a luxuriant black beard and moustache. From the dimly seen forehead, pale eyes peered swiftly about the room—to light exultantly. The man in the chair breathed deeply in his sleep.

The clock, as though in a panic to warn the sleeper, ticked frenziedly. It seemed almost straining itself to touch the alarm that would galvanize the sleep-drugged brain of the unconscious man.

Slowly the bearded figure crept forward. The slim hand disappeared in the pocket of the coat, to reappear holding a long thin blade of razor sharpness. The fire reflected itself luridly on the scalpel, and the poised weapon seemed already stained. Fingers clutched tightly about a hilt, the murderer crept forward. One step...another...the knife was raised now, higher than that dark, bearded face and those pale, staring eyes. One more step...

"On him!" screamed a voice, and Jeffery Blackburn darted from the adjoining room.

With that cry, the room seemed suddenly filled with men O'Connor and Donlin leapt from behind the bed and flung themselves on the bearded creature. Four constables were close behind them. The knife was whisked from his hands; it described a glittering arc across the room and buried itself in the floor some feet away. Now the long overcoat was buried under a surging, struggling group of men. Suddenly there came a shot that snapped like a whip-crack; the acrid tang of smoke hung on the air and the writhing heap froze for a moment, then parted. The bearded figure lay sprawled across the floor, a dark shadow in the lesser gloom. Across the front of his coat, blood oozed slowly. There was a long silence. Then O'Connor detached himself from the group and came across to where Jeffery and the Chief Inspector were standing.

"Grabbed my gun and turned it on himself during the struggle," the detective explained quietly. "Got it through the chest, I think."

Blackburn, staring down at the motionless figure, nodded. "Perhaps it was the best way," he commented. "Right, Donlin. Let's have the house-light. The drama's finished."

With the flashing-on of the light, he walked over to the young man, who had risen from his chair and stood looking about, his pale face flushed.

"Good work, von Rasch," Jeffery said curtly. "You've got nerve!" He patted the lad on the shoulder and turned back to the waiting detectives. "Bring that body over here and place it in this chair." In a few moments it was in position. Blackburn, standing at one side, cleared his throat.

"Chief Inspector Read and gentlemen, allow me to present to you the true identity of the most clever and audacious killer in the history of your records. The murderer of Sir Merton Sheldon in his locked apartment, of Mr. Edward

Biggs in his fruit-shop, and "—his voice rose a note—"of Mr. Dyke Wilkinson, the reporter who was found with his head blown away on the banks of the river two days ago."

Astonishment quivered in the air. Eyes widened. No one spoke. Jeffery hurried on.

"Gentlemen, look upon the face of this murderer!"

He leaned forward and grasped the black beard, winding it in his fingers. The silence in the room was too tense to be borne—a silence of bated breaths, arrested movement, unblinking eyes—a silence when time itself seemed to stand still. Then Jeffery jerked at the beard. It slipped off, together with the moustache to reveal the pleasant, regular features of—Martin Yates!

There came a long, almost unanimous sigh of breaths released in unison. Still no person in that room broke the silence. Amazement laid a hand on every mouth, stilled every tongue. Each pair of eyes was focussed on that handsome Judas face, prepossessing even in death. Then Read made a jerky little movement and swallowed. His voice, when he spoke, was curiously shrill.

"Then—then Yates was not murdered?"

"Obviously not," Jeffery returned. "It was Wilkinson's body dressed in Yates' clothes that we found. Remember, the upper part of the face was disfigured beyond recognition. There was only one means of identifying the body, and that was because Wilkinson wore a small moustache. So Yates removed the lips and destroyed our last chance of recognition."

Read shuddered. "What a fiend! Then Yates was Oscar Dowling's brother?"

Blackburn smiled grimly. "On the contrary, he was no relation at all."

The Chief Inspector stared. "Then—"

"No relation at all," Jeffery repeated. He paused and drew a deep breath.

"You see, Chief, Martin Yates is Oscar Dowling—Oscar Dowling given a new set of features by the miracle of plastic surgery and the genius of a certain Dr. Bernhardt Meyersen."

At that moment, as if waiting for its cue, the alarm on the clock shrilled agitatedly.

Chapter 16

JEFFERY BLACKBURN pushed his coffee-cup back and fumbled for his cigarette case.

"You see, Chief, the criminal's greatest advantage lay in the fact that with his character of the reporter he was on the inside of every new plan. After the first murder, he knew practically every move in advance and could take steps to counteract them. It was this fact that made it possible for him to elude justice so long."

It was the following morning and Jeffery was lingering over a belated breakfast with the Chief Inspector. Read eyed the younger man over the rim of his cup.

"You certainly go to the head of the class this time, son. Whoever would have dreamed of a climax like that? Certainly not this police. man!"

Jeffery lit a cigarette and rocked back in his chair. Gone were the lassitude and anxiety of the past few days; now he was a man at peace with the world and tasting the sweets of triumph. He smiled.

"The biggest surprise was reserved for me when Bertha Fenton walked out of that side room and demanded a personal statement," he chuckled. "What a woman! Seems she'd been hiding in there since four o'clock in the afternoon—came along as soon as she read the 'Courier' report and slipped in without 'being seen. No wonder her paper prizes her services!" He paused, to blow out a feather of smoke. "But, seriously, Chief, if you hadn't made that remark last night about my nerves, I might still be walking round in circles."

Read grunted. He lowered his cup and reached for the toast-rack. "Stop talking rot and pass the marmalade," he ordered brusquely. "You know quite well that the whole business is still so much a closed book to me." He looked up from his spreading. "Here's your chance to hold the floor, son. How about a little explaining?"

Jeffery grinned. "Just for that, I've a good mind to emulate the oyster," he declared. "But I couldn't 'forgo this chance of crowing over you, Chief. So here goes'.

"It's a long and complicated business," he began. "To make it more understandable, we shall take the supposed murder of Yates as our stepping-stone and work backward.

"In the killing of the tradesman Biggs, the murderer left a few loose ends. But in the murder of Wilkinson, the nasty business simply reeked with inconsistencies. Yates was getting panicky, and he took a bold step without stopping to plan carefully. Even so, it was the merest piece of luck that proved his undoing. You see, we were pressing him hard and he took a last desperate

chance—gambled and lost!

"Now, Chief, take that last murder as we heard of it on Sunday afternoon. We were told over the telephone that the body of Martin Yates had been found on the river-bank. Although we did not question this at the time, there was absolutely no proof that the body was that of Yates. Remember how the upper part of the face had been disfigured beyond recognition—and, to make identification even more unlikely, the lower part of the face had been mutilated. So that, reduced to its barest terms, all we saw on the bank was the body of an unidentifiable person dressed in Yates' clothes with Yates' belongings in its pocket and Yates' revolver lying on the grass near by.

"Now—why should we have been so ready to take this false evidence at its face value? Because Yates, on the previous night, had prepared us for his death in a manner that was brilliantly clever. But his cleverness by no means ended with that preparation. Because if we had found a body with the entire face shot away, we might have suspected an attempt to destroy identification. But by blowing away part of the head and mutilating the lower portion of the face in a manner so typical of the other murders, he carried on the horrid motif, as it were, and also managed to lay his false trail without arousing the faintest suspicion—at that time."

Jeffery paused to draw at his cigarette.

"But after the first shock of horror had worn off," he continued, "I began to think logically over this latest killing. And I discovered a number of things that give off a definite fish-like odour. Consider, for instance, the position of the dead body of the supposed Yates. He had been killed among a thick growth of trees about one hundred yards off the main road. Now, recall the behaviour of our supposed victim. On the previous night he had called on us, openly admitting that he was in deadly fear of his life, so much so that when he left this house, he was tarrying with him a revolver fully loaded and ready for instant use. Remember, he expected an attack to be made upon his life! His path, as we know, lay along the main road, over the bridge that crosses the river and into the city. He had no need to go anywhere near that grove of trees on his way home. Then why should he go wandering about in a place where the cover and the darkness would very naturally afford his attacker an excellent hiding-place and an unparalleled opportunity for murder? One would naturally think that, to a man expecting and fearing a murderous attack on his life, such a place would have been avoided at all costs."

The Chief Inspector cleared his throat as Jeffery paused. "But he could have been called in from the trees," he suggested.

"Good! Let us say that he was called in," Blackburn continued. "There would still be no reason for him to go. Yates, according to his story, knew who

the murderer was. If he were called, wouldn't he be likely to recognize the voice? Of course he would. And, having recognized the voice as belonging to the murderer, is it likely that he would walk calmly into that grove of trees to his death? I don't think so!"

"Remember, son," Read pointed out, "that Yates had told us he wanted to meet the murderer to see if the person tallied with that name on the paper."

"I know! But he still wouldn't have risked his life as recklessly as all that. Yates wanted us to believe that he was going to his home and would wait there until the murderer attacked him."

Read made one last effort. "Then supposing the murderer had met him on the road and coaxed him into the trees?"

"Don't you see that exactly the same argument applies? Yates, knowing that the man had designs on his life and having recognized him as the murderer, would be far more likely to shoot than to walk into the trap." Jeffery shook his head. "Again, Yates hadn't been shot on the road and dragged to the Thatched House—the bloodstains proved that. No, Chief, as it stood, we were asked to believe a most illogical fact. We were asked to believe that, entirely of his own free will, Yates, a man in danger of his life, had gone completely out of his way to wander in among the trees—and had been shot down there. For the life of me I couldn't reconcile the facts.

"The second inconsistency came from a clue supplied by Dr. Conroy. Remember how Yates had supposedly received a charge from a shot-gun in the face as he was creeping through the trees carrying his revolver? When he was shot, the weapon had apparently dropped from his fingers to the ground. Now, that, my dear Chief, is a sheer physical impossibility! One shot, you recall, was fired. At first it was presumed that this shot had been fired in self-defence. Then Conroy pointed out that upon the body receiving the charge in the face, the natural tensing of the muscles would have flexed the finger on the trigger and the shot would be discharged in that way. So far, so good! Then why should the revolver have dropped from the hand? If one finger contracted on the trigger, why shouldn't all the fingers have contracted about the revolver? Muscles don't work independently in a case like this—the reaction is quite automatic. According to Conroy, that revolver should have been gripped tightly in the hand, But it had been dropped on the grass! Why?"

"But the dead man must have dropped it," objected Read. "His fingerprints and the prints on the revolver tallied exactly."

"And I'll tell you why they tallied," the young man returned. "Because, after murdering Wilkinson, Yates wiped his revolver clean, placed it in the dead man's hand, double his fingers around the butt and so formed the prints on the gun. If Yates had left his own prints on that gun, they would have not only

proved that the gun had never been in the dead man's—Wilkinson's—hand, but those prints, being Yates' own, would have proved to the world that he was Oscar Dowling! Remember, a record of Yates' prints—under the name of Dowling—was already in the possession of the Department. Any smart detective might have stumbled on the similarity, for although plastic surgery might alter a man's face beyond recognition, no process yet known to science can change finger-prints."

The Chief Inspector nodded quietly. After a pause, Blackburn went on.

"Now we come to the third overlapping. It deals with the incredibly cunning trick of the envelope. After we found that someone had broken in and changed that envelope—I'll have something more to say on that point directly—I was forced to one conclusion. There were no signs of a search being made, therefore I concluded that the intruder must have gone directly to the book-case. There was no other person in this room, barring our two selves, when we hid that letter, therefore Blackbeard must have watched where we put the envelope! And that man was the murderer.

"Yates left this cottage at ten o'clock. I heard the clock strike as I let him out. I came back into this room and we talked for half an hour before deciding that the book-case was the safest hiding-place for the envelope. Therefore Blackbeard must have been outside our window at that time. Yet five minutes later, according to Conroy's medical evidence, he was engaged in shooting Yates on the river-bank a mile away. How could this killer possibly be in two places at the one time?"

The Chief Inspector thought over this point for a moment.

"But Yates himself must have looked in the window, watched where we hid the note—and then killed Wilkinson," he pointed out. "Even though he was the murderer instead of the victim, how did Yates manage to be in two places at once?"

"He wasn't," Jeffery replied. "He looked in at our window at ten-thirty and murdered Wilkinson on the riverbank five minutes later. Because he had a motor-car with the bound reporter in it waiting a street away. He could have easily covered that distance in five minutes, driving the car.

"But what occurred to me was the fact that the murderer could be in two places only by split-second timing. It meant the most meticulous planning—planning by a person who must have known every move in advance—must have known that Yates intended visiting us that night (a thing that Yates, had he been innocent, was most unlikely to mention to anyone), must have known the exact route Yates would take on his way home, must have known exactly what time he would leave this place, and a dozen other details that no one save Yates himself could have possibly known. You follow my reasoning?"

The Chief Inspector nodded. "But I can't understand why Yates, after giving us the envelope, should take the risk of breaking in here to change it. Why couldn't he have left the envelope we found—the one with the warning from Blackbeard inside it—why couldn't he have left that one here in the first place?"

Jeffery looked reproachful.

"My dear Chief, has the coffee drugged the grey cells? Remember that even while Yates was sitting here on that night, you wanted to open the envelope and look at the contents. If that first envelope had contained Blackbeard's warning and we had opened it, Yates would have been exposed outright!" He paused and shook his head. "No, Chief. Yates was taking no risks about our honour. Although it is a guess, I believe the first envelope contained the name of Dyke Wilkinson. Thus, if we did break our word and open the envelope, we would have merely found a fresh suspect to add to our list.

"The planting of the second envelope was a brilliant stroke of cunning. It not only prepared us for putting the name of Yates to the disfigured body on the riverbank, but it also made it appear that Yates had really been shadowed that night. Who would ever conceive that, having given us one envelope, the same man would break in and substitute a second. On the face of it, the idea was preposterous!

"Then why leave the first envelope, you may ask? Because Yates, knowing that the next day we should examine an unrecognizable body, wanted to impress the idea deeply in our minds that he (Yates) was in deadly peril of his life. He wanted to give us a motive for his death! Once Wilkinson's body was buried as Yates, the murderer had a clear run. Where he obtained the idea of the substitution of the bodies in this last murder, will be clear to you as I explain.

"By his visit, however, Yates cleared up one bewildering point. You recall his 'suggestion' as to how the murderer may have escaped from the Sheldon apartment? That the killer may have taken the key from the Judge's pocket, locked the door, and returned the key to the pocket when he returned on the following morning after the discovery of the murder? Yates, unless I am much mistaken, used that very method himself! I learned from O'Connor that he was one of the first persons on the scene of the Sheldon killing and that he and the other reporters examined the body before O'Connor searched the dead man's pockets. Thus he had plenty of opportunity to slip the key in the waistcoat pocket."

Jeffery crushed out his smouldering cigarette-butt before he continued.

"Now we come to the greatest inconsistency—the mistake which cost Yates his life and revealed to me the whole amazing truth just when hope

seemed most feeble.

"Think back to that Saturday night, Chief. Yates was, you remember, sitting in a chair holding a glass of whisky in his hands and acting the part of the gallant hero in fear of his life. Then a gust of wind blew open the door. Yates started so violently that he rather overdid it. His hand, closing about the thin glass, shattered the edges, and the jagged fragments inflicted a deep cut on his fingers. He had to use a handkerchief to stop the bleeding. Remember?

"When I examined the supposed body of Yates on the river-bank, I was conscious of another discrepancy. I couldn't think, at the time, exactly what it was, but was there at the back of my mind.

"I came back that night and tried to reason it out. I pictured Yates as we saw him last, sitting there with that glass in his hand. Then that thrice-blessed door blew open and you made the remark that my nerves were in no better condition than Yates'.—Yates, who on the previous night had started and cut his hand on the glass. Then the discrepancy was clear. The outflung hands of that body on the river were unmarked by so much as a scratch! Now, how could that wound on Yates' hand have healed in a day—not only healed, but disappeared altogether in less than twenty-four hours?

"We were faced, Chief, with a direct contradiction of facts. Yates had left our rooms with a deep cut on his hand. The next afternoon his body was found with hand without trace of the wound. And here was the point that immediately occurred to me—the body was faceless. We had no corroboration of identity from that angle. Then an amazing possibility occurred to me. The body on the river bank was not Yates! And with that realization, the whole monkey-puzzle fell into position. Can you wonder why I behaved like a wild Indian that night?"

"Why didn't you explain?" Read demanded.

"Because, at that moment, there was nothing to explain, except a wild theory that you would have laughed at," Blackburn replied. "My next step was to discover whose body it was. Hoskins was behind bars. Hillier's gaunt frame was out of the running. Torrance was in hospital. Gilbert Lascelles was alive that afternoon, for I had spoken to him after leaving your headquarters. The only other person was Dyke Wilkinson. When I left this room, I hurried around to his rooms, to learn that the reporter had been missing since Saturday afternoon. That strengthened my suspicions. I took a photograph from his rooms and called on Mrs. Bowes' servant. She identified the photograph as a likeness of the man who called with Val Sheldon—the man who had said that 'the thing was in the bag'."

"Now, consider those words! 'In the bag.' Has it occurred to you that the phrase may have been a colloquialism? Say, for instance, Wilkinson had

suspected Hoskins of the murder of Sheldon, say he had crime down to warn Biggs and had straightaway gone to Hoskins' rooms with Val Sheldon to discover more evidence. Isn't it extremely likely that, believing he had a water-tight case against Hoskins, he would say to Val Sheldon, 'There's nothing to be afraid of now. The thing's in the bag'—meaning, of course, that the whole investigation was finished?"

Jeffery grinned. "Because, according to Val Sheldon, that's exactly what did happen. Wilkinson, believing Hoskins to be the murderer, came down on that Saturday afternoon to warn Biggs and was seen by Yates, who arrived at noon. Then Wilkinson went to his rooms for lunch, changed from his brown suit to a blue and, ringing Val Sheldon, went to Hoskins' rooms. Yates followed him and the two men met. Then it was that Wilkinson told Yates about his suspicions of Hoskins. This gave Yates the idea of planting the hand on Hoskins, which he did that night.

"Now, although Wilkinson did not suspect Yates, that person knew that if Hoskins could prove a definite alibi for his movements on the Saturday, suspicion must inevitably fasten somewhere else. And already Wilkinson had proved too astute for Yates' peace of mind. There and then the idea of killing Wilkinson must have been born.

"Of course," Jeffery continued. "I knew nothing of these things at the time. All I knew was that Wilkinson suspected who the murderer was and that Wilkinson was missing. Then could it be Wilkinson's body that we had found? When I left this room last night, I intended going to Cairnside. But first I wanted to be certain about the identity of that body. So I stopped at the city morgue.

"Wilkinson, I knew, wore a moustache. Was that why the lips of the third victim had been removed? Uncovering that body, I did something that took pure nerve. I bent over that mutilated face and examined the edges of the wounds with a magnifying-glass. And on the corners were traces of black hairs. Those lips had carried a moustache! Then the body was Wilkinson's!

"Then—where was Yates himself? Unless he was being kept prisoner somewhere, he must have heard of the murder and come forward to explain. Yet he had not. That left two explanations. Either the prime mover in these murders was an unknown person entirely out of our sphere of investigation who was keeping Yates prisoner—or else Yates himself must be the murderer. As I stood in that morgue, trying to grasp this incredible truth, I found every hitherto irrelevant factor slipping into place to form one inescapable conclusion.

"Here was an explanation of the split-second timing on the night of the third murder. Of the so-called perspicacity of Yates in fathoming how the

murderer got in and out of the Sheldon apartment; of the Biggs murder when Yates, instead of being the man who warned the tradesman, was the actual murderer; of the envelope exchange and a dozen other riddles. Whatever way I turned I found no other solution for the terrible list of occurrences.

"But what was the motive? Was Yates a homicidal maniac, striking down for the sheer lust of killing? But I refused to accept this explanation. Then I realized that the final clue must lie with that patient in the Cairnside Mental Hospital."

Jeffery Blackburn lit a second cigarette. The Chief Inspector, his arms folded across his chest, did not break into the pause. Presently Jeffery continued.

"I'll skip the needless details," he resumed. "Because it's a long enough story as it is I was shown into the room of this patient, young von Rasch, and he told me one of the queerest stories I've heard in a long time—a story that could have only happened in these post-war days and which made the whole business clear as daylight.

"More than six months ago, this young chap joined up with a Dr. Bernhardt Meyersen, who was at that time living in a lonely mansion out on Henbane plains, some miles from Greycliffe prison. This was, you will recall, about the time of the Dowling escape.

"Meyersen was a genius at plastic surgery and he had fallen foul of the police in Vienna over some scandal with a wealthy woman. He took refuge in this country with his mind soured against police and legal authority. He told von Rasch that Dowling was hidden in his—Dr. Meyersen's—house, and that he was going to use him as an experiment.

"He was going to give Dowling an absolutely new set of features so as to render his identification impossible after the operation. Then he would keep the man as living proof of his genius. Von Rasch was to act as Meyersen's assistant during this operation.

"But the first necessity was to account for the disappearance of Dowling. Meyersen had in his laboratory a corpse such as are used in hospitals and universities for experimental purposes. He clawed the face away, dressed the body in the convict's uniform, and left it in a creek for the warders to find. The body, found a month later, was buried as Dowling, and there that part of the business ended. Meanwhile, the real criminal was lying in the Meyersen laboratory and the operation of grafting new skin on his face was taking place. Now, Chief, this is not nearly as fantastic as it sounds. Plastic surgery made wonderful strides during the war, and to-day it is a fairly common, although expensive, operation among the wealthier women. We often read of screen stars and actresses submitting to treatment after sustaining injuries in

accidents. Also, we have to remember that Meyersen was at the top of his profession."

He paused to draw on his cigarette.

Read said quietly:

"So that's where Yates—or Dowling—got his idea about the substitution of the bodies in the last murder?"

"Exactly. As a matter of fact, I believe it was while undergoing this operation and during the period of convalescence that Dowling, as we must now call him, planned these amazing murders. Remember, Chief, Dowling had been a brilliant novelist before his attacks of madness overcame him. His fiction plots were extraordinary. He was labouring under a perverted sense of injustice, and realizing what a wonderful opportunity the new face would give him, he set about planning the greatest crime-plot of his career. He brought to it his imagination coupled with cold logic. Week after week as he lay there wrapped in bandages, unable to see or occupy his mind in any other way, he was perfecting his infamous schemes. There were four long months of planning behind these murders, since it took Meyersen 'that long to complete the operation. At the end of the fifth month the doctor began to treat the scars with new skin. And midway through the sixth month the operation was complete. Oscar Dowling had disappeared. In his place stood Martin Yates, younger and with a handsome regular set of features, without a single betraying scar.

"For some weeks prior to this, the doctor allowed Yates to move about the house and even went so far as to teach him a smattering of anatomy and elementary surgery. Now, Meyersen, believing Yates to have been merely an ignorant brute without brains or imagination, never dreamed that he would want to leave him. After all, Meyersen held his secret, and again, Yates was getting good pay as a handy-man about the place. But the doctor had reckoned without those long months of scheming. Yates waited until one night when Meyersen and a big servant had gone to Henbane for supplies. Then he attacked the young von Rasch with a poker and made his escape. Von Rasch, struck savagely about the head, recovered sufficiently to give chase to the railway-line. There he collapsed and remembers nothing more until he awoke in the Cairnside Hospital."

Again Jeffery paused.

"Now that Yates is dead by his own hand," he continued, "we have no way of filling in the blanks save by guesswork. We know that Yates reached the city and in some way obtained a position with the Associated Press. He was, remember, a splendid journalist and was well equipped for the post. A few weeks later he was shifted to a position in charge of the office, where he

would be on the inside of all the information. It was a wonderful opportunity, and he grasped it—the opportunity to revenge himself on the society which he believed had wrongly sentenced him to the living death of a labour prison."

"Yates was a mental case, of course?" asked Read.

"Decidedly. He was the dangerous mental type with too much imagination and little regard for human feelings. He had brooded on his supposed wrongs for so long that he had actually come to believe them. Added to this were his periodic fits of insanity." Jeffery broke off. "But I'm getting ahead of my story.

"I had cut from a trade paper a photograph of Yates. This I showed to the young patient, and he immediately identified the face as that which Meyersen had given to Dowling. Then I realized that, if the young man would co-operate with me, I had in my hands a powerful weapon by which I could lay the murderer low.

"You see, Yates was assured that, with Wilkinson dead, his secret was safe. Only three persons knew of his operation, and they were unlikely to connect that with the Centenary crimes. Another thing was that Meyersen and his servant, returning and finding Yates gone, naturally became afraid of their action coming to the ears of the police. Where they went is not known, but one may surmise that they lost no time in getting out of the country, and Yates naturally concluded that von Rasch had fled with them! He had no idea that all this time the young man was in the hospital. But if he were to find out, I believed that he would leave no stone unturned to blot out this last surviving clue to his identity.

"So I arranged for the trap in the room at the 'Britannia', with von Rasch as the bait. A story in the 'Courier' was the lead. We grabbed our friend as he walked into the trap." Jeffery spread his hands. "And so to bed!"

Read nodded. "Very conclusive," he returned. "But you're wrong in one detail, son. You presumed that Wilkinson must have rung up Val Sheldon and asked her to come around to Hoskins' rooms. As a matter of fact, the girl met Wilkinson outside quite by chance."

"What was she doing there—and what's her association with Hoskins?"

A shadow crept across the Chief Inspector's face. "Seems I owe that girl an apology," he said gruffly. "Hoskins, you see, was trying the old blackmail game again. He'd got some letters implicating Lady Sheldon in one of Sheldon's shady deals, and he wrote to Val Sheldon asking for a certain sum of money for their return. The girl considered the matter for a week, and on that Saturday morning of Biggs' death drove into the city to pay the money. Hoskins had the letters in a black bag and was probably going to meet Miss Sheldon, when that reporter woman saw him.

"Val Sheldon and Hoskins had lunch together, and the latter, seeing that

the girl was anxious to get the correspondence, popped up the price. The girl was furious and refused to pay the extra. They parted. Later in the afternoon, however, she decided to bow to the servant's demands and went around to Hoskins' rooms. That was where she met Wilkinson. Hoskins, however, had left to visit Lady Sheldon. The girl, suspecting this, gave chase and caught Hoskins a few miles out of the city as he was changing trams. Miss Sheldon took Hoskins into her car, when the police grabbed them. That's why the girl had to tell all those lies—to protect her mother. Anyhow, the result will be bars for Albert Hoskins and apologies to Val Sheldon."

"Very sincere apologies, I hope," the young man said quietly. "That girl seems to have had a raw deal all through this investigation. No wonder she flew off the handle the last time we tried to question her."

A short silence fell. It was broken by Read, who asked:

"When did Yates trap Wilkinson?"

"Must have been shortly after the two left Hoskins' rooms," Jeffery replied. "We can imagine that Yates asked the reporter to come into his apartment and—perhaps—have a drink. All he had to do was to drug the drink, and Wilkinson was in his power. After Yates left this cottage on the Saturday night, he merely had to change clothes with the drugged man. Remember it was a full moon and everything was planned to the second."

Read was silent for a moment. Then he looked up.

"Why did Yates use a reporter's paper-file for the murder of Judge Sheldon? One would have thought that an article so closely connected with the profession would have been the last thing to be chosen."

Jeffery crushed his cigarette in the ash-tray. "That was his damnable cleverness again," he explained. "He worked through all the murders on the theory of reversed or inverted evidence. He knew only too well that such a distinctive weapon as a paper-file could point to only one set of persons—the reporters on the case. Yet the very oddness of the weapon was his safeguard, since it appeared to have been chosen for the reason of throwing suspicion on the pressmen! It actually had the property of turning our attention away from the murderer, since we would argue that only a madman would use a distinctive weapon that was a direct finger-post to his guilt. In other words, he deliberately laid suspicion on himself, knowing all the time that we would never take that suspicion seriously, but would look for a person diametrically opposed.

"Also that same cleverness extended to his apparent inability to furnish an alibi on the night of the Sheldon murder. He told you that he could give no satisfactory account of his movements. Now, no guilty person would dare make an admission like that—they would have provided themselves with a

water-tight alibi, or so we would have reasoned. You see, Chief, paradoxical as it sounds, Yates actually avoided suspicion by deliberately casting it on himself—but in such a manner that we refused to take that suspicion at its face value!"

"And the ten-year-old cable implicating Hillier was another attempt to plant false evidence?"

"I believe so. About that time Yates must have begun to worry about the crimes not turning out just as he had planned. The discovery of the old cable gave him an excellent opportunity to pin suspicion on the evangelist."

The Chief Inspector rose and crossed to the window. He stood looking out for some moments before he spoke. There was a faint note of awe in his voice.

"I can scarcely believe it's over, son. When you consider those crimes and what lay behind them, it's amazing. Never anything in criminal records like it before."

"Nor again, I hope." Jeffery came across and joined his friend at the window. "I've had quite enough of crime for a considerable period. You know, Chief, it was only by a most unforeseen incident that we unearthed the truth. But for that, we would have still been stumbling about in the dark."

He placed his hand on the other's shoulders. His voice was very quiet. "And next time, Chief, luck may be on the side of the criminal. Remember that before you start heaping congratulations on my bowed but blushing head."

End