

The
DETECTIVE
MEGAPACK®



28 *Modern & Classic Tales
of Mystery and Detection*

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The Detective Megapack selects 29 tales, classic and modern, which we hope will intrigue and entertain you. We really enjoyed putting this collection together. Hopefully you will encounter at least a few authors you haven't read before. If you like their work here, do seek out their other books and stories.

This volume was primarily selected by Carla Coupe and John Betancourt, though everyone at Wildside Press helps. And we continue to thank our readers who make suggestions.

Enjoy!

—John Betancourt
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X is for Xmas: Christmas Mysteries

IT TORE THE LAUGH FROM MY THROAT, by Meriah L. Crawford

I was supposed to be on vacation. I was supposed to be relaxing, putting my feet up, reading. I was supposed to be eating locally-caught seafood—like drum, soft-shell crab, and oysters dug fresh. I was supposed to be sitting on the porch of my little rental cabin on Chincoteague, enjoying the break I'd earned after nearly four solid months of long hours, seven-day weeks, and living out of my car while working on a huge class-action lawsuit. The phone was not supposed to ring, and if it did, I was not supposed to answer. But it did, and I did, and this is what happened.

* * * *

“Is this Lauren? Lauren Lindsay?”

I could tell from the voice that something was very wrong. “Yes?” I said.

“My name is Harriet Reynolds. I was Jess Walter’s college roommate.” Jess is a lawyer friend of mine who I work for as a private investigator. She sometimes referred clients to me, but she also knew how much I needed this time off.

“It’s my husband,” she said, her voice breaking. “He’s—he’s missing.” Harriet began sobbing.

I could almost feel her body shaking over the phone. I’d had people start crying before—usually while telling me they suspected their husband or wife was cheating on them—but not like this. I waited for a couple of minutes until the storm began to ease, then said, as gently as I could, “I’m so sorry about your husband. Tell me what I can do to help.”

“I want you to find him. *Please.*”

Though I was exhausted and reluctant to take any new work on, for Jess' sake I decided to at least hear her out. I pulled out a notebook and pen, and sat at the small dining table to take notes.

Her husband Tom, a retired bank manager, went to visit his mother one afternoon, just over a week ago. Harriet stayed behind because of a migraine, and went to bed early. When she woke up at almost eight the next morning, Tom still hadn't come home. Harriet called his mom, who told her that Tom left just after eleven the night before, saying he was going straight home. Harriet then began a frenzy of phone calling: hospitals, the police, friends and family in the area. Nothing. After another call to Tom's mother, who was starting to get frightened, Harriet drove the route to her house, and then back by a slightly different path. There was no sign of him. Nothing at all.

Later that same day, she told me, the police found Tom's car parked at the edge of a field. It was a couple miles off his expected path, which was explained by the fact that the fuel tank was empty. The working theory was that he'd noticed he was low on fuel sometime after he started home, and turned toward the main highway where he knew he could buy gas at that hour. He'd obviously run out before he got that far.

It seemed reasonable to think he'd simply started walking, since it was only about a mile to the nearest gas station. But, what happened next was anybody's guess. Finally, after a week's work with no solid leads, the police had admitted that there wasn't much more they could do. And that's when Harriet called Jess, who sent her to me.

I'd worked missing persons cases before, but they were all fairly basic: finding old friends, former employees, or catching up with a rebellious son who'd left home at sixteen and not been heard from since. It was usually a matter of doing a bunch of online searching followed by, at most, a few phone calls. There was one young woman I hadn't been able to find for seven months, but it turned out she'd moved to a different state and lived with friends for half a year

while saving up to rent an apartment. That kept her name out of the databases for much longer than usual.

But, this? Harriet's story just didn't make much sense to me. It all came back to a simple question: If he wasn't dead, why hadn't he called? There was a time before cell phones, when some rural areas didn't have phone service available for every home, that he might just be sick or hurt and not able to let her know. But the man had a cell phone, as do most people nowadays, and service was fairly good on the peninsula. It seemed clear to me that he was gone either because he wanted to be, or because he was beyond wanting. Beyond anything. Either way, it wasn't going to end well for Harriet.

After briefly flirting with the idea of declining the case, I suggested we meet to talk in person. Why didn't I just tell her I couldn't do it? Two reasons. First, I owed Jess. She'd helped me deal with the murder of a dear friend the year before, and then put me to work when I needed it. I knew I'd earned my keep working for her, but she'd risked a lot on a rookie. If a friend of hers was in trouble, there was no way I could turn her down. The second reason was that it was an interesting case. I'd like to say I did it because I care, because Harriet's pain touched me—and it did. But, as much as anything, I just wanted to dig in and find the answer for myself.

Harriet gave me directions, and I headed out. I hadn't seen much of the Eastern Shore on my drive to Chincoteague, because I'd gotten a late start. It had been well after sunset when I rolled off the bridge onto the southern tip of the peninsula. What I found in daylight was a single north-south highway lined mostly with tiny strip malls and fields of corn, soybeans, and tomatoes. A foul stench announced the presence of the area's other major industry: a chicken processing plant. I slid the window up and put the air on recirculate, trying not to think about the smell and the flocks of seagulls rioting over the back lot.

Away from the commercial areas, on narrow, winding country roads, I saw a mix of farmhouses, mobile homes, and small housing developments sprinkled among fields and a few tracts of wooded land. A nice place to visit and drive through, but rural areas like that

always make me feel sorry for the local kids, imagining the boredom they must suffer growing up. And there were so many bleak houses that bore signs of neglect and deep poverty.

It made the small housing development that Harriet had directed me to all the more striking. They owned a recently-built single-story brick house with a view of the Chesapeake Bay between two houses across the road. It was lovely, but utterly silent. There wasn't even the sound of birds. When the houses were built, they must've scraped the land clean, because the only landscaping I could see consisted of saplings and clumps of ornamental grass that wasn't dense enough to sustain much in the way of wildlife.

When Harriet ushered me into the dimly-lit living room, it felt like a house already in mourning. For her sake, I wished there was a small crowd of family and neighbors there, but during the nearly two hours I was with her, no one knocked, the phone didn't ring, and no cars even drove past. It made some sense when she told me they'd just moved to the area to help take care of his mom, but it was still so grim.

I sat quietly and listened to Harriet tell me the story again, encouraging her to add more details or explain when it seemed relevant. She had an easy manner about her, and a gentle, quiet humor that, even in the midst of this nightmare, peeked out now and then. But she was clearly both physically and mentally exhausted, and when she finished, she sat and stared silently out the window, as though she lacked the energy to even think of what to say or do next.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but there's something I have to ask."

"You want to know if he might have left me," she said tonelessly.

I waited for her to continue.

After a moment, she shook her head and turned to look at me. "No." She straightened and gave me the most confident look I'd seen from her so far. "I understand why you're asking, but I would bet the whole commonwealth of Virginia that he'd never cheat on me. Not ever. And lord knows, he's had opportunity to. Conventions, business trips, late nights at work."

“Then, how...” I paused, knowing she could guess what I meant, and we’d both like it better if I didn’t need to spell it out.

Still firmly, she said, “Because he tells me everything. He told me the time he got drunk during a conference and called his boss a jackass. He told me when he dented his rental car and reported that he had no idea how it happened. He even told me when his assistant at the bank told him she was in love with him—and he let me decide what to do about it.” She nodded to herself at the memory.

If nothing else, she was sure of her man’s devotion, and for that, at least, I envied her. I don’t know whether it’s me, or the men I choose, or simply a reflection of the times, but three of my last four boyfriends had found monogamy too great a burden to bear. Good riddance to them.

Of course, it was also possible that she was just in denial. Clients are often wrong, whether willfully or not.

“OK,” I said. “Is there any other reason he might take off without telling you?”

She tilted her head to the side, giving me questioning look.

“Maybe rescuing a friend in distress?” I said. “Helping a family member he knows you don’t like?” I frowned, thinking, grasping for something even remotely plausible, and she stared at me eagerly, hoping for more.

She seemed to realize I had nothing else to suggest, and sat back, looking momentarily numb again. “No,” she said. “Nothing like that. I did wonder at first if he ran into someone. Decided to go for a beer and managed to get drunk, then slept on their couch. But of course, as that first day wore on, that got less and less likely. And by now...”

“You’ve called everyone?”

“Yes.” She rested her hand gently on a stapled stack of papers on the table beside her. “I called everyone I could think of. Everyone in his contact list in his e-mail program that might have heard from him. Nothing. Nothing, nothing, *nothing*.” Her fists suddenly clenched, her eyes narrowed, and her lips pressed tightly together.

I kept going, hoping to distract her. I asked about money, his credit cards, retirement accounts, investments. Nothing had been touched. She'd spent considerable time over the past few days going over the last three years worth of financial data, and nothing seemed amiss. Nothing was missing from the house, as far as she could tell. He didn't even have much money with him. She thought it would have been less than \$20, since he rarely carried much cash anymore.

"Oh," I said quickly, "why is that?"

She half smiled. "He'd always be donating money, or loaning it out, or just giving big tips to people wherever he went. I don't mean to sound...I mean, I love that about him, that he's so generous, but you see—well, he'd just go through the money so quickly, so we agreed. He carried just enough for a paper, lunch, maybe a few little things, and told everyone his wife had him on a strict allowance." She shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "I suppose people thought I was controlling and cheap, but we really couldn't afford for him to spend so much."

She looked intently at me, as though waiting for my approval or my judgment, so I said, "Sure, that makes sense."

She nodded again, and began shuffling through the papers.

Based on what she showed me, it was clear they were comfortable financially, though not wealthy by any means. Most of their money was in the house, which was paid for, and their two cars. Kidnapping seemed unlikely, but still worth considering, I suppose.

"Had anyone asked either of you for a large loan recently, or seemed particularly interested in your finances?"

"Not so far as I know."

I continued. "Since the night he disappeared, especially right afterwards, were there any strange phone calls or hang-ups?"

"No."

"Any odd letters or packages?"

She froze. "Gosh, I don't know. We don't even have a mailbox here. Everything goes to our post office box, and there's been nothing unusual there. I guess someone might have put something in a neighbor's box by mistake."

I asked her to check with the neighbors, glad to have a task to give her, and then I asked for a copy of the contact list. She stood and took it with her to a room down the hall where I heard a copier running.

While she was gone, I scanned the room. It was neat, spare, with a faint haze of dust on everything. The furniture was mostly new, in an odd mix of overstuffed upholstery and shaker-style pieces, with a few ornate antiques thrown in. An upright piano stood in one dim corner with a handful of photos scattered across the top. A pleasant room, but it didn't tell me much.

Harriet's shoes—navy leather pumps—thudded faintly as she moved from carpet to wood to rug coming back into the room. She handed me the pages and we sat for almost twenty minutes going through them, page after page.

"He never deletes anyone out, even people he hasn't spoken to in ages. Tom always says that some of his best times are spent talking to old friends and business associates. He can pick up the phone and call someone he hasn't heard from in a decade or more, and talk and laugh and do business with them like they'd played golf that weekend." She smiled, looking almost happy for a moment. "I've never understood how he could do that. I'll run into someone I haven't spoken to in six months and not have a word to say beyond, 'How are you?' and 'You look wonderful.'"

Harriet showed me the code she used when she went through the list, noting which ones she called, which people he knew only faintly—say, through church or rotary—which were family and close friends, business associates, people she knew he hadn't spoken to in years. I added a few notes as well, including highlighting people Harriet hadn't been able to locate, and anyone who lived on the peninsula.

After a few more questions, I finished by asking, "Is there anything else you'd like to ask me, or any questions you have?"

She stiffened abruptly and looked down at her feet, and I braced myself. She said, "Do you think he's alive?"

I paused, trying to come up with the right answer, but there just wasn't one. "I really don't know, Harriet."

She sighed and leaned back in the chair, looking exhausted and defeated.

I suggested she get some rest, and promised I'd call the next day to give her an update. She nodded dully and sat staring straight ahead while I let myself out.

As I climbed in and started my car, I felt as though I'd escaped. I was relieved to be away from her grief and fear. At the same time, I couldn't help feeling thrilled to be working on such a baffling case. Together, those emotions brought a truckload of guilt with them. The only thing I could really do to help her was to find her husband, and I needed enthusiasm to do my job well, but did that excuse it? That was another question I wasn't prepared to answer.

As I drove out of the Reynolds' neighborhood, I called the Sheriff's office and made an appointment to meet with a Lieutenant Withams, who was surprisingly willing to talk. We met at a nearby Hardees and found a quiet corner to sit in.

"So, what is it you need to know, ma'am?" he asked, with a large, rough hand planted firmly on the creased and dirty file folder in front of him.

A full copy of the file would have been nice, but it seemed unlikely. "How about telling me what steps you've taken so far. I'm sure you've been thorough," I added.

He raised his eyebrows. "Are you?"

"Well, I know your time and resources are limited, but I have a lot of respect—"

He put a hand up. "Sheriff told me to cooperate, and I will. I don't need my ego stroked." He started by pulling out a map and folding it into about a twelve-inch square. "Here," he said, making Xs with a blue ballpoint, "is where we found the car, here's his Mom's house, his own home, and the gas station we're guessing he would've headed for."

I studied it briefly, asking questions about the exact spot where Tom's car was. "I was wondering—could he have gone to a nearby

farm or something where they might have had some gas to give him?”

Withams shrugged again. “That area’s mostly a mix of marsh, housing developments, and fields.” He turned the map toward him. “Lots of folks have dogs and shotguns, too. Not to mention jobs to get up for, bright and early. That time of night, I don’t see a man like him waking someone up just because he was dumb enough to let his tank run dry. But, who knows?”

I took notes as Withams continued. He had been thorough. He’d spoken with dozens of people, knocked on a lot of doors, checked accounts, cell phone usage, even spoken to a few people at Tom’s former job.

“And the car?”

He flipped through the file until he got to a report from the state police, who had more of a crime lab than the local department. “No signs of blood, no tampering or forced entry. Nothing illegal or out of the ordinary at all, in fact. No papers aside from the manual and registration. Missus Reynolds said he’d just cleaned it out, and the garbage all went to the dump. And the scene? No skid marks, no footwear impressions, nothing dropped or discarded.” He scowled. “Nothing. Just nothing.”

He listed a few other things he’d done, including checking Tom’s credit and his criminal history, which basically got him nowhere. When he was finished, I asked, “Lieutenant, what do you think happened to him?”

He pushed back slightly from the table and reached down to adjust the gear on his belt. Finally, he sighed and shook his head. “I haven’t the slightest idea, ma’am. There is not one piece of this that makes sense to me. It’s that *damn* car.” He looked up to see how I’d react to the curse, and seemed reassured by the lack of offense on my face. “Well, if it weren’t for that, I’d be sure he’d taken off with some lady. As it is?” He shrugged. “I was expecting him to roll in hung over the next day, or for his wife to get some kind of half-assed redneck ransom note.” He looked at me more confidently this time, almost challenging me to object to his words.

I ignored them and went on. “Could he have gotten lost in the woods?”

He exhaled sharply and tilted his head. “I don’t see how. He might’ve forgotten the woods around here since he moved away, but I understand he’s been a hunter all his life. He’d be too savvy for that.”

“Have there been any abductions that look similar to this? Kidnappings?”

“Only on TV,” he said. “I’ll tell you what we have seen, when adults have disappeared. The person, man or woman, has had some bad news—usually money or health, or maybe a cheating girlfriend—and they’ve gotten in a car or thumbed a ride on the highway, and they’ve just vanished. Sometimes they turn up again. Sometimes not. But oftentimes, there’s just no way to find them until they get locked up for something, killed or hurt bad, or...hell, one guy—real sumbitch—he sent his wife a postcard from someplace sunny telling her how much happier he was not to have to listen to her whining anymore. As if there was something unreasonable about her expecting him to work now and then and help pay the bills.” Lieutenant Withams had a mean look on his face as he remembered it.

After a moment, he turned his attention back to me and I asked, “Is there anything you can recommend I look into? Anything you didn’t have time to do that might be promising?”

He leaned forward, resting his chin on his folded hands. “Let me see. Did she give you the list of contacts?”

I nodded.

“I called the top tier—the ones he’d spoken with the most. But there are maybe two hundred more on there that I just didn’t have time for.”

I grimaced, and he smiled.

“And I didn’t knock on every single door between the gas station and where we found his car.”

I sighed and nodded. “OK, I’ll start on those. Will you let me know if you can think of anything else that might be useful?”

“You bet. And if you find anything...”

“I’ll keep you up to speed.” Only with Harriet’s permission, that is, but he didn’t need to hear that.

* * * *

I followed the lieutenant to the field where the car had been found. There was nowhere to pull off except for the dirt-and-gravel farm road that Tom had left his car on, and I wanted to leave that clear. The roads were narrow with no shoulder, and edged with deep drainage ditches, so Withams obligingly turned on his lightbar and waved to me to park in front of him along the road. I got out and he showed me the spot, pointing out various landmarks. There was a trio of rusting bins—wide, squat silos made of corrugated steel that farmers store grain in—just visible above the treeline.

“Those bins—” I started.

“Checked ’em, first thing. Also the abandoned house beyond those trees there,” he pointed toward where I knew the bay was, “and the five closest houses.”

I walked around for a few minutes, eyes down, studying the ground. There were prints all over, from boots and sneakers mostly, but I knew it had rained heavily early on the morning after Tom had disappeared, so they’d be more recent. I nudged at some trash with my foot, and peered under a plastic bag.

Withams watched with a slightly amused expression. “What are you expecting to find?”

“More than I’d find if I didn’t look at all,” I said. “I’m sure you already did this, but it never hurts to have another set of eyes.”

He shrugged, then walked back to his car and propped himself on the hood.

I kept going, moving in a spiral pattern out from the car’s location. I wanted intensely to find some critical piece of evidence. After ten minutes, I’d have settled for finding something mildly interesting or even vaguely suggestive. But aside from a disturbing amount of roadside trash, there was nothing that struck me as deserving to be called evidence.

Finally, as I saw the lieutenant checking his watch and my own patience began to wane, I gave in and decided to spend the rest of my afternoon knocking on doors. Withams wished me luck, and we drove off in opposite directions.

I went to house after house that day, well into the evening, repeating the same words. “Hi, my name is Lauren Lindsay. I’m a private investigator. I was hired by Harriet Reynolds, from over near Craddockville, to help find her husband Tom. Can you tell me about the night he went missing?”

I met some very nice people; some that were fairly polite, but probably wouldn’t tell me if my butt was on fire; some that didn’t seem bright enough—or sober enough—to remember a night eleven days earlier; and a handful that were so creepy that I found myself checking their yards for signs of freshly-turned earth or unusually well-fed hogs.

After repeating my spiel yet again, one woman asked, through a barely-cracked door, “There a reward?”

I hesitated, and she started to close the door, so I said, “Sure. Yeah, I’m sure that could be arranged. Did you see something?”

“I might have,” she said. “Which night was that, again?”

I told her, and she said she saw a man picked up by a maroon sedan, around 11 P.M. “And...I think they was fighting.”

I got the clear impression she was inventing on the spot in the hope of making some cash, so I asked for a description. The woman hesitated. “Did you see if he had a ponytail?” I asked.

“Oh yes, that’s right. I remember he did.”

“Thanks, then,” I said. “Wrong man.”

She slammed the door, swearing, as I turned and walked back to my car. That was the closest I came to anything useful—and it wasn’t anything remotely like close.

Withams was right, too—most of the locals did have dogs. I was sniffed and growled and barked at. A gorgeous black lab-rottweiler mix lunged at me so hard that the chain around his neck yanked him off his feet, and he struggled in the mud to stand again, shaking himself. He was more cautious, but continued barking just the same.

If I were home in Richmond, I'd have grabbed my pepper spray before wandering through this area. I hadn't thought I'd need it on vacation. Next time, I was bringing it.

* * * *

The next morning, I was awakened by gulls crying, and the sound of a small boat as it chugged away from the dock near my rental. For a moment, I wished I was going with them, but then the wind gusted and blew a wave of rain against the front windows. An awful day for a boat ride, but a perfect day for computer searches. I started with the PI databases, and found little of interest. The database showed the few places they'd lived—they spent nearly thirty-six years in the same house in Charlottesville, Virginia—but I found almost nothing of note. He had a hunting and fishing permit, which wasn't a surprise, and it showed his last employment, at the Virginia National Bank. The rest was as expected—family, neighbors, a whole bunch of people the system thought might be related to Tom, but probably weren't.

It was never easy teasing the meaningful data out from the rest, but I saved the report to refer to later, just in case something came up. Often, the database showed unadmitted bankruptcies, a criminal record here or there—it was always more luck than anything when the system could spit that out—and even suggested a spouse or kids that the person had forgotten to mention. But I already knew Harriet and Tom were married, and their data was pretty straightforward. They had no mortgage on their current house, owned no other properties, and there wasn't even a speeding ticket showing.

I moved on to a whole slew of other searches, like newspapers, blogs, and general web searches. I turned up some interesting articles, including a profile of Tom in the *Charlottesville Daily Progress*, published when he retired. I learned that he was an avid golfer, an active member of Rotary and the local chamber of commerce, and had served on the city council for two terms more than ten years earlier.

Harriet's name came up in a few similar articles, though she was less public with her activities. I pulled up one story whose title caught my attention—"Reynolds Indicted for Check Fraud"—but it was Shauna Reynolds, no apparent relation. Her attorney's name was Tom, which is why the article came up. I sighed in disgust and went outside for a quick break.

The overhang on the porch protected me from the slow, light rain, except when the wind carried it in my direction. The air was warm and smelled salty-sweet, and I wished I could go walk on the beach. I knew there was a short path I could take to get a closer look at the lighthouse that I could see from the small deck, and there were overlooks where I could see herds of wild ponies and flocks of egrets and ibises. And then maybe some nice, fried local seafood for lunch. I wanted so badly to go out and play.

Over the last few months, I'd taken scores of repetitive statements in a huge class-action lawsuit, picked up medical records, made thousands of copies, written reports, handled stupid questions, and answered phone calls at all hours—all of it critical, urgent, life-or-death. Then the clients would call with questions that made it obvious they hadn't even read the reports I'd sent them.

I complained to Jess about it—she'd referred the law firm to me—but she was less than sympathetic. "Brainless paperwork and brain-dead clients are part of the gig, darlin'," she told me, and then reminded me how much they were paying. And yeah, that was nice, but I'd barely seen or spoken to friends and family since it started. And as for dating...well, I wasn't sure I'd particularly missed that. Still, I wondered if I'd made a mistake by becoming a PI. Is this what my future would be like? I heaved another deep sigh, went back to my desk, and started plugging keywords into the browser again.

By the time the sun began setting and I'd decided to stop for the day, I had a large file of copied web pages on my computer's desktop, a couple pages of written notes, and a half dozen appointments for the following day. I'd called a few people that the lieutenant and Harriet had both already spoken with, just because they were

the most likely to hear from Tom: his siblings, his best friends, a nephew in DC that he was close with, and some former co-workers. I mostly heard what I expected—a whole lot of nothing—but the nephew, a salesman for Verizon, had some interesting insight.

“I dunno,” he said thoughtfully. “Aunt Harriet wasn’t happy. I mean, she wasn’t, like, miserable or anything. But she was...like, discontent. You know? And it made him feel guilty?”

“Why was she discontent?”

“Uhhhh.” He cleared his throat.

I got the impression he regretted mentioning it, so I said, “I can keep what we discuss confidential. And, really, anything you can tell me might help.”

“Yeah. OK. Well, I guess she wanted kids, but he didn’t, so, you know. She loved him. But then, after he retired...and it’s so quiet out there. She doesn’t know anyone, and there’s nothing much to do, he told me. But, you know...”

“Did he say what he was going to do about it?”

“Oh,” he said, and I could imagine him shrugging, “he said he’d probably buy her some jewelry or take her on a trip. Something like that. I mean...you know, he would never have left. Not *ever*.”

I underlined “ever” in my notes, and asked some follow-up questions, but didn’t really learn anything else. It was nice that he was so confident about Tom’s loyalty to his wife, but people were wrong about that sort of thing all the time. I wanted to believe in Tom, too, but I had to keep an open mind.

I updated Harriet and learned that she’d spoken to the neighbors. No one had received any packages or letters not meant for them. She sounded oddly calm and I wondered if she’d had pharmaceutical assistance. For the moment, though, she seemed OK.

* * * *

The next morning, the sky was still gray, but I was up and ready to roll early. I went to talk with Dan Stockton, the VP of the local bank where Tom and Harriet had their accounts. He and Tom had

struck up a friendship shortly after he and Harriet first moved there, and they had lunch about once a week.

Dan didn't have a lot to add to what I already knew. "We talked about the business world, mostly. He gave me a fair bit of advice, to be honest. Good advice, too. And we talked about stuff like the weather, crop yields, local scandals. That kind of thing. Wish I could help you, but I'm sure I'd be the last person he'd tell if he was planning to take off."

After we talked, Dan showed me details of the Reynolds' accounts—Harriet had faxed him a signed consent form—and he confirmed that Tom's cards still hadn't been used. Just before we parted company, I asked him the same question I asked everyone I spoke with who knew Tom at all: "Where do you think he is?"

He shook his head. "I've thought and thought about it, and I just don't know. I do *not* know. I'm sorry."

The next few interviews—with neighbors, the president of their homeowners' association, and even Tom's minister—netted me nothing new except for the revelation that Tom was really fond of root beer, and liked to watch David Letterman after his wife went to bed. The minister thought Tom was a good Christian man, though not terribly interested in scripture. Mildly interesting, but not exactly useful.

I ate a late lunch at a shack of a place called Metompkin Seafood, where I had some of the best fish I've ever eaten. I was sitting at a picnic table outside, wiping the last of the meal from my hands, when my cell phone rang. It was Harriet.

I expected a request for another update, or maybe a new bit of information. What I got was some very bad news: Tom's mother, Marian, had had a stroke, and died alone sometime late the night before.

"Oh, God." Harriet moaned. "I should have been with her. I should have...and she died not knowing—not even knowing if her son was dead or alive." She moaned again, harshly. "So help me, if that man just ran off with some woman—" she broke off, said "Damn," and I thought she was going to start crying again.

“Harriet,” I said, “I’m so sorry.” I was especially sorry that I hadn’t been able to talk to Tom’s mother before she died, though I felt incredibly insensitive even thinking it.

Harriet sighed and said, “You know, I didn’t even like her. I don’t know that anyone did, she complained so much. Talked about herself and her troubles all the time. But she loved him dearly. And what a terrible way to die. I didn’t...I didn’t want this. God, I *didn’t*.”

She said it so insistently that I was certain she *had* wished Tom’s mother dead, even if only for a moment, so they’d be free of the obligation to care for her. I felt sorry for Harriet. It’s the kind of thought people have just because they’re human, without any real desire to see it happen. And the worst of it was, this *would* make life simpler for Harriet. Part of her had to be relieved that the burden wasn’t hers any longer.

We spoke for a few minutes more, and I updated Harriet on my progress. There wasn’t much of it, but I hoped it would help her, even if just a little bit, if she knew that I was hard at work.

Once I got off the phone, I headed back to Chincoteague. I sat and reviewed my notes, hoping I’d see something I missed before, but there was nothing. Finally, I pulled out Tom’s long list of contacts, scowled at it, and sat down to start dialing. I didn’t have high hopes, but I knew from experience that if I worked at it hard enough, sooner or later I’d probably stumble over something useful.

As the afternoon passed into evening, I continued crossing names off the list. I made notes about every call, marked a couple that sounded odd, had numbers that were disconnected, or where I got a machine. By 9 P.M., I was starting to lose steam. I took a break and made a sandwich. While I ate, I stared out at the water, lit by the flash of the lighthouse’s warning light rotating in a strange long-short, long-short rhythm. The sight relaxed me, finally, and I decided to call it a night.

It was just past eight the next morning when I started up again, and continued calling for hours. By mid-afternoon, I switched over to the west-coast numbers, which I’d left for last. I was getting ready to dial the fifth California number when I noticed something odd.

The man, Ed Gorman, had a Sacramento address, but a Virginia area code—and it looked like an Eastern Shore number. I inhaled sharply, and punched the numbers, thinking, “Be there, be there, be there...” Of course, he wasn’t. His voicemail answered, and I cursed and hung up.

I went online and did a reverse phone search. The results came on the screen, and I shouted, “*Yes*,” when I saw it: 81 Bay Crest Drive, Pungoteague, VA. I knew that road name; I’d driven by it the day before. It was near where Tom’s car had been found. Less than a quarter mile, and much closer than the gas station, though in the opposite direction. I doubted anyone had thought to look there. I certainly hadn’t.

I dug in my bag for the map, and tried desperately to think of some explanation that would fit. Tom walked to Gorman’s house after the car ran out of gas, and they got drunk together. Maybe Tom had gotten sick or injured, and Gorman was taking care of him.

I unfolded the map, trying to hold onto my desperate, absurd hope, even though I knew it didn’t make any sense. He’d have been home ages ago. But it was too much of a coincidence. It *had* to tie in.

I called the number three more times and finally said, “Screw this,” got in the car, and started driving. It would take about fifty minutes to get there. I ran through different scenarios in my mind as I drove, and it started making me crazy, so I cranked up the radio and sang along. There was a song about a guy riding his pony on a boat, and another about tractor love. I was no fan of country music, but it passed the time.

* * * *

The road Gorman lived on was a smooth gravel track with trees pressing in on either side. The house, no more than a hundred feet back, looked like a fifties-era brick ranch, with large windows and a slate patio out front. There was a light on inside, which seemed like a good sign, but then I saw two packages tucked inside the screen door, and a soggy flyer for a lawn mowing service plastered to the stoop.

I knocked, and for a minute imagined that an amnesiac Tom would answer, looking kindly and confused. But that kind of thing only happens in cheesy soap operas—and it was always the evil twin in disguise, anyway. Neither version of Tom opened the door. After several more attempts and a walk around the house, I had to accept that no one was home.

I walked down the driveway to the road, pulled open the mailbox, and found a note taped inside: “Out of town—family emergency. Please hold mail. Have a blessed day. Lou.” At the top was the date the note had been written—three days before Tom had gone missing.

“*Damn.*” I felt like I’d had the wind knocked out of me. After all the work I’d done, this had been my one promising lead.

After a few minutes of staring at the ground feeling sorry for myself, I turned and looked back at the house. It was possible Tom had come here anyway, not knowing Lou were gone. If he’d arrived on his front steps sometime late that night and found the place empty, what would he have done?

I headed back behind the house, to where I’d seen a shed. Inside, I found a small riding mower, the usual assortment of shovels and rakes, a wheelbarrow, and a few other pieces of equipment. I spotted a gas can under a workbench on the left, and jiggled it. It was empty, and I saw no other cans. I suppose he could’ve taken one with him and walked back to the car. But, then what?

There was a garage, too, though. Might they have gas stored in there? Would Tom know how to get in to check? I started looking around the shed for the key that I thought they’d probably have hidden there, not thinking too hard yet about what I’d do if I found it. I lifted coffee cans full of nails, and half-empty bags of grass seed and potting soil. I was getting ready to climb a step ladder and check the beams, when the light shifted, and I heard a man clearing his throat.

I spun toward the door, my heart feeling like it was trying to break out of its cage, and was both relieved and dismayed to find Lieutenant Withams standing there looking amused—mostly.

“We got a call that some girl was sneaking around back in here. From the description, I thought it might be you. Something I can help you find?”

I explained what I’d learned, and why I was at the house.

“Huh,” he said, “that was good thinking.”

We talked a while, and I was relieved to see he didn’t seem particularly upset about what I’d been doing at the house. We discussed the case in detail, and then he asked, “What next?”

I folded my arms and tried to look thoughtful, because it seemed preferable to admitting I had few ideas left. “Did Tom know anyone else down this road?”

“Not so far as I know, though truthfully, I never considered he might walk in this direction. I wouldn’t have thought he’d take the chance at that hour. And wasn’t Gorman one of the people Mrs. Reynolds said her husband hadn’t spoken to in years?”

“Yes, but he had the local phone number in his contact list. They must have spoken recently, or it would still have been a California number, wouldn’t it? Maybe he just hadn’t gotten around to putting the new address in.”

“Huh. I suppose. Pretty sure the Gorman’s have lived here for almost ten years, though. They can’t have been close.”

I nodded. “Maybe he saw it as an opportunity to renew their friendship?”

“By asking to borrow gas late at night?”

I shrugged. “Sometimes the best way to get to know someone better is by letting them do you a favor.”

He thought about that for a minute and then nodded.

“I tell you what,” I said, “I’m going to walk from here to where the car was found, just to see if anything jumps out at me. Care to come along?”

Withams nodded, and called in on his radio to let dispatch know where he’d be. We started out walking, and chatted idly about trivial things: the nice weather, the Chincoteague ponies, his fishing trip to the Florida Keys the month before. I told him about fishing for trout with my dad when I was little, and the time I ate a worm. He told

me about his grandmother teaching him how to knit, and the fit his father'd had when he came home to find his little man sitting on the couch with his sisters, knitting a scarf.

We were both roaring with laughter when I saw it, and it tore the laugh from my throat. It was the underside of a boot, submerged in a deep water-filled drainage ditch beside the road, just a short distance from where Tom's car ran out of gas. It might be just an old, discarded boot. It might be nothing. Except for the edge of a black and red flannel shirt that was also floating in the water, in just about the right spot.

Withams noticed I'd stopped, and started to ask what was wrong. But then he saw my face and followed my gaze, and he knew, too. We'd found Tom.

"Sweet Jesus," he said, and reached for his radio.

* * * *

What followed had little to do with me. After they'd removed the body from the ditch, I went with the lieutenant to tell Harriet. She saw us coming up the drive looking grim, and collapsed, wracked with sobs. Her minister was there, and he promised he'd look after her. I felt guilty, again, for the relief I felt at being able to walk away, but I could see that Withams felt it, too. I suppose it was natural enough.

I went back to the office with him, answered a few questions, and gave him all my contact information. I made Withams promise to let me know what the medical examiner found, and he said he would, and we said our good-byes.

And then, the sun still high in the sky and the day stretching before me, I got in my car and headed back to Chincoteague. If it was a hit and run, it was a matter for the police; if it was accidental—a fall, maybe, or a heart attack—then it was just a shame. In either case, my part in it was done.

I had another week of my vacation left, and suddenly that seemed terribly long. I reached the turn for my rental, and instead kept on

driving. Now that I had the time, I was finally going to climb to the top of that lighthouse, and see if the view was any better from there.

THE TAGGART ASSIGNMENT,

by Vincent Starrett

CHAPTER I

I had not seen my friend Lavender for some days, and through no fault of my own. He was out of town. But faithfully every morning I strolled around to his rooms, collected his mail, and tried to imagine that in the absence of the great Lavender I was myself a person of importance. I even opened letters that appeared to be significant and, when necessary, replied with tidings of my friend's absence; but throughout the week of silence that followed his departure there had been nothing warranting a wire to him in Wisconsin, where I knew he was engaged upon a will case of national prominence.

On the eighth day of my voluntary factotumship, I sauntered toward the dingy edifice whose upper story concealed the curious activities of my remarkable friend.

I suppose there were not a dozen men in the community who knew Lavender to be a detective, but the regular postman was one of these, and this friendly individual I met as I entered Portland Street.

"Well, I see he's home," he cheerfully greeted me.

"The deuce he is!" I exclaimed.

"Yep, saw him this morning on my first trip. I've got a letter for him. You going up?"

"Yes;" I said indignantly, "and he's going to be called down! He might have let a fellow know when he was coming."

The man in gray laughed. "Now you see him and now you don't," he chanted, and fished in his sack until he had found the single letter intended for James Eliot Lavender.

But I withheld the bitterly affectionate greeting that lay upon my lips as I burst into the library, for I quickly saw that Lavender was not alone. He was deep in consultation with one of the most striking young women I had ever seen. Both looked up at my noisy entrance.

“Hello, Gilly,” said my friend casually. “I was about to telephone you. Glad to see you! Let me make you acquainted with Miss Dale Valentine. My friend Mr. Gilruth, Miss Valentine.”

I bowed and stared. We had had young lady visitors before, but seldom such arresting specimens as this one. And her name and face were curiously familiar, although at the moment I could not place her.

“You are wondering where you have seen Miss Valentine before, no doubt. Probably you have noticed her portrait in the newspapers. Her engagement recently was announced by the press. Draw up a chair, Gilly, and listen to what Miss Valentine will tell you. Do you mind repeating the story?” he asked his client, with a friendly smile. “Mr. Gilruth is my assistant and will work with me in this matter.”

Of course, I knew her as soon as he spoke about the newspapers. She was the season’s bright and particular “bud,” and her approaching marriage to a young man of her own set had filled the society columns. What in the world, I wondered, could this darkly beautiful girl, with a woman’s greatest happiness less than a week away as I remembered it, want with my friend Lavender?

“Something very strange has happened, Mr. Gilruth,” she said frankly. “Perhaps something very terrible.” Her lips trembled, and she paused as if to control an emotion that threatened to destroy her calm. “My fiancé, Mr. Parris, is missing. That is everything, in a word. He—”

Noting her distress, Lavender hastily threw himself into the breach.

“Yes,” he said, “that is the whole story. In a word, Mr. Rupert Parris has disappeared, practically on the eve of his wedding. Miss Valentine cannot explain so remarkable an action by any ordinary reason, and quite naturally she suspects that something may have happened to Mr. Parris; that he may have been injured, or abducted,

or even—possibly—killed; although, as I tell her, that seems, unlikely in the circumstances. There is no one else to ask that a search be made—Mr. Parris is alone in the world—and Miss Valentine has determined to risk the unpleasantness of possible gossip and ask for investigation. The case is to be kept from the newspapers if humanly possible, but one way or another Mr. Parris is to be found. Miss Valentine has honored us by asking us to conduct the search.”

The young woman nodded her head gratefully in acknowledgment of his understanding and his delicate statement of the facts.

“Today is Tuesday,” continued my friend, “and Mr. Parris has been missing only since Sunday evening, so it is possible that he may appear at any moment with a quite reasonable explanation of his absence. Something of the highest importance to him may have occurred which called him away without giving him opportunity to notify Miss Valentine. We dare not assume that, however, for it is also possible that Mr. Parris is at this moment in need of our assistance. Now, Miss Valentine, your fiancé called you on the telephone on Sunday evening—?”

“Shortly after six o’clock,” she took up the story as he paused. “He said that he had just dined, and that he would be over within an hour. I waited, and—he did not come. I supposed that something unexpected had detained him, but when he had not arrived at nine o’clock I became anxious and called his rooms. He was not there and had not been in all evening. Nor had he been seen at his club. There was no further word from him that evening, and there has been none since. I am at my wit’s end, and—”

“Quite so,” interrupted Lavender, smiling, “but we are not, Miss Valentine. So far as it is possible, you will please let us do the worrying from now on.” His engaging smile conjured a feeble response. “You had not planned to go out on Sunday evening?”

“No, we were to spend the evening at home—at my home, of course. Dad was there, and he was very fond of Rupert. They always played a game of chess when Rupert came.”

“Your mother, I think, is dead?”

“Yes.”

“And how long had you known Mr. Parris, Miss Valentine?”

“For about a year. We have been engaged for about three months. The engagement was to have been short. Mr. Parris and my father were both opposed to long engagements.” She paused, then continued: “Perhaps I should tell you that it was largely on my father’s account—for his sake, rather—that Mr. Parris and I became engaged. Dad liked him very much, and when I had come to know him I liked him, too. My father naturally wanted me to marry happily, and he had a high opinion of Mr. Parris, who is somewhat older than I. Do not misunderstand me, please! Of course, I was very much distressed by his disappearance, and I shall do everything in my power to find him. I think I have proved that.”

“I see. Will you describe Mr. Parris for us?”

“He is of middle height, and quite slim; dark hair worn rather longer than usual. Complexion somewhat pale. He was forty-one on his last birthday. I suppose he would be called good-looking.”

“You can give us a photograph, of course?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. Rupert was averse to having his photograph taken, and I haven’t one in the house.”

Lavender frowned and nodded. He drummed his fingers on his chair-arm for a moment.

“Gilly,” he suddenly said to me, “you must trace that telephone call. Miss Valentine will—”

“You mean Rupert’s—Mr. Parris’s call to me?” asked Miss Valentine quickly. Then she blushed. “I did that, Mr. Lavender!”

“Good for you!” cried Lavender. “I ought to have asked you.”

“Yes,” she continued, “when he didn’t come, I didn’t know what to think, and when I had called his rooms and his club, and no one knew anything about him, I was afraid, and I—I was ashamed to do it—but I traced his call.”

“Admirable!” my friend exclaimed. “The most sensible thing you could have done. Where did it come from?”

“That is strange, too, and I can’t quite believe it. Perhaps the operator made a mistake and traced the wrong call; but I was told that it had come from the office of the *Morning Beacon*!”

“A newspaper office,” I said quickly. “Then we have another clue.”

“No,” she said, with a shake of her head, “for when I called the *Beacon*, as I did, nobody ever had heard of Mr. Parris. I had to be very careful, you see, for if I hinted at his disappearance there would have been a dreadful story about it the next morning. I didn’t identify him for them; I just asked for a Mr. Parris who had telephoned from there; but there was no such man in the office, they said, and had not been. When they became curious I thanked them and rang off.”

“Odd,” muttered Lavender, “very odd!” He sat with creased brow for a moment, then leaped to his feet. “No matter, Miss Valentine! We’ll begin at once. I hope before long we shall have a happy report for you.”

The dark young woman stood up and extended her hand. There was embarrassment in her eyes.

“You know,” she faltered, “the wedding date is—set? It is to be—”

“I know,” said Lavender, understanding her hesitation. “It is set for a week from tomorrow. You mean that if there is to be a wedding, and no gossip, I must work quickly. Believe me, Miss Valentine, I shall!”

“Thank you,” she said simply, “I know you will.”

Then with a quick grip of my hand, and a bright, brave look at us both, she was gone. Lavender looked after her thoughtfully.

“A fine girl,” said my friend at length. “If this Parris has jilted her and run away for any reason, I’ll—well, I’ll make him regret it, Gilly, if he’s living!”

“You think that is the case?” I asked.

“It is the obvious answer to the riddle,” he replied. “But certainly I have no right to think it. In fact, I don’t think it as vigorously as I may have suggested it—but it must be considered. After all, the poor devil may be dead, or even—as she suggested—a prisoner somewhere, although it doesn’t look much like abduction. Full grown men are abducted on, their wedding eves only in books.”

I plunged my hand into my pocket. "By George, Lavender," I exclaimed, handing him the letter the postman had given me, "this was handed me outside the house, and I clean forgot it! And talk about the long arm of coincidence! Look at that return address!"

He received the envelope from my hand and read the printed card in its corner. As plain as print could make it, the inscription invited a return in five days to the *Morning Beacon*!

"Coincidence?" he asked, looking up with a quizzical smile. "I wonder! The *Beacon* was suspicious when Miss Valentine called up, remember."

He tore open the envelope and a card dropped out. There was nothing else. Lavender picked the card from the floor.

"As usual, the plot begins to thicken," he continued, chuckling. "If this is coincidence, it's a striking case of it."

The card bore the engraved name "Mr. Gorman B. Taggart," and underneath in pencil script, "2:30 P.M."

"Taggart!" I cried.

"Yes," said Lavender, "Taggart! Owner and publisher of the *Morning Beacon*. And he will be here, if I do not misread his laconic message, at 2:30 by his expensive gold watch." He produced his own, and frowned.

"It's after 2:30 now," I contributed uselessly.

"Yes, confound it!" agreed my friend. "I hope he didn't see Miss Valentine leaving this house! I have a feeling, Gilly, that a curious muddle is developing. There's the bell now, and in a moment you will see my feeling verified, when Gorman B. Taggart stands upon my rug and tells us the meaning of his visit."

He walked across to the door and flung it open, and through the aperture there shortly entered the mountainous and well-known figure of the famous newspaper proprietor; thereafter for twenty minutes it occupied a creaking arm-chair by the window.

"Your secretary?" queried Taggart, in a bass rumble. His glance was upon me.

"My assistant," corrected Lavender politely. "What can we do for you, Mr. Taggart?"

“Damn it!” said Gorman B. Taggart, “I hope you can do a great deal.” He frowned at us both for an instant, then continued: “Mr. Lavender, my circulation manager, Moss Lennard, has been with me for forty years without missing a day, and now I’m afraid something has happened to the old man. He’s been missing since Sunday evening!”

CHAPTER II

We found our pipes soothing after our second visitor had gone away. Lavender looked questioningly at me, and I looked back at him without a glimmer of light in my brain.

“Muddle is right!”, I said at length. “You guessed it, Jimmie!” He laughed a little.

“And yet it may clear things amazingly,” he retorted. “That there is a connection between the two I have not the slightest doubt. On the face of things, I would say that they are together, wherever they are—Parris and Lennard. If Taggart’s story is correct—and I must suppose that it is—they must have disappeared at about the same time; and note how easily a theory may be builded that will fit the case. Parris called Miss Valentine shortly after six; that call, traced, is found to have originated in the *Beacon* office.

“Now for Lennard: after being seen around the place all afternoon—Sunday is a working day for a morning newspaper—he goes out to dinner about half past six and does not return. Lennard is a familiar figure in the *Beacon* neighborhood, and he was actually seen in conversation with a man, who may very well have been Parris, outside the office; that is what the cigar dealer next door told Taggart. The cigar man knew Lennard, but of course he did not know Parris. Parris could have made his call from any one of a dozen phones in the *Beacon* office without being seen—of course, with the connivance of Lennard.

“Our first theory, then, would shape up about like this: Parris, for reasons of his own, as yet unknown, goes to see old Lennard at the *Beacon* office, and—obviously—discharges at him some revelation

that alarms the older man. Whatever it is, it is important enough to make both seek safety in flight. Of course, it follows that they have known each other for some time. We shall have to look into the past of both these gentlemen before we are through; meanwhile, instead of one man we have two to look for, and our task is simplified because by finding one we at least get word of the other.

“We shall have to proceed carefully, for we can’t let Taggart suspect that we are looking for any one other than Lennard. For Taggart we are running down only Moss Lennard, for Miss Valentine we are seeking Rupert Parris; two cases ostensibly; yet we know that we are working the same case. Really, it begins to look very promising.”

“I’m glad you think so, Lavender,” I said dryly. “To me it looks like a bigger job than ever. Two missing men—twice as much work.”

“No, half as much,” he corrected. “Our description of Parris might be better; as it stands, it will fit hundreds of fellows of his class. We are better off with Lennard. Taggart’s description is clear enough, and here is the photograph he left. Well-preserved old chap, isn’t he? I’ll have a copy made for you, and you can carry it around with you. I’ve an idea that we shall find Moss Lennard before we find Rupert Parris. And now for an important question: Did these two skip together, or did they separate?”

“If they are seeking safety from something, they probably separated,” I promptly answered.

“You may be right. That is what they should have done, of course. Well, our first step must be to visit the haunts of each. Parris lived at the Sheridan Arms, and belonged to the November Club. Lennard, Taggart said, is an old bachelor, and has three rooms in a private house on the West Side. We may as well work together, at first anyway, for it’s little we’ll learn at the Sheridan, and we can proceed almost at once to Lennard’s place.”

We taxied to the Sheridan Arms and learned exactly what Lavender had expected—nothing, or practically nothing, that we did not already know. Parris had not been seen at the hotel on the Sunday of his disappearance and had not called up. Nobody thought anything of this, because Parris was not often seen at the hotel, anyway; he

maintained a room for his occasional convenience and was supposed to spend his time at the club. There was nothing in his room to suggest that he had left it permanently; indeed there was much to suggest that he would certainly return—expensive garments, pipes, knickknacks, a pigskin suitcase, and the usual impedimenta of a bachelor's chamber, including a handsome photograph of Miss Dale Valentine in a silver frame.

A chat with the switchboard operator gave us our single fact of interest, and that merely added weight to our already acquired knowledge. The girl testified that several times in recent weeks Parris—who was well-known to her by sight—had telephoned to the *Beacon* office, and each time she had heard him ask for Mr. Lennard. She had never overheard any conversation between the two, however, and Parris never had stayed long in the booth.

“At least,” said Lavender, “we have established a connection between them.”

At the November Club little more was to be learned. Parris was not often on hand; at any rate, he was seldom seen in the lounge; and although he had a room, it was not much occupied. He came and went without question, and it was not always known when he was in the place and when he was not. He did not court publicity, and to us it was apparent that for reasons of his own he must divide his time between the hotel and the club, so far as sleeping was concerned.

“A queer bird, this Parris,” commented Lavender, as we left the last place. He looked at his watch. “Now, Gilly, if we haven't lost Lennard's address, we should be able to get out there and back before dinner time. Remember we are to dine with the great Gorman B. Taggart at his club, and although he may be five minutes late for an appointment, we may not.”

Moss Lennard, circulation manager of the *Beacon* for many years, lived far out on West Jackson Boulevard, but our taxi deposited us before his door in a little time; and here for the first time we received a scrap of highly important information. Although Taggart certainly had caused inquiries to be made at Lennard's rooms, apparently they had been of a perfunctory character, and no doubt by

telephone, for the housekeeper was able to tell us at once that Lennard had gone to Milwaukee.

“Yes, sir,” said the elderly female, with a series of nods, “Mr. Lennard went up to Milwaukee by the night boat, sir, on Sunday. That is, he told me he was going to Milwaukee, sir, and by the night boat, and so I suppose that is what he did. Didn’t say when he would be back, sir, and naturally I didn’t ask him. ’Twasn’t my business, and Mr. Lennard is not a boy, sir. He’s a man that knows very well how to take care of himself. He’s been here, off and on, for a good many years, and we never worried when he was away.”

“He was away a good deal?” asked Lavender.

“No doubt,” replied our garrulous informant. I “Yes, I suppose he was. Him being a newspaper man, sir, he was often away on duty for days at a time. Sometimes he stayed at the office; sometimes he was out of town; sometimes he was here. We never bothered about Mr. Lennard. And on Sunday morning he said to me, ‘Mrs. Barrett’—that being my name, sir—I’m going up to Milwaukee tonight by the night boat. I don’t feel well, Mrs. Barrett,’ he said, ‘and a lake trip is what I need, and it’s little time I get during the day for boats,’ he said. And so he went, and if he is not back at his office, then you may be sure he’s stayed in Milwaukee. Never fear, sir, about Mr. Lennard.”

“Quite so,” said Lavender, who had followed this long speech with polite attention, “but it seems strange, nevertheless, Mrs. Barrett, that he did not notify his office that he was going; and it is stranger still that, finding he could not get back the next day, he did not wire. I represent Mr. Taggart, as I have told you, and he is anxious about Mr. Lennard. He asked me to look, into Mr. Lennard’s rooms while I was here, to see if Mr. Lennard had left a note maybe, or something of the sort—possibly, an address in Milwaukee, eh?”

The old woman sniffed.

“It’s a strange time for Mr. Taggart to be anxious,” she asserted scornfully, “and him paying Mr. Lennard a salary which he should be ashamed to give a man after forty years! Many’s the time I’ve heard Mr. Lennard say that he wouldn’t stand it much longer, no

he wouldn't. He could get more money on any other paper, he said, and it was only loyalty that kept him to the *Morning Beacon*. Yes, sir, loyalty is what it was! He'd been with 'em from a lad. And now because he takes a little trip to Milwaukee—"

"Was Mr. Lennard a drinking man?" interrupted Lavender with a smile, edging past her into the hall.

"Well, sir, he certainly was that, sometimes, but never a rough word from him, or a sound out of his room. He drank his liquor, sir, like a gentleman. Yes, sir, you can see his rooms; as neat and clean as a pin they are—"

Still mumbling she turned away, and we followed her into the dark hallway and up a flight of stairs to the second story, where she opened a door and asked us to enter. When she had pushed an electric button we looked around us upon a comfortable sitting room, every detail of which bore out her claims as to its neatness. But Lavender's interest at once was centered upon an old desk that stood beside the front window. He crossed to it, with only a hasty glance at the bedroom which opened off the sitting room.

"This, I suppose, is his desk? Very interesting indeed! And as you say, Mrs. Barrett, not an empty bottle about the place." He winked at me. "A fine gentleman, this Mr. Lennard. I can see. Well now, about that Milwaukee address—" And he began to rummage with a practised hand in the drawers of the old desk.

His search was unrewarded by anything of value, and he turned his attention to the waste basket, still half full of old papers, while I explored the bedroom. When I returned, Lavender, with a gleam in his eye, was saying good-by to the housekeeper. It occurred to me that he had found something. At any rate, he was pressing a coin into the old lady's willing palm.

"Thank you very much," I heard him say. "Come on, Gilly, we must get along or we shall be late for dinner. the way, Mrs. Barrett, did Mr. Lennard ever make any trips home?"

"Home?" echoed our humble servant. "You mean to Washburn? Well, yes, sir, but not very often. Only twice that I can remember

while he's been here. But I've often heard him speak of his old home. That's where he was born."

"Of course," said Lavender. "Washburn, Indiana, isn't it?"

"No, sir. Washburn, Illinois. Right here in our own state. Mr. Lennard is one of our great men, sir, like Lincoln and Grant and Logan—"

"And Roosevelt," interrupted Lavender wickedly. "Well, that is very interesting. Thank you very much."

And after a time we were out in the street and in the waiting taxicab.

"What were you getting at?" I demanded, as we started.

"Nothing in particular," smiled my friend, "but we'll have to investigate Lennard's past sooner or later, and I just wanted to find out where he originated. She's certainly a loquacious old person, isn't she? I'll have to have another talk with her some time. No, Gilly, I got what I really wanted out of the wastebasket."

I jumped. "You mean that you got something you went there expecting to find?"

"I went there hoping to find a correspondence between Parris and Lennard," he replied, "and what do you suppose I discovered?" He fumbled in his pocket, and produced an electric torch, for dusk was now falling and the interior of the taxicab was almost dark. "This!" he concluded triumphantly, and turned his light on a crumpled sheet of paper.

Bending over excitedly, I smoothed it out on his knee and read the words written on it in ink. Apparently it was the beginning of a letter which had been discontinued and thrown away. It read:

My Good Prince Rupert:

This is to say that your romantic career is at an end. Every dog, 'tis said, has his day, and yours—poor dog!—has come. You have been useful to me, I shall not deny, and I am grateful for a few things. For the rest—no matter! At any rate, I am through with you, and for good. It may be that your little enterprise—

There the fragment ended. I sat staring at it until Lavender snapped off his light and plunged us into darkness.

“Well?” he asked, and chuckled at my astonishment.

“That is a threatening letter, Lavender,” I said soberly. “Did Lennard write it? There’s no signature.”

“Oh, I have no doubt that he wrote it; Taggart could tell us. It was never finished, of course. He may have written another that pleased him more. A very curious letter! Did Parris receive one like it? Or was this written for us?”

“For us?”

“For any who would take the trail! It seems incredible that such a letter, preceding such a mystery, should have been left lying for anybody to find.”

“You can’t ignore it, Jimmie,” I said.

“No, I can’t! Furthermore, I must assume that its brother went to Parris, and that it had something to do with this double disappearance. On the face of it, it would appear that Lennard was threatening Parris, but the tone of the letter is not violent; it is more ironical than malicious. One might suppose such a line as ‘your day has come,’ to be a threat—or, such a line as ‘I am through with you for good.’ And yet the tone of the letter is rather one of amused pity, as if the writer had knowledge of the other’s disgrace in some connection, and were twitting him about it.”

“I would arrest Lennard, just the same, on the strength of that letter,” I vigorously asserted.

“So would the police,” said Lavender. “I’m not sure that I wouldn’t arrest Parris on the strength of it!”

I stared at him for a moment, then nodded.

“I see your point, of course; but both are missing—Parris the more mysteriously of the two.”

He did not, answer, and for a time there was silence between us while the auto scudded toward the Loop. Then Lavender broke the silence with another question.

“And why ‘Prince Rupert’?”

“Part of Lennard’s irony, no doubt,” I made answer. “You pointed out the satirical tone of the letter.”

“Maybe,” he shrugged, “but it has a romantic sound. That is, it suggests a masquerade. And Lennard obviously has something on Parris. May it not be that he has unmasked Parris, who is really somebody else? That would explain the letter in part. Parris’s receipt of the letter—I wish it were dated!—would explain his rushing off to see Lennard and breaking his engagement for Sunday evening with Miss Valentine.”

I nodded agreement.

“Very ingenious, Jimmie,” I applauded, and it sounds more than plausible as you state it. I think it almost equally obvious, though, that Parris has something on Lennard.”

“Because Lennard, too, has disappeared? Perhaps! It’s quite possible, of course. But if what Lennard knew about Parris was of great importance, as it seems to have been, Lennard may have disappeared for reasons best known to Parris.”

This gruesome suggestion gave me a shock.

“See how easily everything is explained by such a supposition,” he continued. “Parris receives a letter and learns that he is discovered—whatever his sin may have been—so he hastens off to the *Beacon* office and sees Lennard. While there he calls Miss Valentine on the telephone, expecting that he will be through with Lennard in time to join her in an hour. Or did he really expect to meet her at all? The question intrudes itself! Assuming that he did, however, he is not through with Lennard in an hour, so we must believe that something unexpected happened. In other words, he was unable to shut up Lennard in one way, so he chose another. And it took him longer than an hour, and left him fearful of a return. Eh?”

I nodded again, unwillingly. I think I liked the unknown Parris better than Lavender did.

“Oh, I admit the plausibility of it,” I said. “Yet Lennard has found Parris ‘useful,’ by his own showing, and must have known of Parris’s sin, whatever it was, for some time. Parris must have known that Lennard knew.”

“I think not,” disputed Lavender. “Lennard undoubtedly had known Parris’s secret for some time, but Parris may not have known that Lennard knew. When Lennard speaks of Parris as having been ‘useful,’ he means merely that he has used Parris for his own purposes—not that they were confidants.”

Beyond question, it occurred to me, Lavender already had builded a strong theoretical case against Parris. I blurted out the plain American of his argument.

“It comes to this, then: That Parris has murdered Lennard to stop his mouth.”

“My dear Gilly, you know very well that I would never make such a charge with so little to go on. I do not even hint it, really, save as a possibility. I casually suggest it to you; I’m not telling the police. But you will admit, I think, that, if Lennard’s body were to be found, some place, our task of locating Miss Valentine’s fiancé would become a very unhappy one. In short, we should probably be looking for Lennard’s murderer at the same time.”

At the Waterside Club we found Taggart impatiently. awaiting us, although we were quite on time.

“We’ve only a moment for a bite, I’m afraid,” he greeted us. “Lennard has been found, and—”

“Not in Milwaukee, surely?” interrupted Lavender, while something clutched at my heart.

“Milwaukee, hell!” said Taggart. “He was found in the lake. Dead—drowned—probably a suicide. Poor old man!”

And there were tears in the eyes of Gorman B. Taggart.

CHAPTER III

It was true enough. Taggart identified the body while we looked on in silence. He had been telephoned at the club, and had only awaited our coming to hasten to the undertaking establishment whither his manager’s body had been removed.

Lavender made his usual careful examination, but, startling as had been his suggestion in the taxicab, a suggestion that was almost

prophecy, in one detail he had missed. To all appearances Lennard had not been murdered. The man had been drowned, but no mark showed on the body to indicate that violence had preceded the plunge. Lavender was frankly puzzled.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Taggart suddenly! And when we were all back at the club he abruptly finished the thought that had been in his mind. “Lavender, it’s all my fault! I’m the man to blame! I threatened him with dismissal. Yes, I did! After forty years of faithful service, I threatened him with dismissal! And why? Because the poor devil was drinking more than I thought he ought to. Poor old Lennard! And he went away and drowned himself! By God, I ought to be held responsible for it!”

Lavender shook his head in slow disagreement.

“No,” he said. “Your feelings do you credit, of course, but you need not hold yourself responsible. You could not have anticipated this. I’m sorry that you didn’t tell me sooner, though. Not that it would have made any difference to Lennard; he’s been in the water since Sunday.”

“I’m to blame;” repeated Taggart grimly. “A damned old fool, that’s what I am! Well, the case is over, Lavender. I’m sorry. I hadn’t looked for anything like this. I’ll sign a check for whatever amount you like, and add a thousand to it for charity.”

This would not be at all to Lavender’s liking, I thought, to give up the case. There was another side to it about which Taggart knew nothing. I looked anxiously at my friend, wondering what he would say. To my surprise he accepted his dismissal easily, accepting at the same time a handsome check for services which, he declared, he had not rendered, and applauding Taggart’s benevolent intentions toward “charity.”

“There will be an inquest tomorrow,” he said, “but I can’t imagine that I shall be wanted. If so, you can communicate with me. And now, as I have another matter on hand, I’ll thank you and say good-by.”

We stood up and shook hands, and shortly thereafter were in the street, I wondering mightily. Lavender smiled at my perplexed face.

“I couldn’t arouse his suspicions, Guy,” he said. “We must protect Miss Valentine’s name at all costs. But, of course, I’m not through with the case. More than ever now, I must see it through. What, time is it? Late, of course! I wonder if, that old chatterbox, Mrs. Barrett, is up at this hour? Probably not. I’ve got to see her again. She probably knows all about Lennard, and it’s particularly necessary now for me to know all that she can tell. Well, I’ll have to wait until morning. And we shall have to see Miss Valentine again. What a muddle this Lennard episode has made of the case!”

But the morning brought our second and biggest shock; one that left us blinking. Miss Valentine called and calmly stopped the search. I had spent the night with Lavender, and we were hardly done with our breakfast when the young woman appeared.

“I’ve been thinking it over,” she told us, “and I know now that I have acted foolishly. If Mr. Parris has seen fit to go away, it is his own business. It is mine, too, of course, but I have no right to make it anybody else’s. If I have been—well, to be brutal, if I have been jilted, there is no reason for me to cry it from the housetops. And I am making myself ridiculous by seeking a man who may not care to have me find him. No, Mr. Lavender, let him come back to me, if there is a reasonable explanation for his action. I shall not demean myself by running after him.”

Lavender delicately pointed out that her fiancé’s disappearance had not been cried from the housetops, and was not likely to be; but his words fell on deaf ears. Nor did the suggestion that Parris might need our assistance move her to reconsider her decision.

There was no help for it. Lavender had been dismissed again, and when a few moments later she had gone away he said as much with bitter amusement. He had flatly declined to accept a fee from her, and I could see that he was greatly disturbed by this latest and apparently final development.

“I must admit that she did that very well,” he said with a snort. “Now, why did she do it?”

“I thought she told us pretty clearly,” I replied. “And, truth to tell, Lavender, there was sense in what she said—about running after him, you know.”

“That’s the clever part of it,” he nodded. “On the face of things, she has simply reconsidered and decided that she will not pursue a man who may not want her. But her agitation of yesterday does not check with her calmness of today.”

“Why else should she call us off?”

“Well,” drawled my friend, recovering his self-possession and lighting his pipe, “it is just conceivable, you know, that she has heard from Parris!”

“By Jove!” I cried.

“That is too obvious not to be considered,” he continued; “but there are difficulties in the way. If she has heard from Parris, and Parris is responsible for the death of Lennard, as he may very well be, then she is protecting him. She might even do that, of course, but somehow I don’t think so. She doesn’t really care enough about him for that. She may be protecting him without knowing the truth, or as I say, in spite of the truth. On the other hand, she may be perfectly honest in her statement to us. In any case, we seem to have been properly fired. How does it feel to be discharged, Gilly?”

“Are we definitely out of it?”

“Unless I carry my suspicions to the police, I fancy we are. And my suspicions are only suspicions. Lennard’s body is unmarked. I could carry my tale to Taggart, perhaps, and work with him again; but that would be betraying Miss Valentine, which is not to be considered. It looks as if we were out of a job, Gully!”

But we were not out long. Before our pipes had been refilled twice the telephone rang, and on the other end of the connection was Gorman B. Taggart. Taggart, too, had reconsidered.

“Look here, Lavender,” he said to my friend, as at Lavender’s nod I picked up the extension receiver and listened in, “has it occurred to you that there may have been something irregular in Lennard’s death?”

“Yes,” replied Lavender promptly, “it has! But there’s not a shred of actual evidential proof. What makes you ask?”

“Nothing but my conscience, I’m afraid,” said Taggart mournfully. “If I could think that I was not indirectly responsible for this, I’d be a happy man, Lavender.”

“Then,” said my friend, “try to be happy. I can’t promise anything, but if you want me to go ahead with my suspicions and see where they lead, I’ll be glad to make the attempt.”

“Fine!” boomed the voice of Taggart. “Go ahead! Unlimited funds behind you, and report when you’ve got something to report. Good-by!”

Lavender hung up the receiver with a smile of wicked pleasure.

“We’re never out of a job long, anyway,” he murmured. Then he bounded to his feet. “Gilly, I’m off to see Lennard’s housekeeper, the garrulous, and perhaps bibulous, Mrs. Barrett. You’re off to see Miss Dale Valentine. Tell her of the finding of Lennard’s body, if she doesn’t know, and that Parris and Lennard are known to have been together. The Lennard affair is probably in the papers, and she may have seen it; possibly that’s what brought her here this morning. Tell her, anyway, and try to find out whether she has heard directly or indirectly from Parris. Don’t frighten her. We’re asking for assistance, not threatening her; but she must understand that we are now employed by Taggart in this affair. You can explain that we have not betrayed her confidence, She’ll see you, I think—I thought she liked your hair.”

He seized a handful of cigars and a package of cigarettes from his humidor, and we descended the stairs to the street. A gray-haired old man was approaching, our door, and at sight of us he stopped.

“Mr. Lavender?” he asked, glancing from one to the other of us. My friend nodded, and he continued: “I am Arthur Valentine. My daughter, I believe, has consulted you about the curious absence of her fiancé, Mr. Rupert Parris, May I ask whether you have made any headway in the matter?”

Lavender seemed surprised. He shook his head.

“We are no longer in Miss Valentine’s employ,” he said quietly. “I believe Mr. Parris has not been found, but you will have to consult your daughter, Mr. Valentine.”

The old man, for whom a handsome car, was waiting, stared at us in astonishment.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand you,” he said at length. “My daughter said nothing to me about concluding the search. This is very strange. You know nothing, then?”

“Nothing whatever,” said Lavender politely. “Have you any theory of your own?”

Valentine shook his head. “I am not in my daughter’s confidence in this matter,” he replied almost sadly. “I was on my way to the office, and I thought I would stop in and see you. Until yesterday my daughter and I discussed this matter freely, but last night she seemed worried, and this morning she left the house early, refusing to talk. I thought that perhaps she had heard something that distressed her.”

“Not at all,” said Lavender cheerfully. “Not from us, at any rate. She called this morning and dispensed with our services, Mr. Valentine; that is all I can tell you.”

With a word of thanks Valentine turned away. Lavender thoughtfully watched him until his machine had turned the corner and disappeared.

“Last night!” he said. “What did Miss Valentine learn last night, Gilly, that made her refuse further to discuss matters with her father?”

After a moment he shrugged, and at that instant a taxicab came into sight. He flagged it with upraised hand.

“A great day, eh?” he smiled, as if nothing had occurred to make him think. “Better come back here, Gilly, when you’re through. I’ll return as quickly as possible.”

As luck would have it, Miss Valentine had not gone directly to her home, and in consequence she was not there when I called. I waited in the house for an hour, and spent another hour in the streets nearby; then as she had not appeared I returned to Lavender’s rooms where he impatiently awaited me.

“Odd!” he commented, when he had heard what I had to tell. “Well, we’ll call her up from time to time. We must talk with her.”

“What about Mrs. Barrett?” I demanded.

“I begin to see light, Gilly,” he replied gravely. “I fancy I know what Miss Valentine heard last night, or part of it; her father may have revealed something innocently enough which set her on the right track. I’ll tell you the whole story, and you can see what you make of it. This, in effect, is what Mrs. Barrett had to tell. She was prostrated, of course, by Lennard’s death, and glad to tell everything she knew.

“Lennard came from Washburn, as she told us before. In his youth there was an unhappy love affair, as a result of which he never married. A Miss Mary Glover was his sweetheart, and on the eve of their wedding, almost, she jilted him and married a wealthy man in the city—that is, in Chicago. Prepare to be shocked. We met the wealthy man this morning.”

“Great Jupiter!” I cried. “Not Valentine?”

“Jupiter and Jove, too,” he agreed. “Yes, Arthur Valentine. In short, Lennard was engaged to marry Miss Valentine’s mother, and was turned down cold for money. Who shall say what tortures he suffered and what revenges he planned? Lennard came to Chicago, and no doubt kept track of the social rise of the Valentines. He was fortunately situated in a newspaper office; he knew all that went on. In time Dale Valentine was born, and in time Mrs. Valentine died. Dale Valentine grew up into—well, you know into what she grew. She had suitors, among them Rupert Parris, who became the successful one.

“Here, then, would be a splendid opportunity for Lennard’s deferred revenge. Jilted by the mother himself, if he could contrive to have the daughter jilted on her wedding eve how poetic would be his revenge! I don’t defend this course; I say it may very well have occurred to him. Suppose then that he contrives to meet Parris, to do him services, and at the same time to learn something about Parris that is not to Parris’s credit. We can learn nothing of Parris’s past. It may have been anything. But would it be enough to threaten Parris

with exposure? Would Parris vanish at a threat? Not necessarily. Lennard's hold would have to be pretty strong for that.

"But suppose Lennard combines with his threat of exposure some manufactured tale, say about Dale Valentine's mother, whose memory he both loves and loathes! If Parris were a gentleman he would resent it; if he were a coward in masquerade, probably he would not. But gentleman or coward, what would Parris do? I think he would try to stop Lennard's mouth, either for his own sake, or for the sake of Miss Valentine. Did he do it?"

"I'm afraid he did, Lavender," I confessed. "You make it seem very probable. But what hold could Lennard have had over Parris?"

"A queer one, you may be sure. It's almost the kernel of the riddle."

"And what do you think Miss Valentine learned from her father?"

"Merely, perhaps that he had once had an unsuccessful rival in love whose name was Lennard. It would be enough. Miss Valentine would couple it with the story in the newspapers about the discovery of Lennard's body. Or perhaps she already knew, through her mother years ago, that Lennard had been her father's rival. If so, the newspaper story about Lennard would revive that memory. But I think something her father said put her on the track of the truth, for he told us that it was last night that she began to be preoccupied and silent. All of which, of course, would be insufficient to convince her of what is possibly the truth, if she had not heard from Parris. She must have received a letter last night, and I'd give a good deal to know what it revealed."

I turned it all over in my head, and to me it seemed complicated enough to bother anybody. But one thing I was certain of.

"The time has come, Lavender, to tell Taggart the whole story," I said flatly.

"Yes," he agreed instantly, "we must be frank with Taggart; we can't play two games now. He must print no word of the affair, of course; and I think he will not wish to, for it will reflect on Lennard to some extent—his own man."

He swung to the telephone and called up the Valentine home.

“This is Gorman B. Taggart speaking,” he said deliberately into the mouthpiece, “the publisher of the *Morning Beacon*. I wish to speak to Miss Valentine.” There was a silence and then his tone changed. “Out?” he cried. “Out of town? Are you sure? When did she leave? A letter, eh? I am very sorry; I have important news for her. Can you say where she went? To what station, then? A ten o’clock train! Yes, Mr. Taggart speaking! Now listen, please. I want you to remember what Miss Valentine wore to the train. It is important, for I am going to send a man to see her, and he must be able to identify her.”

After this there was a longer silence, at the end of which Laverder coolly said, “Thank you,” and hung up. He was tremendously excited.

“Gone!” he cried. “Gone out of town on a ten o’clock train, this morning. There was a letter last night, as I suspected. They deceived you at the house, Gilly. They knew then that she had gone.”

“Yes,” I said, “gone to meet Parris!”

He swung back to the telephone and gave a strange number quickly. Then he asked an astonishing question.

“A young woman, dark and very pretty, wearing a heavy veil, was there this morning and asked to see the body of Moss Lennard. Was she allowed to see it?”

He listened to the reply, then with a word of thanks rang off.

“Miss Valentine saw Lennard’s body this morning, after leaving these rooms. She examined Lennard’s garments. She went away in a taxicab. By George, Gilly, that girl has spunk! It took nerve to do that!”

CHAPTER IV

We found Taggart seated before a worn old desk in a private office on the glass door of which appeared the letters forming the name “Moss Lennard,” and the words “Circulation Manager.” The publisher swung about in his chair as we entered and seemed embarrassed at our coming. But he extended his big hand in welcome.

“Glad to see you,” he said. “I’ve just been looking over poor old Lennard’s desk.”

“Nothing wrong with his accounts, of course?” asked Lavender. “I assumed that you had looked into them before.”

“Oh, that’s all right. He was straight as a string. But I didn’t know what the old desk would develop.”

“What have you found?”

“Nothing of interest, I guess; unless it’s this! I didn’t know Moss went in for light literature.”

He smiled and handed over a volume bound in green cloth, on the back side of which appeared its flamboyant title, “The Montreville Mystery.”

Lavender smiled. “I know that yarn,” he said. “It’s a French detective story, translated into English. A good one, too. I haven’t read it in years.” He laid it on his knee. A curious light danced in his eyes.

“Well, Lennard must have found it to his taste,” said Taggart. “It appears to be well worn, although I haven’t had time to look into it.”

“I’ll take it along with me, if I may,” smiled Lavender boyishly. “Do you mind? I’d like to read that yarn again. Also,” he added dryly. “I’d like to see why it was of such interest to Moss Lennard.”

Taggart looked surprised, but readily acquiesced.

“Sure,” he said. “I guess no one wants it now. Keep it if you care to.”

“Now,” said my friend when he had pocketed the volume, “I have news for you, Mr. Taggart, and you are going to be surprised.” And he told our client the whole story of Rupert Parris.

Taggart was immensely agitated. He leaped from his chair and executed a few steps of an improvised and unintentional dance.

“We’ve got to get him!” he cried. “Lavender, we’ve got to get him!”

“I suppose so,” said Lavender. “But wait; I’m not through.” And he revealed the recent activities of Miss Dale Valentine, including a statement of her visit to the morgue where the body of Lennard lay.

Taggart paced the room in his excitement.

“You see it, of courser he demanded. “Incriminating evidence! She removed something from the garments that would have hurt Parris!”

“And now she’s gone to Parris,” I said, unintentionally humorous.

“No,” corrected Lavender, “she’s gone to Washburn, Illinois, the early home of Moss Lennard and her mother. She must have relatives there yet. The poor child has discovered the truth.”

“The truth!” cried Taggart suspiciously. “What are you withholding now, Lavender. Come, let’s have it! What is the truth then?”

“It’s a long story,” my friend replied, “and I’ve just found the final link in this novel you have given me. But the first truth is this: Moss Lennard was not murdered; he committed suicide, and for the purpose of making it appear that Parris had murdered him. He wished to leave a stigma upon the name of Rupert Parris, the accepted lover of Miss Dale Valentine. It was part of his revenge upon the girl’s mother, long dead. You know that story. With the girl jilted and her lover’s name smirched, his revenge would be complete save in one particular.

“He would want Miss Valentine to know what he had done; that would be the final twist of the knife, to tell her what he had done and why he had done it. I am now convinced that the letter Miss Valentine received was from Lennard, a letter nicely timed to be delivered some days after his death. It would be sent first to some other part of the country, then re-addressed by some friend there, who, of course, would not suspect Lennard’s motive. Miss Valentine received it last night, probably by special delivery. I can see Lennard working it all out.

“What a dolt I have been, Gilly!” he exclaimed. “Because the truth was fantastic I refused to see it, or at any rate to credit it, until this book and the girl herself convinced me. She left the house veiled. Why? I deduced the morgue, and found that I was right. I had already deduced a letter, and I know now that I was right. Then Taggart hands me this book, and it is a book that I know! In it there

is a leading character named Rupert; the scene of the story is Paris. Could anything be plainer? Look!”

He drew it from his pocket and began to turn the leaves. A quick frown settled between his eyes. Then suddenly he examined the covers. In the end he leaned back and laughed quietly.

“I’ve been an ass again,” he smiled. “An examination of the book would have solved the mystery days ago, had we known of the book’s existence. Look at it! A book on theatrical make-up, rebound in the covers of a popular novel!”

But now Taggart and I were both on our feet, bursting with the amazing thought that had pierced our brains.

“Then Parris—” I began and hesitated to finish it.

“Was Lennard!” roared Taggart.

“Yes,” smiled Lavender. “Lennard, all the time, except for one or two evenings a week, when he became Parris to revenge himself upon the daughter of the woman who had jilted him. Gilly, I’m afraid I am becoming dull!”

CHAPTER V

We did not pursue the distressed and humiliated girl to Washburn. Lavender’s explanation was too clear to require further proof. Complete and final proof was found by a thorough ransacking of Lennard’s rooms in the West Side rooming house, where the paraphernalia of make-up, and a really splendid toupee, was carefully hidden away. But the make-up boxes were scarcely touched; they had been unnecessary except at the beginning.

Mrs. Barrett, half blind and splendidly loyal to her eccentric guest, had never suspected, and in the dark hallway—on the evenings of his Parris masquerades, as Lavender called them—Lennard had passed without question. Dressed in Lennard’s clothes and speaking in Lennard’s voice, he had gone forth as Parris to exchange for Parris’s clothes at his hotel. His “Parris” life had been spent in three places, almost alternatively; at his hotel, at his club, and at the

Valentine home, and at no one of them had he ever stayed long. It was a masterpiece of deception.

His motive for suicide was certainly obscure; but it is conceivable that he may, have sickened of the game he was playing. Lavender's idea is that he was merely sick of life, and passed out gladly after accomplishing his self-appointed task. Certainly the whole scheme was elaborately worked out, even to the ingeniously phrased and romantic letter in which the manager bade farewell to his younger self, then left for an investigator to find. And an admirable touch was his habit of calling himself from the hotel—that is, calling for Lennard on the telephone, in the hearing of the operator who knew him as Parris. A clever rascal on the whole, and a man who might have been an asset to society with a little more charity.

“The amazing thing to me, Lavender,” I said, “is how he was able to pass himself off in the Valentine home.”

“It may have been difficult at first,” he replied, “but Lennard's make-up was, of course, very skilful. It consisted in very little, for really little disguise was necessary. He probably used very little theatrical make-up, in spite of his study of the subject. Lennard was fifty and more, but a well preserved man. Further, he was thin, and therefore had no betraying weight to endanger his plan; he would pass as a slim, middle-aged man. With a good wig over his half bald head, and a sprinkling of rice powder over a good massage, he would look quite as young as he claimed to be. He admitted to forty-one years! His dress helped, too, for naturally he dressed in the height of fashion. His features were good, and his determination was great.

“And the big thing in his favor was the fact—for certainly it must have been a fact—that neither Mr. Valentine nor his daughter ever had seen him as Lennard. The mother who would have recognized him was dead. Probably he met the girl's father at the club and won him by his personality and his chess; after that the match was as good as made. Miss Valentine as much as hinted that it was a match made by her father.”

“I am sorry for Dale Valentine,” I said sincerely.

“So am I,” said Lavender, “sorry that she must suffer this humiliation, even though there may be no distressing publicity, for Taggart will take care of that. Parris will be called away suddenly, and will die in another city, and no one will know the difference. But I’m glad for Dale Valentine in another sense. What a good thing it is that the old rascal didn’t see the greater revenge he had in his power. Suppose he had actually married the girl!”

TOMORROW'S DEAD, by David Dean

The old man opened his eyes and groaned. A string of reddened spittle spun from his busted lip and stretched itself impossibly upwards, crawling across his narrow field of vision in its quest for the ceiling of his car. He wanted to wipe it away, but his arms felt heavy and useless. He looked down to find his hands but they were absent from his lap.

He thought irritably of his wife—perhaps she could explain; quite probably she was responsible. Wincing from the pain in his neck, he managed to turn towards the passenger seat. His wife hung loosely within her seatbelt, tendrils of her grey hair floating above her head like that of a drowned woman.

He understood now; began to remember. There had been a truck... a very large truck with one of those great push-bumpers welded onto the front of it. It was the last thing he had seen as it t-boned them with such force that his car had been overturned and his wife killed. He had been given no time to be afraid or react. As he hung there studying the alien geography of his shattered windshield and the asphalt sky beyond, he began to grow angry. Not so much over the loss of his wife, as he had never had much use for her, but at being so roughly handled. He understood something of brutality, but only in the giving, not in the receiving.

With a great effort, fueled largely by his growing righteous fury, he willed his arms to return to his sides, to obey his commands, but like lumps of molded clay they dangled uselessly from his shoulders. Yet, a slight and painful tingling alerted him that they still lived; might still serve to release him from his entrapment given enough time. Once free of the seatbelt, he could crawl from the car and seek help; get proper medical attention; sue the towing company whose truck and drivers had done such damage. Because it had been a tow

truck, there was no doubt in his mind on this matter as his thoughts gelled; he remembered the crane-like appendage that jutted up from behind the cab. It had had a distinctive paint job, as well—blue and yellow; the cab occupied by two men so heavily tattooed that, in the brief moment before impact, they had appeared almost blue. ‘By God,’ he thought, ‘they left me here to die! I’ll wring them dry for this.’

As if summoned by his angry thoughts, the rumble of a large diesel engine entered his blood-filled ears. The old man painfully swiveled his head to peer out what was left of his driver’s-side window in time to see the distinctive blue and yellow color-pattern roll slowly into his field of vision and stop. ‘This won’t do them any good,’ he thought bitterly. ‘I had the right of way at the intersection and they were speeding on top of it; there’s no way trying to be Good Samaritans now is gonna save ’em—they’ve broken my arms...and killed my wife, too,’ he added with a growing sense of indignation.

The truck appeared to sit there for a long time and from his vantage, the old man could see nothing but the huge knobby tires and the lower half of the door. ‘Where are the police?’ he wondered anxiously. ‘Damn police should be here.’

He heard the squeal of rusted hinges and a pair of busted-up work boots dropped upside down into sight. A door slammed; then another. Both of the men were coming over, he observed. ‘Sons-of-bitches are not in any hurry,’ he thought, as the second pair of boots came into sight from round the truck—these were cowboy boots, shiny and new, the toes pointy and hard. Both sets of boots appeared aimed at him, immobile now; waiting.

‘What are they doing?’ the old man wondered, suddenly uneasy. The amount of blood pooling onto the car ceiling alarmed him, though he was reasonably certain it was from his wife. ‘Even so, they should help,’ he reasoned. ‘They should get me out of here... it’s their fault, after all.’ In the distance, a siren intruded into his increasingly panicky thoughts. ‘Thank God,’ he thought, ‘someone has called the police. The boots began to move.’

The cowboy boots clipped across the tarmac of the street, taking two steps for every one of the work boots. They reached his window and halted once more, the old man's world suddenly reduced to a close study of men's footwear. He could see that the Western boots were covered in snakeskin while the work boots were scuffed and dusty, nondescript. "Help me," he croaked through a mouthful of blood and loose teeth. It sounded more like gargling, the words turned to mush.

Two faces suddenly appeared, disconcertingly close and upside-down. The tattoos flowed from beneath their collars and sleeves in a riot of swirling, maze-like patterns, occasionally interrupted by a recognizable image. The straining face of Christ, bloodied by his crown of thorns, peeked out from the partially open shirt of 'Work Boots', while a serpent swallowing a naked woman crawled down the arm of the Cowboy.

Before he could wrench his attention from their illustrations and actually look into their faces, 'Work Boots' produced a blade from somewhere, it's cutting edge short, but as cruelly curved as a parrot's beak. 'He's going to cut me loose,' the old man thought, even as alarms began to clang inside his churning brain.

The larger man reached in as if to slice through the strap and the old man felt a sharp tug. But as his would-be rescuer retreated once more, he found that he was still suspended, though suddenly robbed of breath. A fine, crimson mist filled the car and though he comprehended its meaning, he no longer had the power to scream. A caul of blood masked his face and blinded his eyes. Even as his brain and heart began to power down in furious jolts and ominous lulls he wondered why. 'Why have you cut my throat?' he wanted to ask, but the ones who could answer were already driving away in the stolen car they had parked nearby just a few hours before.

* * * *

Byron snagged the phone before the third ring, flipped it open and mumbled, "Chief Patrick here." The voice on the other end of the phone made him sit bolt upright in bed, his gummy eyes fluttering

open. The digital clock glowed redly from its perch—it was three-thirty in the morning.

“Byron?” the woman’s voice sounded uncertain. “It’s me, Reba.”

Byron pictured his best friend’s wife in faraway Atlanta, a genteel, classy woman. The soft lilt of home bled through the tension in her voice. “What’s wrong?” he asked. Something had to be wrong, of course, for her to call at this hour; for it to be her instead of Tom. He thought of Tom’s recent heart problems. “Is Tom okay? What’s wrong?”

There was a pause, and then she answered, a tremor entering her voice now, “He’s gone, Byron. I don’t know what’s happened, but he never came home from his office on Tuesday.” Byron’s free hand slid unconsciously across the smooth, unwrinkled sheet of the far side of his bed. It remained as empty as when he had turned in for the night. He remembered that it was now Thursday—Tom had been gone for over twenty four hours. Julia had not come home either, but he was growing used to that; they were not Tom and Reba.

Reba went on, “I’ve called everyone we know; everyone I could think of. No one’s heard from him or seen him. Then I thought of you. I knew it was a long shot, with you being way up there in New Jersey, but I thought maybe...maybe he just needed some time with an old friend. He’s seem worried lately...preoccupied.” Another pause ensued, this one charged and dark as a thunderhead. “He’s not there, is he?” she asked at last, the tears in her voice betraying her fear.

“I’ll catch the very first flight I can,” Byron replied softly, even as his mind raced through all the details of handing over the reins of his department to his second-in-command. “I should be there by late afternoon. Call me right away if he comes home in the meantime.”

* * * *

Byron sat in the faux leather chair that Thomas Llewellyn should have occupied and slowly swiveled from side to side. The seventh floor office overlooking Peachtree Street was not cooperating. The large chair and the scarred metal desk it faced were the only signs

of permanence, and even these were devoid of character, being standard issue in cubicles across the nation. The shelving along the walls was constructed of thin, wobbly railings supporting dusty cardboard boxes; most appeared in danger of imminent collapse. The few filing cabinets were tilted and dented, as if accustomed to suffering the kicks and blows of angry men. The ragged files they contained meant nothing to Byron and shed no light on his friend's disappearance. Tom's laptop, the only computer he possessed Reba had explained to him, was nowhere to be found.

Byron had visited the office only once before and that had been many years ago on one of his annual trips to see his mother. Whenever possible, he engineered a stopover with the Llewellyns on his way to their mutual hometown of Columbus, yet a hundred miles further south. It seemed more than a lifetime ago when they had all attended the same high school together; lived in the same neighborhood.

At the time of his first visit Tom had been in the midst of just getting moved in; just beginning his consulting business. And now it seemed to Byron that almost nothing had changed in the room since that time, and this gave him an anxious, uneasy feeling. Thomas had done very well in life, had a good income and a beautiful home in a leafy, much sought-after suburb, yet his office bespoke none of this. In fact, Byron reflected, it was a decidedly mute environment—any single one of his officers' lockers back in New Jersey displayed more character, more personality, than this dim, silent room.

Byron had opened every drawer, closet, and box in his blind search for any clue as to where Tom had gone—or been taken. Reba had assured him that Tom had no enemies; none that he had ever spoken of. "He's a municipal planning consultant," she had reminded Byron shortly after he had arrived. "He visits towns throughout the southeast, by invitation mind you, conducts interviews with employees, observes procedures and writes up his thoughts and recommendations on streamlining operations.

"He's never the one that actually does any firings, you know, if that's what you're thinking. He's long gone before anything like

that gets done,” she had assured him. “People like Tom, Byron; you know that; they always have.”

It was true, Byron thought once more. Tom had always had an easy, witty charm about him. He wasn’t the kind to make enemies. In that way, they were very different men. Byron smiled at the memory of Tom’s slightly sardonic banter, the arched eyebrow, the curved upper lip that belied his innate good humor. He moved easily amongst men Byron reflected with only a little envy. But even as he remembered his best friend, his hands, patting and probing without need of his direct attention, discovered the envelope and drew it forth. It had been taped to the bottom of the battered desk’s slide-out typing shelf—an anachronism concealing a secret.

As the yellowed, brittle newspaper clippings spilled forth onto the desk top like ancient leaves, Byron felt a darkness, the shadow of a black wing, sweep across his heart. He did not need to read the terse accounts to know the story they told; he recognized his old home in the grainy photos, his own mother and father, decades younger, but the strain and heartache already permanently etched into their faces. Worse still, was the tiny inset of a school photo the police had used in their investigation—a boy of ten sporting the heavily lacquered, thrust-up hair of the era; his smile wide and toothsome—a boy that might have been Byron himself but for his blondness. “Daniel,” he whispered.

Byron leapt to his feet sweeping the clippings hastily back into the envelope. A list of names and addresses written on a strip of white paper, obviously much newer than the articles, caught his eye amongst the tobacco-colored shards, and he studied it for a moment. All of the addresses were in Columbus, but the names themselves meant nothing to him. He returned the list to the envelope and stuffed the entire package into his inside jacket pocket. Within minutes he was in his rental car and speeding southward on I-85 through the wind-swept night.

* * * *

The shell of a house peeked whitely out from its nest of riotous shrubberies and questing vines. In the moonlight it reminded Byron of a skull sinking into the overgrown, humid earth. The entrance was only partially covered by a piece of warped plywood. ‘Probably neighborhood kids,’ he thought; ‘the house would certainly qualify as haunted.’ He could picture the local kids taking the dare to enter the decrepit blue-collar bungalow; he might have done the same thing himself once upon a time.

Something flexed and popped beneath his shoe and he flashed a quick beam from his penlight onto it. A barely legible ‘For Sale’ sign lay rusting and forgotten in the tall, rank grasses. The house still lay empty after thirty-five years—a testament to the fate of its original owner.

Daniel’s body had never been found; his abductor and murderer never apprehended by the police. ‘But the man responsible *was* identified,’ Byron recalled in a frisson of loathing tinged with guilt—‘justice had been served, and more importantly, Daniel had been avenged.’ Of this, and not very much more, he was certain. Just as he was certain when he discovered the clippings regarding Daniel’s kidnapping in Tom’s office, that his missing friend had discovered something new in the decades-old case; possibly something dangerous to them both. Otherwise Byron would never have returned to this house just two blocks from where he and Thomas grew up; never returned to the only place on earth where he had been responsible for the death of another human being—where they had killed his brother’s murderer.

The list of names meant something to Thomas and now he had disappeared. Was he being blackmailed? Had they been found out after all these years?

Byron pushed through the tall grasses and mounted the few, cracked concrete steps leading up to the gapped entrance. With just a pause to quickly illuminate the interior and insure that a floor still existed, he squeezed through and stood inside.

The climbing tendrils that threatened to pull the tiny house down had not yet obscured all the windows, and through these poured a

faint, phosphorescent light; Byron stood still and allowed his eyes to adjust. Gradually, objects once recognizable as furniture coalesced into view—a moldering armchair trembling with hidden mice, a pile of unidentifiable debris seemingly swept up into one corner, a two-legged coffee table that appeared to be kneeling like a dog. He glanced nervously down the short hallway and risked a brief flash of his light. The kitchen at the other end of the house remained impenetrable to the weak illumination, but no noose hung there; no corpulent little man dangled kicking and purple-faced, his eyes black with engorged blood; there was no toppled chair.

Something fluttered whitely on the door frame and Byron instinctively sought it with the beam of his light. He half-expected to find a dusty, irritated moth, but found instead a square of paper tacked to the warped, peeling wood, its edges trembling faintly in the slight breeze. Like the list with the yellowed clippings, this also appeared fresh and recent in its brilliance. Byron trod cautiously down the corridor, his heart thudding louder with every step that drew him closer to the kitchen and its dark memories.

It had all started with their dog ‘Buddy’—he was the first to go missing. In reality, he had been Byron’s dog, an amiable mongrel that he had adopted off the street and then left behind as he had entered his teens. Daniel had been only too happy to inherit the black and white cur. In just a short while, Buddy had successfully, and far too easily as far as Byron had been concerned, transferred his allegiance to the younger Patrick—he became Daniel’s shadow and constant companion; there was not one without the other. That is, until Buddy failed to show up for breakfast one hot, sticky morning a month into their summer vacation.

By the second day of Buddy’s absence, Daniel was inconsolable, suffering the loss as a fresh and open wound. It had been Byron that suggested his little brother stop his sniveling, wipe his snotty nose and go from house to house to make inquiries. Byron had not expected this tactic to produce any actual results other than occupying Daniel’s attention for a few days and putting an end to his bawling,

if only temporarily. This cynical suggestion would haunt Byron for the rest of his life.

Armed with a crayon depiction of Buddy scrawled onto a page of lined notebook paper, Daniel sallied forth into the early morning neighborhood with full confidence in his brother's idea. He never came back. The portrait of the dog was later found in a garbage can set out to the curb. The can bore the sloppily painted numbers that once were attached to the decaying house in which Byron now stood. The former, and deceased, occupant denied any knowledge of little boys or missing dogs. No one believed him.

He was an older man who lived alone. So far as any one knew there had never been a Missus or a girlfriend, and there had been rumors long before Daniel disappeared. Some of Byron's friends hinted at hidden knowledge, kids in the neighborhood who went silent when the subject of Mr. Virgil Curtsie came up—children who went dead white and stared at their feet. When Byron had suggested the door-to-door campaign to Daniel, he had forgotten Mr. Curtsie; he had forgotten the spider that crouched within the heart of their neighborhood, the small, soft man who always found something to do in his postage stamp-sized front yard when school let out. The grubby little man with the thick, greasy glasses that insisted trick-or-treaters come in to his home on Halloween to receive their due.

Even so, the police search revealed nothing useful to their investigation within his walls. Half the neighborhood, adult and child, had stood vigil outside his home the day of the search. When Curtsie had escorted the last officer to the door, Byron recalled the little smile that had lifted his pursed and purplish lips—a tiny, furtive smile of triumph. Thomas had nudged him hard in the ribs that hot day as the sun sank like a ball of fire into the faraway ocean. “We should git'im! You wanna git'im?” he had asked urgently. “If it was my brother, I'd damn sure git'im!”

They were both big boys at fourteen, and athletic, and what they did was not hard to do once they had made up their minds. Thomas had been startlingly adept at violence, pummeling and overpowering the smiling Curtsie as he answered their knock at his back door.

Binding him with the clothesline they had brought was the work of only a few moments. The remaining length had been fastened round his fleshy neck and pulled through a lamp hook fastened to the ceiling and tied off to the oven door. Byron remembered being amazed and intimidated by his best friend's unexpected proclivity for violence and his adult-like confidence. From the moment they had entered the house Thomas had moved with assurance.

The entire episode had unfolded in the slow, detail-laden way of dreams; only the moments of violence achieving rapidity, the images blurred and seeping colors. Byron had intended that they should interrogate the grimy little man about Daniel's whereabouts, but Thomas, in his righteous zeal, had rendered his mouth incapable of forming coherent words. Now, their plan to threaten him with hanging unless he came 'clean' would appear to have no real purpose. Nonetheless, Thomas had herded their prisoner onto the chair and threaded the hangman's rope to its anchor. Mr. Curtsie swayed from side to side and appeared dazed; unsure of what was happening to him. Just as Byron prepared to intervene—after all it was Daniel's whereabouts that they had come for—Thomas suddenly put a finger to his lips and pointed to the front of the house. "Did you hear a car pull up?" he asked urgently.

Byron sprinted for the front door and peered cautiously through the curtains. The mail man's jeep was just pulling away from the Curtsie post box. He nearly passed out with relief. When he returned, the chair lay on its side and the man responsible for his little brother's disappearance dangled from the ceiling. "The bastard jumped," Thomas whispered at the awe-inspiring sight and pointed to the back door. "Let's go," he had commanded the mesmerized Byron; "Now!" Together, they had fled the house like two boys running from a broken window; shouting and laughing with relief when they were safely away. It was only later that Byron realized that Tom had untied the dead man's hands before they had escaped.

Byron snagged the folded note from the door frame and opened it. In the beam from his penlight, he read the words, "Waiting for you."

The chief of the Columbus P.D. was a large, heavy man not much older than Byron, early fifties, he guessed. He had the look of a college football player gone to seed. The chief slid a paper cup of coffee across his desk and regarded his visitor. Byron saluted him with it and said, "I appreciate you seeing me, Chief Tanner; I'm sure you're busy."

"Call me Steve," he replied, suspicion written all over his face; "How can I say no to a fellow chief...even one from New Jersey?" he added with just the hint of a smile.

Byron smiled tightly back. "I grew up here...born and raised. My mama still lives here."

"Columbus High?"

"No, Pacelli."

Chief Tanner took a noisy sip of his coffee and leaned back in his leather chair. "Is that right? You gotta go somewhere, I reckon. Well how in the hell did you end up stranded in the frozen north, pray tell?"

"Pretty easy, actually; I met and married a Jersey girl while I was serving in the army. You know how it goes, when we decided to get out of the service she wanted to settle down close to her folks, and I just wanted her to be happy for a change; it worked ...for a while."

Tanner smiled more broadly now, as if Byron were just then exhibiting recognizable human features. "Wives," he waved his meaty paw across the top of his desk; "they're something, ain't they?" He didn't require an answer. "Looks like they've treated you pretty good up there, didn't they, Chief...for a southern boy?" He slid Byron's police ID card across his desk to him.

"Yep," Byron admitted; "they sure as hell have."

Tanner gazed silently across the desk top at him with the expression of a benevolent uncle for a nephew who has traveled far and done well. "So then, what is it we can do for you," he asked in the gently tumbled grammar of the Piedmont.

Byron looked at Tanner squarely. “Steve, my best friend has gone missing and I have reason to believe he may be somewhere here in Columbus...his wife is frantic,” he added for emphasis.

“Grown man?” Tanner asked. “He might not thank you if you find him, Byron. Besides, you know as well as me that the police can’t involve themselves with runaway husbands.”

“It’s not like that.” Byron leaned forward. “I think he’s gotten into some kind of trouble. I don’t know if he’s running from something or away from it, but it’s also possible he was taken.”

“Taken?” Tanner echoed. “If you had any proof of that the FBI would already be involved, wouldn’t they?” He didn’t wait for an answer, but continued. “I’m still not hearing why this might be a police matter, Byron, and to tell you God’s honest truth, we’re a little bit busy around here just at the moment. You may not be familiar with the little crime wave we’re having, but the press is having a field day.” He shoved the morning’s *Ledger-Enquirer* across his desk to Byron and pointed at a photograph of an overturned car—spectators knelt and peered at something dangling within. Chief Tanner stabbed a thick finger at it and said, “Had his throat cut, by God! Run off the road and murdered for no apparent reason; his wallet left behind. It don’t make sense and it’s not the first—we’re rackin’ ’em up day by day. I’ve got a city of over a quarter million people, Byron, and less than five hundred cops to take care of ’em. Like I said, we’re kind of preoccupied just now.”

Byron had stopped listening, his attention having been arrested by the name of the elderly victim, Nicholas A. Strohmayer. His finger hung above it like a wasp, hovering and uncertain, unable to move on. He fished the list of names he had taken from Tom’s office out of his jacket pocket and quickly scanned it. N. Strohmayer appeared third down. His eyes flicked back to the newspaper to confirm the spelling; then up to the face of his counterpart.

“Steve,” he began softly, “you said there have been other unexplained murders recently—like Strohmayer?” The Columbus chief nodded his large, bullish head warily. “What were their names?”

Tanner paused for just a moment; then answered, “Robson, Fletcher and Forrester, Claudius...Claude to his friends when he was breathing. Why do you ask?”

Byron’s finger trailed down the list stopping briefly on the two names printed as C. Forrester and F. Robson. He looked back up at Tanner; then said, “I think I may have a list of the victims.” He handed the paper to him.

Tanner studied it for several long moments before saying, “I’ll assign you a liaison officer, but you’ll have to share a desk.”

* * * *

Vanda Tucker did not recognize Byron by either name or appearance and he said nothing to enlighten her. On the other hand, he had recognized her instantly in spite of the many years that had passed since their brief acquaintance. He actually felt himself blushing upon introduction. She was in a gray pants suit that had become a little too snug and sported a detective sergeant’s badge on the leather holder attached to her belt. Byron had to keep biting his lower lip to keep from smiling. As she escorted him into her small, basement office she threw him a suspicious glance as she pushed open a frosted window. The narrow view revealed little but a concrete runway leading to the basement steps at the other end of the building. Several trash cans were lined up opposite, their lids invisible from the acute angle. She fired a cigarette and waved the smoke out the opening. “What’s the grin for, Chief? Something strike your funny-bone this morning?” She took a quick glance in a mirror hung on the brick wall and pushed at her dark hair a little. “Hmmm?”

“No,” he lied; “just the awkwardness of the situation, I guess.”

She didn’t appear to buy that, but went on anyway. “Alright then, the chief says, that is, *my chief*, that I’m to bring you up to speed on these cases—our little murder spree, so let’s get to it.”

She signaled for him to sit, so Byron obediently eased himself into the ancient wooden school chair that was wedged next to her desk. If someone opened the door suddenly he would be banged in

the knees with it. She threw a number of files onto the desk but did not bother to sit herself.

Puffing away at her smoke she narrated in fine detail the apparently senseless murders of three men. The most recent, Strohmayer, he already knew the manner of death, but the previous two bore no resemblance other than the cold-blooded ferocity of their execution and the lack of any appreciable motive. “Oh yeah,” she added. “In all three cases the victims were elderly men, though I’m sure you’ve already noted that.

“Also, she continued, “witnesses have testified that the killers were two heavily tattooed white males. They don’t seem to be making too much of an effort to conceal their identities—the forensic artist is working something up for us and it should be ready soon.”

She flicked her latest cigarette out the window and turned back to face Byron. “I’m sorry about all that,” she said shyly. “I’ve tried to quit a bunch of times, but every time I do I blow up like a balloon. Even now, I can hardly button these pants,” she laughed.

It was not her pants that drew so much of Byron’s unwilling attention, but her fully-packed blouse, whose buttons appeared to be straining with the effort of containing her. The memories of their first and, until now, only meeting, came rushing back to him, flooding his senses; making him as testosterone-charged as an adolescent boy; as the fifteen year old he had once been when they had met that long-ago autumn night.

“Goodness gracious you are easily embarrassed,” she laughed; mistaking Byron’s discomfort to be about her remarks. “Don’t they have any girls up there in New Jersey?” she asked playfully.

“Yeah,” he admitted, as thoughts of Julia rose like snow dervishes; instantly cooling him. “Maybe we should consider re-interviewing the families of the victims,” Byron offered.

Vanda’s smile vanished with Byron’s and she responded flatly, “To what end?”

He told her about Thomas and the list and she asked, “What’s your friend got to do with all this?”

“I don’t know,” Byron answered honestly; “I really don’t.” But even so, he felt a darkness gather in his heart like a murder of crows, shrieking and restless, merciless and full of hunger.

* * * *

The widow Robson greeted them from her front porch swing. The early sun had yet to reach her and she was wrapped in a hand-knitted shawl in shades of orange and green that were last popular in the 1970’s. Byron thought her thin white hair resembled a halo as it floated above her tiny, fragile skull. She pointed to two rusty metal rockers that faced the street and asked pleasantly, “Could I get ya’ll some coffee?”

“No ma’am,” he declined; ‘we’ve had our coffee, thank you.” He could hear his drawl seeping back into his speech with every word—It was like a first language that returned when back in the land of one’s birth, smoothly; without conscious thought, and ever since he had landed in Atlanta it had crept steadily forth.

“We just wondered if we could ask you a few questions about your husband?” he continued. Vanda smiled at the old woman and took a seat, while Byron half-sat and half-leaned on the porch railing.

Mrs. Robson’s smile vanished and she snugged the caftan around her narrow shoulders as if she had just felt a chill. “More questions, then? I don’t much see the point, I must say. The harms all been done; nothing we say here’s gonna change any of that.”

Vanda said, “Harm, ma’am...you mean your husband’s murder?”

The old woman looked down at her lap and her large-jointed fingers that she restlessly knit together. “Yes,” she answered after a moment; “That’s harm too, isn’t it?”

Byron threw a puzzled glance at his partner and answered, “Of course it is. It’s a grievous harm that’s still out there—men are still being murdered, Mrs. Robson, and we’d like to put a stop to it; that’s why we’re here.”

She looked back up at him; her eyes misty and frightened. “I don’t really know anything,” she pleaded.

“Maybe you do, ma’am,” Vanda intervened; reaching over and patting one her veined hands. “Sometimes we know more than we realize.”

“Did you, or your husband, know a man named Thomas Llewellyn?” Byron asked.

The old woman shook her head. “No, I’m afraid that doesn’t ring any bells. I’m sorry.” Byron thought she seemed relieved. He thrust the list at her.

“How about any of the names on this list? Take your time, Mrs. Robson and be sure.” He watched her carefully peruse the roster from the top down. The paper began to vibrate in her fingers and she went to hand it back to him. “Which ones do you recognize,” he asked abruptly; refusing to take it; “Point at them.”

She looked up at him with pleading, yellow eyes. “Do it, ma’am; right this minute.” He felt Vanda’s gaze on him. The old woman unfurled a talon-like finger and tapped a name on the list; then another and another. Byron watched closely. One name had been that of fellow victim, Claudius Forrester; the second, however, still lived...at least for now.

“How about the name, Virgil Curtsie...does that do anything for you?” She kept her face pointed down at the quaking paper clutched in her spiderish hands. “That name isn’t on the list, so why don’t you look up at me and answer?”

Vanda had risen to her feet and appeared on the verge of intervening. “Hey now,” she began, but Byron cut her off.

“Look at me and answer,” he nearly shouted; snatching the list from her.

Mrs. Robson raised her pale, ghostly face; her mouth parted; tears trembling in her eyes. “How did you know?” she asked. “How could you know?”

“What’s going on?” he heard Vanda ask from somewhere far away; “Chief?”

Byron ignored her and pressed on. “Did your husband keep an address book...where is it, Mrs. Robson?”

She pointed at the screen door. “Just inside by the telephone...I don’t know why you’re shouting at me,” she sobbed; “I didn’t do anything!”

“Get it,” he barked at Det. Sgt. Tucker.

“Yes sir!” she barked back, throwing open the door and letting it slam behind her. When she returned moments later with the book, it was to witness Byron stalking away toward the car. She hastened to catch up. “We’ll return this after we’re done with it,” she promised the old woman over her shoulder.

“I don’t want it,” she cried in return as she scurried into her house.

“Sir,” Vanda called out to Byron’s back; hurrying to catch him, “sir...chief or no chief, you’ve got some explaining to do! What *was* that back there?”

Byron had already reached the car and started it. He began to pull away from the curb before she could even close her door. The acceleration threw her back into her seat. “Damnit, Chief! You mind not killing us...at least not before you’ve explained what’s going on.” She snapped her seatbelt and took a moment to situate it comfortably between her breasts before turning to study Byron’s hardened profile. She lit a cigarette and didn’t bother to open the window. “It’s not fair to sit down at *our* table with cards up your sleeve—it’s just not polite; especially when you’re a guest. So how about it, Chiefie? You about ready to spill your guts, or do I have to smoke you out?” She laughed at her own joke in a way that made Byron feel both warm and challenged.

“Yeah,” he answered, glancing over at her; noting the sparkle in her green eyes. “I’m about ready...just open that damn window.”

He aimed the car for downtown and the Rankin Bar.

* * * *

Byron knocked back his second bourbon and set the glass down next to his cooling cup of coffee. Vanda sat across the small table from him sipping at a steaming cup of chicory; the Rankin Bar being one of the very few places in town where they served the ‘Old

South' coffee substitute. The Detective Sergeant studied her charge with some amusement.

"Hey there," she said softly, "let's not forget it's only eleven—that's AM, by the way." She glanced around the coolly dark room nearly devoid of customers. "Ain't it a shame you can't even smoke in bars anymore? Good Lord...this used to be a place of sin and iniquity...now look at it, all dolled up for church."

Byron took in his surroundings for the first time. It was true...this bar, like most of downtown, had become so gentrified since he had last lived in Columbus that it was almost unrecognizable. What had once been a decaying business district in a dying mill town had been transformed. Gone were the sleazy hole-in-the-wall, drink-standing-up or go-outside-to-fall-down bars where textile workers used to donate their hard-earned paychecks. Even the gritty, massive brick buildings that had once ground and roared twenty-four hours a day and housed thousands of workers had fallen silent, their operations spirited away to exotic lands like Mexico and Indonesia. Now, those that remained had been converted into high-end lofts with views of the river that had once powered their turbines; the rest had been plowed under for strip malls or preserved as seldom visited museums. Like elsewhere, Byron thought through the calming haze of 'Makers Mark', Columbus had surrendered its blue collar soul for a place in the land of cubicles; replacing its mills and foundries with insurance companies and credit card corporations. As if conjured up by his ruminations, an old tramp made his unsteady way past their window, blinking and uncertain in the new day—a working-class Rip Van Winkle awakened to a future that has no place for him. Byron raised a finger to the bar tender.

"Hold that thought," Vanda commanded both Byron and the mixologist; stopping the latter with his hand on the neck of the preferred bottle. Receiving no encouragement from Byron he drifted away into the shadows. "Still waiting on you, professor," Vanda smiled across the table at her new partner; "Let's have it, shall we; before you render yourself incapable. Tell me about that list."

“When I realized that some of the names on Tom’s list were also ‘your’ victims, I knew that I...we,” he corrected himself and received an encouraging nod from Vanda; “had to find the connection—that there had to be something that tied them all together. So, when I saw the old woman, Mrs. Robson, I decided to take a chance and show her the list. She knew the other names, and more importantly, her husband had known them, as well...she also knew Virgil Curtsie.”

“Who the hell is he when he’s at home?” Vanda quipped. “His name wasn’t on that paper.”

“No,” Byron conceded, “but she knew him, which meant her husband knew him, and my friend Tom Llewellyn knew them all...or at least their names.”

“Why?” Vanda asked simply.

“I’m not sure,” Byron replied.

Vanda took a breath, “Do you think it could be your friend is behind these murders?”

Byron took a moment before answering. “I don’t know anymore, but it’s something I have to consider.”

Vanda reached over and patted his hand before asking, “How did you know to show the old lady the list, Byron? What significance do those names hold for you? Cause if you don’t mind my saying, that scene on the porch came across as a little personal to me.”

He looked across at Vanda while weighing his words, even as the alcohol and her touch loosened the tight collar with which he always girded himself. “You really don’t remember me, do you?”

Vanda tucked her chin in and pursed her lips as if she had been considering this very thing; then tapped the table top with a long, lacquered nail before answering, “There *is* something about you that is *so* familiar.” Her eyes narrowed in concentration. “High School?” she asked

“Pacelli,” he answered, just as he had done in Tanner’s interview.

Vanda shook her head, “Nope...Baker.” She arched an eyebrow at him. “A Catholic boy, huh; they can be awful sweet,” she observed dreamily.

“Please, Lord above,” she continued, “do not tell me that I *should* remember you, if you know what I mean, and I pray you don’t.” She shook a cigarette out of her package, then not finding an ashtray, managed to break it in half while trying to get it back in. “There was a time there...a short period, mind you, after my husband left me, when I’m afraid I kinda went off the deep end a little...did a little too much partying...woke up in a few too many strange places with a few too many strange...well, I don’t have to tell you; you’re a mature man, after all.” She took a deep breath. “*You* are not one of *those* men, are you? *Please* say no.

“You can’t be,” she hastily answered herself, “you’ve been living up north all this time! Oh my God, that’s a relief! Only why in the world do I run my mouth so, besides you’re the one that’s supposed to be talking! You did that on purpose!” she accused Byron.

He laughed gently. “I’m sorry,” he offered; “I do have the advantage, as I remember you explicitly.”

Vanda propped her chin in her hand and said, “Explicitly...oh dear...well do tell, get it over with.”

“It was at Baker High School,” Byron began; his voice becoming soft and smoky with the memories of a long-ago evening. “Some classmates and I crashed one of those famous teen dances at your school gym. One of the coaches that guarded the entrance was the older brother of one of my school buddies and he let us in. We hardly knew what to do once we had breached your battlements, so we just stood around in a knot trying not to look conspicuous and achieving the exact opposite, I’m sure. That’s when I saw you. You were dancing away and the center of attention; at least my attention, and I made up my mind right then and there to ask you to dance. I couldn’t stop looking at you.”

“Oh how you do go on!” Vanda said in her best tidewater drawl. Then, “Pray continue, please, I’m all ears.”

Byron chuckled hoarsely. “Well, I asked...I asked you to dance and you did. I think my legs were shaking, I was so nervous. Then, at some point, the band switched to something slow and I’ll never forget the sensation of holding you close. Remember, I’d been

attending a Catholic school, and it was the seventies you know, so I hadn't had a lot of experience with girls yet. Then I did something that I've never forgiven myself for." He glanced guiltily at Vanda whose hand had drifted to her cheek as if she were checking for a temperature.

"Oh my God," she whispered.

"I let my hand brush up against your left breast, I distinctly remember which one, and said, quite romantically I'm sure; "I'd really like to do it with you."

Vanda's mouth fell open. "You!" she managed to say. "That was you?"

"So you do remember me?" Byron laughed.

"I do now, you naughty boy! I was so disappointed that you didn't stick around for an answer; you took off from there like the devil was on your heels."

"No," Byron smiled ruefully. "I lost my nerve and so also the lady fair...but, I never forgot her."

Vanda blushed in spite of herself but drawled, "How you do talk, suh, I declare!"

"So now you know my deep, dark secret."

"Darlin', if that's the worst of it you've *got* to keep trying."

Byron glanced down at his empty tumbler and Vanda followed his gaze. "But that's not all, is it? Maybe I should buy you another after all; it appears firewater puts you in a confessional mood."

He glanced up guiltily just as her cell phone began to ring. She dug around in her voluminous bag for several moments before locating it. Flipping it open she answered, "Detective Sergeant Tucker," then went silent. After a moment more she said, "Five minutes, we're just around the corner from the station." She snapped the phone shut and announced, "We've got to roll...it seems a package arrived at the station that's causing quite a stir...and it's for you."

* * * *

They met Chief Tanner in the evidence processing room on the second floor. He was waiting for them at the end of a long table

on which sat a single cardboard box. The box appeared to have been roughly torn open; the brown wrapping paper and string that had bound it had been left hanging from its crushed sides. It was smeared with fingerprint dust as well. Several men in lab jackets were arrayed around the table in various attitudes; none appeared happy with the box.

“We had the robot open it when we saw it was addressed to you,” Chief Tanner informed Byron as he and Vanda walked into the room of waiting men. “There was no return address and after what just happened, I thought it best we didn’t take any chances.”

Byron stopped at the far end opposite his counterpart and asked, “What *did* just happen?”

Tanner pushed the box several inches further away just using his fingertips and said, “We went right over to Mister Timothy Wakely’s house after I got a look at that list of yours—he was the next on it; still living so far as we knew—we now know that to be incorrect.”

“Murdered?” Byron said.

“Very much so,” Tanner assured him; “Had his head removed with the family sword. My boys here,” he nodded at the gloomy technicians, “assure me that the sword is a genuine Confederate issue; probably a family heirloom. Not that that matters much for Mr. Wakely, as it appears he had no children of his own to hand it off to—a confirmed bachelor as they used to say in the old days.” He winked at Byron.

Vanda, who had been edging up to the open box, halted and said, “Please tell me that his head is *not* in that box.” Her face went a shade lighter.

Tanner gave her a look; then said, “Byron, I’m afraid this might be bad news for you, but what came in this box has to do with your missing friend, Llewellyn.”

Byron noticed Vanda sidling a little closer to the box. He remained still. “Bad news?” he repeated dully.

Vanda reached the box and peered quickly in. Byron heard her say, “Oh my God!”

“Pretty bad, yeah,” Tanner continued; softening his voice a little. “Some sonofabitch sent you his index fingers.”

Byron felt himself take a step back then stop; then heard himself ask, “You sure they’re his?”

“Yeah, ’fraid so; we rolled one and sent it through AFIS. It was a match from when he applied for a pistol permit in Atlanta a few years ago. We couldn’t lift any prints from the box itself. Whoever sent it was careful enough.”

“Any chance for Thomas,” Byron asked.

“It’s possible” Tanner answered; his expression unconvincing; “...he could still be alive. It would depend on whether they stanchd the bleeding...or whatever else they may have done to him before, or afterward. I’m sorry, Byron; I know you were good friends.”

“That’s it then?”

Tanner shook his big head reluctantly. “No, I’m afraid not... there’s a note.” The Columbus chief slid a clear plastic evidence bag containing a handwritten note on lined paper to Byron. Byron noted the rusty-looking stains that decorated the margins, as well as remnants of clear tape that had been snipped near their middle. It read, ‘Tell Byron to hurry up—I’m almost done. Thomas wanted to point the way.’ He looked up at Chief Tanner as Vanda placed a hand on his arm. He could feel himself shaking. “His fingers had been taped to this page?”

Tanner nodded. “Each was pointing in the opposite direction of the other...a joke.”

“Who’s left now?”

“Just one according to Llewellyn’s list—a Randolph J. Carruthers, white male, aged seventy-six. He lives alone since his mother died a few years ago. We’ve got undercover with him now.”

“Anyone assigned to the night shift yet?”

“You and Tucker I expect,” Tanner sighed.

“That’d be fine...thanks.” Byron said.

Tanner called over to Vanda, “Tucker, you in?”

She turned slightly from the open window overlooking the patrol parking lot and answered, “Neck deep, Chief.”

“Byron, go get fitted for a vest and draw a weapon from the armory...you comfortable with a .45 cal?”

“That’s what we qualify with.”

“Good. Tucker, will you stop mooning around and escort Chief Patrick to the armory, please ma’am?”

As they walked down the hallway together Vanda turned and said, “He might still be alive, Byron. I know it’s not likely, but we don’t know why he was taken in the first place. He may have some value to them.”

Byron said nothing; as he was wondering what that value might be.

“Besides,” she added with a weak smile, “at least now you know that he’s not the one behind all this.”

* * * *

Randolph J. sat in the shadowed corner of his cluttered, dusty living room and eyeballed the two officers that had relieved his previous guardians. They didn’t look like much to him. When he had been the man’s age, he reflected, he could have taken him easily; as to the woman...well, that was obvious. He had spent nearly his entire life in school gyms teaching kids the rudiments of sports and the basics of developing a strong physique and knew two losers when he saw them. Smokers and drinkers...soft and slow—this was what stood between him and...something...a painful death, maybe. He shuddered and the damned woman noticed as she made her rounds of the windows checking latches. She quickly turned away. He hoped that they could at least shoot well, if it came to that.

The man reentered the room from the kitchen after spending what seemed an inordinate amount of time in the back rooms of his house. He was drying his hands with a ragged dish towel. “Find anything to interest you?” Randolph J. asked slyly.

Byron regarded him for a moment before asking in his turn, “What do you think?”

The old man reared back in his stained and tattered lounge, “I won’t tolerate disrespect—I demand respect.”

Byron turned away and went to the front door. “Uh huh,” he answered disrespectfully.

Vanda sidled up to him and whispered fiercely in his ear, “Do you mind? We’ve got to spend all night here with this old boy, so do you think you could you give your feud with the elderly just a slight hiatus?”

Byron jiggled the door knob and double-checked the deadbolt without answering.

Vanda’s forehead furrowed with a new thought. “Wait a minute,” she continued with just a glance over her shoulder at Mister Carruthers, “*did* you find something?”

Byron turned back toward the kitchen and Vanda followed. “I’ll make some coffee,” he said.

When they had entered the tiny, fly-blown kitchen, she seized his elbow. “Byron?” she demanded; then folded her arms waiting.

He looked over her shoulder into the darkening living room. Carruthers studied them both with open suspicion, his long, sagging face, pale and stubbled, pursed in distaste; his tiny, deep-set eyes glittering with malice. Byron turned back to Vanda. “He has a drawer full of children’s underwear in his bedroom,” he said; then resumed his preparations, rinsing out a greasy coffee pot and spooning some stale grounds into a filter basket.

“Might be grandchildren,” Vanda offered unconvincingly.

Byron glanced over his shoulder at her; then returned to his task.

She looked once more to where the man they were to protect glowed like a fungus in the deepening shadows of the on-coming evening. “Oh Lordy,” Vanda whispered; “Oh dear God; I won’t sleep a wink in this house,” she promised.

“Am I allowed to use my own bathroom?” Their unhappy host called out to them. “Would that be a goddamn problem, do you think?” He began to hoist himself up on shaky, spindly arms.

“It’s your house,” Byron answered, “do what you want. All we ask is that you not go outside and to keep all the curtains closed and the doors locked—the rest is up to you.”

“So I can go to bed if I want to?” Randolph J. persisted unpleasantly; beginning his unsteady exit of the close, malodorous room.

“It’s up to you,” Byron repeated; “Don’t let us stop you.”

The old man made his way like a great, white spider into the dark recesses of the rear of the house and vanished from sight.

* * * *

When they came for him it was not in darkness but just as the sun began to rise over a murky horizon. Vanda had not been as good as her word, but had fallen asleep on the old man’s seedy, sprung couch sometime after three AM. Byron had succumbed in an armchair facing the front door some time before, confident that the sound of anyone attempting to gain entry would quickly rouse him.

It was the crash and grind of the approaching garbage truck that awakened them both. Byron stood and stretched before going to the window to take a peek at the world newly revealed, and heard bones cracking in his back. He smiled tiredly at Vanda who had just managed a sitting position and who smiled blearily back.

He parted the thick, dusty curtains just enough to peek outside. The garbage truck trundled noisily into view, an institutional green monster, spewing diesel smoke and dripping an unsavory stew of fluids from various leaks within its carcass. With a hiss and a squeal it halted in front of Carruthers’ house and the ‘Moan Back’ man leapt down from the maw of the vehicle. Byron dully registered the worker’s scroll of ‘tats’ and began to turn away. ‘He’s going to ruin those fancy cowboy boots,’ he thought.

“Anything showing,” Vanda asked cheerfully as she made her way to the kitchen to begin a new pot of coffee.

Byron heard the crash of metal as Randolph’s garbage can was slammed into the lip of the receiving end of the truck outside. “No,” Byron began, “just the garbage pick-up. That’s one job you couldn’t pay me to...” The boots niggled at his subconscious and he turned back toward the window, but it was the sound of running footsteps that interrupted his sentence. “What the ...” he began. He threw back the curtain just in time to see ‘Cowboy Boots’ returning the

now-empty and very dented can back to the side of Carruthers' house, even as a second heavily-tattooed man, presumably the driver, charged up the walk wielding a cinder block. Byron just had time to think, 'Two white males, heavily tattooed,' before the concrete was launched through the very window he was peering out from. He threw himself to the right in a shower of broken glass and shards of jagged wood.

From the kitchen, he heard the sound of something clattering to the floor and the faraway sound of Vanda's voice crying, "Byron?"

He had fallen onto his right side, pinning his gun beneath his frame. He scrambled to flip himself over and bring it into play even as Vanda rushed in with her weapon already drawn and pointing at the destroyed window. In that split second, the face of 'Cowboy Boots' appeared framed in the wreckage and Byron noted his long, curly hair, clean and shining in the light of the new day; swinging about his shoulders like a model's in a shampoo commercial. In spite of the tattoos concealing so much of his features it was clear to Byron that he could not be much more than twenty-five. He tossed the grenade into the room and vanished before either he or Vanda could fire a single shot and Byron thought his expression inappropriately cheerful for the occasion.

The resultant explosion concussed Byron and retuned him to the floor clapping his ears, deaf, writhing, and blind as a mole. He could not know what might have happened to Vanda. Though his senses had been scattered by the concussive bang and brilliant flash of the stun grenade, he understood that he was still alive for the moment, yet helpless and at the mercy of his enemies.

It was the terrified screams of Randolph J. that first pierced the swirling disorder of his mind and ears and let him know that there would be an end to his disablement. Through a white haze he was startled to see that the two tattooed men were already in the house and carrying the old man between them, as neatly wrapped in a blanket as a cigar. Byron sat up feeling for his gun. The driver kicked him in the forehead as he passed with his load and Byron went back down, the gun temporarily forgotten.

As a trickle of blood began to stain his vision, Byron dragged himself toward where Vanda lay. He could see that she was still breathing, but unconscious. He felt something metal beneath his hand and seized it; then made for the appallingly destroyed doorway like a slug—unable to comprehend what had transpired in the lost time from the moment of the explosion until now.

As the sun rose like an angry red eye over the misty tree tops and damp roofs, he saw his adversaries toss Carruthers onto the drooling lip of the garbage truck's compressor. Byron's vision cleared enough to witness the younger of the two men throw the lever to commence the downward progress of the great blade, as the older held their victim in place, smiling all the while. Carruthers screamed and flopped about like a monstrous cocoon while watching his death come to him with the inexorable whine of hydraulics.

Byron's first shot went wide of the larger, older man, but pinged off the metal hide of the truck in an unnoticed shower of rust and paint. The killers were unable to hear the report above the screams and machinery, so he tried again. This time the younger one went down, his hand releasing the deadly lever, but without missing a beat his partner took over his duties and resumed the downward progress while pinning Carruthers with a corded, muscular arm. He glanced back towards Byron with a patient hatred, as if he had all the time in the world. As Byron tried to steady himself for his next shot, the great, filthy blade arrived; beginning its crude vivisection—there was no chance for the victim now; the voice of his terror and pain arcing ever-higher; then abruptly halting with the sickening snap of metal at last meeting metal.

With only the briefest of pauses to insure that his partner was truly dead, the big man stalked away in the direction from which the truck had come, but so many people had come out to see what was happening, that Byron had no chance for another shot. His quarry walked away and, wisely, no one made a move to stop him. The screaming of the shocked witnesses almost masked the banshee-wail of fast-approaching sirens, while behind him Byron heard Vanda cough and groan.

“Don’t open your eyes,” he mumbled through a mouthful of blood; then laid his head down on the filthy floor and closed his own.

* * * *

It was mid-afternoon by the time Byron and Vanda were released from the emergency room at Saint Francis and Tanner was waiting for them in his office. He could have been happier.

The two of them gave their account of the debacle at the Caruthers home and their stories being in accord with the facts found on the scene, Tanner had little to say except, “Well, maybe things will settle down now since they got everyone on the goddamn list; hopefully that made the surviving sonofabitch a happy camper.” As they made their way for the door, he added, “By the way, I’m glad those bastards let you two live...they did, you know. Any thoughts on that, Byron; I’m sure it’s crossed your mind too?”

Byron turned back to Tanner who looked tired and as creased as old leather, and said, “I’ll probably never know now. They did what they set out to do, I think. It’s over.” He didn’t tell Tanner or Vanda of the note he had found tucked away in his jacket pocket. One of the assailants had slipped it into his jacket as he and Vanda had lain unconscious after the concussion grenade had done its work. It read, ‘Think simple and you’ll know what to do—come alone.’ It was written in the same crude lettering of the note contained in the bloody package.

Outside of Tanner’s office Vanda took Byron’s hand and looked up into his face. “You shouldn’t be alone tonight, Byron...I know I don’t want to be.”

Byron found that he couldn’t even smile. “God, I spent my whole youth and a good part of my adulthood fantasizing about this moment.”

Vanda sighed and took a step back, releasing his hand. “But...?”

“The memory of ‘us’...of what could have been, is all I’ve had to keep me going at times...a lot of times. My life is a shambles right now...my wife...I don’t even want to go there. The truth is I can’t

afford the risk of losing you by having you; I'm afraid to take the chance, Vanda."

The corners of Vanda's mouth turned up just a little. "My God, I can't believe I'm being turned down in favor of a fantasy—even if it is a fantasy about me. You are a dreamer, Byron Patrick, and a little bit of a poet, and very sweet, and I'd really like a chance to kick your wife's ass." The little smile vanished. "You're also something of a liar, Chief Patrick. You're keeping something back in all this and I know it has to do with your little brother's abduction all those years ago."

Byron reared back as Vanda smoothly continued, "Yeah, that's right, I know about your little brother and Virgil Curtsie—I had one of our computer geeks 'Google' you the day we met—I may be a hot little number, Byron, but I am also a pretty damn good cop. That list your friend Llewellyn had is connected to that event. You know the rest, I think, or have figured it out by now."

Byron stared hard at her for several moments; then said, "Tom and I killed Virgil Curtsie, Vanda, the man who took my little brother. We were just kids, and I don't think we set out to do it, but to be honest with you, I don't really know anymore. But now, all these years later, it seems someone wants revenge for that killing—that's why they took Thomas."

"As to the list, I'm just not sure. It became apparent to me during this investigation, and to you as well I suspect, that the list was a roll call of pedophiles; all of an age to have been contemporaries of Virgil Curtsie. What Tom was doing with the list—that's where things start to get hazy. At first, I thought it might be Tom behind the murders, but after the index fingers, I knew better."

Vanda glanced cautiously at Chief Tanner's closed door. "You poor baby, you've been carrying this around all these years and then...this. It must seem like a nightmare."

Byron nodded; then added, "It's been a nightmare since I sent Daniel out to look for that damned dog of his. The killing of Curtsie seemed just another part of it all. It's why I left Columbus all those years ago; it's probably why I went into police work in the first

place—penance. Now it's come full circle somehow and here I am again."

"What will you do now?" Vanda asked; then, "What will you tell Tom's wife?"

"What'll I do?" Byron repeated; then lied, "Go back to my motel room and get drunk. Then sometime after that call Reba and give her the news that Tom's not coming back—not now; not ever."

Vanda took his jacket by the lapels and pulled him down to her, planting a moist kiss on his stubbled cheek, while just brushing his lips with hers. For a brief moment he felt her fingers stray across his ribcage then withdraw with a final, urgent tug on his jacket. "Call me if you change your mind," she said, her eyes never leaving his; "...and don't go roamin' around after dark, okay? I'll be watching you," she promised.

Byron nodded dumbly back, the note in his pocket as heavy as death.

* * * *

Curtsie's house appeared just as he had last seen it—bathed in moonlight and sagging beneath the weight of climbing vines and cloaking branches. The plywood door covering still hung tiredly from a single nail as Byron slipped behind it and entered.

A wavering yellow light flickered in the short hallway leading to the kitchen and Byron walked toward its source. He did not try to hide his coming as he knew that he was expected and the creaking floorboards would not allow stealth in any case. Even so, he walked slowly and gently, his hands empty; palms sweating.

The kitchen chair (could it possibly be the same one?) had been placed in the middle of the room once more, it's spindly metal legs, rusty and loose with age, shifting dangerously with the weight of Thomas Llewellyn. Lit candles gave the long-abandoned kitchen the sepia tone of an old photograph. Tom shifted carefully on his feet to avoid upsetting the precarious balance he was afforded by the rotten plywood seat. His hands had been tied behind his back and Byron could see the crude, dirty bandages they sported; he also had

a filthy rag tied round his mouth. Byron also noted the rope that ran from round his neck, through the chandelier hook; terminating in a sturdy knot. The knot lay in the hands of the large, tattooed man who had written Byron's invitation to the party. Occasionally the man would give a slight tug on his end in order to observe the resultant actions on the other. Tom's predicament appeared to provide him a quiet amusement.

"Figured it out, yet?" he asked Byron in the sand-papered voice of a heavy smoker.

Byron studied the features camouflaged beneath the swirling blue body art, the faded blue eyes; the stubby nose flattened now by some past violence, the sandy hair going grey with hard years, still shaggy as a rock star's. "Some, Danny...not all," he answered. His throat felt swollen and his vision blurred momentarily.

"It's all about your friend here, brother; your friend...and his friends—men like Mister Curtsie."

Byron shook his head and took a slight step back, feeling as if he might faint.

"What?" Daniel asked; "You never knew when we were kids that Tom knew Curtsie? I'm shocked, big brother, after all he was your very best friend wasn't he?"

Byron looked to Tom whose streaming brown eyes were wide with fear and panic. "Tell me," Byron said, turning away from him to face his brother.

"He was Curtsie's 'boy', Byron; that is, until he reached fourteen. Curtsie liked 'em a little younger. That's where I came in. *I* was a little younger." He gave the rope a slight tug and Tom teetered precariously to one side; then the other, before regaining his balance once more. Byron could hear his mewling through the filthy gag.

Daniel lit a cigarette with his free hand; then continued, "Curtsie threatened to sell him to someone who liked his age group unless he recruited a replacement...that was me. Are you beginning to get the picture there, Chief?"

Byron nodded, saying nothing.

“Ol’ Tom here took advantage of my search for the dog to make sure I stopped in at Virgil Curtsie’s. He told me he was pretty sure that Curtsie had taken our dog in and was keeping him for the owner to claim. I went there, of course. What did I know?—I was only nine years old. He had a cozy room set up for me in his basement, and if the heat hadn’t been brought on him so soon, he might have ‘recruited’ me to take Good Friend Tom’s place and let me go—that’s how it went with you, didn’t it, Good Friend Tom?” He placed a work-booted foot against the chair and slid it carefully for several inches. Tom’s squealing grew more frantic. From somewhere outside Byron heard a car gliding down the deserted street; then another. They stopped several houses away.

“As it turned out,” Daniel continued; crushing out his smoke with his heel, “Curtsie had ‘friends’ and he was able to hand me off before the police came in to search. I think you know the kind of friends I’m talking about, Big Brother; you’ve got a list of them from our friend Tom, I think. He got that list from our Mister Curtsie and has been making money from it ever since...can’t say I blame him too much on that account. He deserved something, too, I reckon, for all *his* sufferings.” He turned to regard Tom once more. “Even so...I did a little suffering myself.” He shoved the chair a few more inches and drew up on the slack in the rope. The toes of Tom’s shoes danced on the edge as his eyes began to bulge and grow dark with blood.

Daniel turned back to Byron. “For the next seven years I got traded. I didn’t even know who I was anymore...who I belonged to—I was newly adopted, a visiting nephew or grandchild, a run-away daughter’s illegitimate son.... I had so many different names, that if it weren’t for Tom’s list there, I might not remember them all.

“In the end, I was dumped out of the other end of the pipeline—too old...at sixteen. Can you beat that? I never went home; the thought never even crossed my mind; I wasn’t ‘that’ little boy anymore. I went to all the places people like me go and made my way in fits and spurts to prison—it wasn’t hard...in fact, it seemed kind of like a natural progression. It was a good environment for me...I kinda of liked prison, really.”

He studied Byron in silence for a moment; then continued, “I met a fella inside that had done time in New Jersey; courtesy of you, he said. ’Course he didn’t know we were brothers. Boy was I surprised...my big brother, a cop...and in New Jersey for God’s sake! That guy hoped to kill you next time he got up north...but he fell to death in the showers before his time was up.”

Daniel sighed and coughed as the room began to fill with a silence that swirled and curdled in the dark corners of the dead house. From down the street, Byron heard the distinct snick of car doors being carefully shut.

“Friends of yours?” Daniel inquired casually, and when Byron didn’t answer continued his narrative as if nothing were happening. “If you and Tom hadn’t killed Curtsie they might have found me, brother. That was Tom’s plan all along, you know—he never intended for the old man to be able to talk to anyone...about anything, if you know what I mean. He brought you along for extra muscle and, if it all went wrong, fall guy.”

Byron looked up at his little brother and asked, “Why now, Daniel—what’s happened?”

“I was released, Byron...sent back out into the good old world to finish dying. I’ve got the ‘Big A’ as it turns out...clock ticking, that sort of thing. It just occurred to me tie up some loose strings. I did that and just have this one left. I knew you’d come when I took Tom...I hoped you would. You’re a loose end, too; and I wanted you to know.” He grinned up at Tom and poked him hard in the ribs with a stiff finger. His victim supplied a corresponding muffled squeal. “You want to help?” Tom’s pleading eyes met Byron’s but he turned away.

“Who was that I killed,” he asked.

“A good friend of mine from prison...somebody like me really; there’s a lot of us out there. I don’t think he cared too much that you killed him, big brother, if that’s worrying you.”

Byron shook his head once more and said softly, “I have a lot to answer for, Danny. I didn’t look after my little brother and look what it’s come to—mom and dad killed by the strain of it all, you...

ruined, and me—my whole life an attempt to escape the past; each day, each tomorrow dead, stillborn. Just look at us.” The brothers’ eyes met in the flickering, haunted room.

“But we were kids, little brother, victims; even Tom—not that that lets him off the hook. But I can’t just stand here and let this happen, because if I do, I will never, ever, be able to recover from it, and everything will just continue instead of really ending. I’m gonna take him out of here, Daniel, and I’m gonna see to it that everyone knows what he did; and more importantly, why you’ve done the things you’ve done. I owe you that much, Danny; people should know, and you should be there to tell them while you can.

“Tom sent you into this house a long time ago and I wasn’t there for you—please, Danny, now that I’ve found you all these years later, let me take you out of here...if not for your sake, then for my own—I need you, little brother, and there’s not a lot of time left to us. Isn’t that why I’m really here?”

Byron reached across the short distance between them and took hold of Daniels’s end of the rope. Daniel stared back hard at him; his grip firm.

“Please,” Byron pleaded.

“You should have gone with me, By,” Daniel answered, tears leaking from his fierce, bloodshot eyes. “I needed you.” His grip loosened and Byron untied the knot; then gently threaded the rope back through the ceiling hook. Still holding one end, he guided Tom down from the rickety chair and led him toward the door like a dog on a leash. He didn’t bother removing his gag or ligatures. He felt Daniel looming close behind.

As he neared the doorway, Byron called out to the officers he knew would have surrounded the house, “Vanda...Chief, we’re coming out! Hold your fire! I’ve got the one responsible for all this and I’m sending him out first!” With that, he kicked his old friend hard enough in the backside to propel him through the doorway. Thomas took out the plywood sheet as he tumbled helplessly down the steps into the tall, rank grasses of the front yard. A murmur arose at the trussed suspect’s violent expulsion.

“Vanda, I’m coming next, but I’ve got company so don’t anybody get antsy, you hear? You’ll recognize him, but take it easy! He’s ugly enough to scare anybody and that’s for certain, but he’s with me...its Daniel, my brother!” And with that Byron turned and took his brother’s arm, and together they walked out of that house and into the warm and living night.

THE FLAMING PHANTOM,

by Jacques Futrelle

CHAPTER I

Hutchinson Hatch, reporter, stood beside the City Editor's desk, smoking and waiting patiently for that energetic gentleman to dispose of several matters in hand. City Editors always have several matters in hand, for the profession of keeping count of the pulse-beat of the world is a busy one. Finally this City Editor emerged from a mass of other things and picked up a sheet of paper on which he had scribbled some strange hieroglyphics, these representing his interpretation of the art of writing.

"Afraid of ghosts?" he asked.

"Don't know," Hatch replied, smiling a little. "I never happened to meet one."

"Well, this looks like a good story," the City Editor explained. "It's a haunted house. Nobody can live in it; all sorts of strange happenings, demoniacal laughter, groans and things. House is owned by Ernest Weston, a broker. Better jump down and take a look at it. If it is promising, you might spend a night in it for a Sunday story. Not afraid, are you?"

"I never heard of a ghost hurting anyone," Hatch replied, still smiling a little. "If this one hurts me it will make the story better."

Thus attention was attracted to the latest creepy mystery of a small town by the sea which in the past had not been wholly lacking in creepy mysteries.

Within two hours Hatch was there. He readily found the old Weston house, as it was known, a two-story, solidly built frame structure, which had stood for sixty or seventy years high upon a

cliff overlooking the sea, in the center of a land plot of ten or twelve acres. From a distance it was imposing, but close inspection showed that, outwardly, at least, it was a ramshackle affair.

Without having questioned anyone in the village, Hatch climbed the steep cliff road to the old house, expecting to find some one who might grant him permission to inspect it. But no one appeared; a settled melancholy and gloom seemed to overspread it; all the shutters were closed forbiddingly.

There was no answer to his vigorous knock on the front door, and he shook the shutters on a window without result. Then he passed around the house to the back. Here he found a door and dutifully hammered on it. Still no answer. He tried it, and passed in. He stood in the kitchen, damp, chilly and darkened by the closed shutters.

One glance about this room and he went on through a back hall to the dining-room, now deserted, but at one time a comfortable and handsomely furnished place. Its hardwood floor was covered with dust; the chill of disuse was all-pervading. There was no furniture, only the litter which accumulates of its own accord.

From this point, just inside the dining-room door, Hatch began a sort of study of the inside architecture of the place. To his left was a door, the butler's pantry. There was a passage through, down three steps into the kitchen he had just left.

Straight before him, set in the wall, between two windows, was a large mirror, seven, possibly eight, feet tall and proportionately wide. A mirror of the same size was set in the wall at the end of the room to his left. From the dining-room he passed through a wide archway into the next room. This archway made the two rooms almost as one. This second, he presumed, had been a sort of living-room, but here, too, was nothing save accumulated litter, an old-fashioned fireplace and two long mirrors. As he entered, the fireplace was to his immediate left, one of the large mirrors was straight ahead of him and the other was to his right.

Next to the mirror in the end was a passageway of a little more than usual size which had once been closed with a sliding door. Hatch went through this into the reception-hall of the old house.

Here, to his right, was the main hall, connected with the reception-hall by an archway, and through this archway he could see a wide, old-fashioned stairway leading up. To his left was a door, of ordinary size, closed. He tried it and it opened. He peered into a big room beyond. This room had been the library. It smelled of books and damp wood. There was nothing here—not even mirrors.

Beyond the main hall lay only two rooms, one a drawing-room of the generous proportions our old folks loved, with its gilt all tarnished and its fancy decorations covered with dust. Behind this, toward the back of the house, was a small parlor. There was nothing here to attract his attention, and he went upstairs. As he went he could see through the archway into the reception-hall as far as the library door, which he had left closed.

Upstairs were four or five roomy suites. Here, too, in small rooms designed for dressing, he saw the owner's passion for mirrors again. As he passed through room after room he fixed the general arrangement of it all in his mind, and later on paper, to study it, so that, if necessary, he could leave any part of the house in the dark. He didn't know but what this might be necessary, hence his care—the same care he had evidenced downstairs.

After another casual examination of the lower floor, Hatch went out the back way to the barn. This stood a couple of hundred feet back of the house and was of more recent construction. Above, reached by outside stairs, were apartments intended for the servants. Hatch looked over these rooms, but they, too, had the appearance of not having been occupied for several years. The lower part of the barn, he found, was arranged to house half a dozen horses and three or four traps.

"Nothing here to frighten anybody," was his mental comment as he left the old place and started back toward the village. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. His purpose was to learn then all he could of the "ghost," and return that night for developments.

He sought out the usual village bureau of information, the town constable, a grizzled old chap of sixty years, who realized his importance as the whole police department, and who had the gossip

and information, more or less distorted, of several generations at his tongue's end.

The old man talked for two hours—he was glad to talk—seemed to have been longing for just such a glorious opportunity as the reporter offered. Hatch sifted out what he wanted, those things which might be valuable in his story.

It seemed, according to the constable, that the Weston house had not been occupied for five years, since the death of the father of Ernest Weston, present owner. Two weeks before the reporter's appearance there Ernest Weston had come down with a contractor and looked over the old place.

"We understand here," said the constable, judicially, "that Mr. Weston is going to be married soon, and we kind of thought he was having the house made ready for his Summer home again."

"Whom do you understand he is to marry?" asked Hatch, for this was news.

"Miss Katherine Everard, daughter of Curtis Everard, a banker up in Boston," was the reply. "I know he used to go around with her before the old man died, and they say since she came out in Newport he has spent a lot of time with her."

"Oh, I see," said Hatch. "They were to marry and come here?"

"That's right," said the constable. "But I don't know when, since this ghost story has come up."

"Oh, yes, the ghost," remarked Hatch. "Well, hasn't the work of repairing begun?"

"No, not inside," was the reply. "There's been some work done on the grounds—in the daytime—but not much of that, and I kind of think it will be a long time before it's all done."

"What is the spook story, anyway?"

"Well," and the old constable rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It seems sort of funny. A few days after Mr. Weston was down here a gang of laborers, mostly Italians, came down to work and decided to sleep in the house—sort of camp out—until they could repair a leak in the barn and move in there. They got here late in the afternoon and didn't do much that day but move into the house, all upstairs,

and sort of settle down for the night. About one o'clock they heard some sort of noise downstairs, and finally all sorts of a racket and groans and yells, and they just naturally came down to see what it was.

"Then they saw the ghost. It was in the reception-hall, some of 'em said, others said it was in the library, but anyhow it was there, and the whole gang left just as fast as they knew how. They slept on the ground that night. Next day they took out their things and went back to Boston. Since then nobody here has heard from 'em."

"What sort of a ghost was it?"

"Oh, it was a man ghost, about nine feet high, and he was blazing from head to foot as if he was burning up," said the constable. "He had a long knife in his hand and waved it at 'em. They didn't stop to argue. They ran, and as they ran they heard the ghost a-laughing at them."

"I should think he would have been amused," was Hatch's somewhat sarcastic comment. "Has anybody who lives in the village seen the ghost?"

"No; we're willing to take their word for it, I suppose," was the grinning reply, "because there never was a ghost there before. I go up and look over the place every afternoon, but everything seems to be all right, and I haven't gone there at night. It's quite a way off my beat," he hastened to explain.

"A man ghost with a long knife," mused Hatch "Blazing, seems to be burning up, eh? That sounds exciting. Now, a ghost who knows his business never appears except where there has been a murder. Was there ever a murder in that house?"

"When I was a little chap I heard there was a murder or something there, but I suppose if I don't remember it nobody else here does," was the old man's reply. "It happened one Winter when the Westons weren't there. There was something, too, about jewelry and diamonds, but I don't remember just what it was."

"Indeed?" asked the reporter.

"Yes, something about somebody trying to steal a lot of jewelry—a hundred thousand dollars' worth. I know nobody ever paid

much attention to it. I just heard about it when I was a boy, and that was at least fifty years ago.”

“I see,” said the reporter.

* * * *

That night at nine o’clock, under cover of perfect blackness, Hatch climbed the cliff toward the Weston house. At one o’clock he came racing down the hill, with frequent glances over his shoulder. His face was pallid with a fear which he had never known before and his lips were ashen. Once in his room in the village hotel Hutchinson Hatch, the nerveless young man, lighted a lamp with trembling hands and sat with wide, staring eyes until the dawn broke through the east.

He had seen the flaming phantom.

CHAPTER II

It was ten o’clock that morning when Hutchinson Hatch called on Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen—The Thinking Machine. The reporter’s face was still white, showing that he had slept little, if at all. The Thinking Machine squinted at him a moment through his thick glasses, then dropped into a chair.

“Well?” he queried.

“I’m almost ashamed to come to you, Professor,” Hatch confessed, after a minute, and there was a little embarrassed hesitation in his speech. “It’s another mystery.”

“Sit down and tell me about it.”

Hatch took a seat opposite the scientist.

“I’ve been frightened,” he said at last, with a sheepish grin; “horribly, awfully frightened. I came to you to know what frightened me.”

“Dear me! Dear me!” exclaimed The Thinking Machine. “What is it?”

Then Hatch told him from the beginning the story of the haunted house as he knew it; how he had examined the house by daylight,

just what he had found, the story of the old murder and the jewels, the fact that Ernest Weston was to be married. The scientist listened attentively.

“It was nine o’clock that night when I went to the house the second time,” said Hatch. “I went prepared for something, but not for what I saw.”

“Well, go on,” said the other, irritably.

“I went in while it was perfectly dark. I took a position on the stairs because I had been told the—the *thing*—had been seen from the stairs, and I thought that where it had been seen once it would be seen again. I had presumed it was some trick of a shadow, or moonlight, or something of the kind. So I sat waiting calmly. I am not a nervous man—that is, I never have been until now.

“I took no light of any kind with me. It seemed an interminable time that I waited, staring into the reception-room in the general direction of the library. At last, as I gazed into the darkness, I heard a noise. It startled me a bit, but it didn’t frighten me, for I put it down to a rat running across the floor.

“But after awhile I heard the most awful cry a human being ever listened to. It was neither a moan nor a shriek—merely a—a cry. Then, as I steadied my nerves a little, a figure—a blazing, burning white figure—grew out of nothingness before my very eyes, in the reception-room. It actually grew and assembled as I looked at it.”

He paused, and The Thinking Machine changed his position slightly.

“The figure was that of a man, apparently, I should say, eight feet high. Don’t think I’m a fool—I’m not exaggerating. It was all in white and seemed to radiate a light, a ghostly, unearthly light, which, as I looked, grew brighter. I saw no face to the *thing*, but it had a head. Then I saw an arm raised and in the hand was a dagger, blazing as was the figure.

“By this time I was a coward, a cringing, frightened coward—frightened not at what I saw, but at the weirdness of it. And then, still as I looked, the—the *thing*—raised the other hand, and there, in the

air before my eyes, wrote with his own finger—on the very face of the air, mind you—one word: ‘Beware!’”

“Was it a man’s or woman’s writing?” asked The Thinking Machine.

The matter-of-fact tone recalled Hatch, who was again being carried away by fear, and he laughed vacantly.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know.”

“Go on.”

“I have never considered myself a coward, and certainly I am not a child to be frightened at a thing which my reason tells me is not possible, and, despite my fright, I compelled myself to action. If the *thing* were a man I was not afraid of it, dagger and all; if it were not, it could do me no injury.

“I leaped down the three steps to the bottom of the stairs, and while the *thing* stood there with upraised dagger, with one hand pointing at me, I rushed for it. I think I must have shouted, because I have a dim idea that I heard my own voice. But whether or not I did I—”

Again he paused. It was a distinct effort to pull himself together. He felt like a child; the cold, squint eyes of The Thinking Machine were turned on him disapprovingly.

“Then—the *thing* disappeared just as it seemed I had my hands on it. I was expecting a dagger thrust. Before my eyes, while I was staring at it, I suddenly saw only half of it. Again I heard the cry, and the other half disappeared—my hands grasped empty air.

“Where the *thing* had been there was nothing. The impetus of my rush was such that I went right on past the spot where the *thing* had been, and found myself groping in the dark in a room which I didn’t place for an instant. Now I know it was the library.

“By this time I was mad with terror. I smashed one of the windows and went through it. Then from there, until I reached my room, I didn’t stop running. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t have gone back to the reception-room for all the millions in the world.”

The Thinking Machine twiddled his fingers idly; Hatch sat gazing at him with anxious, eager inquiry in his eyes.

“So when you ran and the—the *thing* moved away or disappeared you found yourself in the library?” The Thinking Machine asked at last.

“Yes.”

“Therefore you must have run from the reception-room through the door into the library?”

“Yes.”

“You left that door closed that day?”

“Yes.”

Again there was a pause.

“Smell anything?” asked The Thinking Machine.

“No.”

“You figure that the *thing*, as you call it, must have been just about in the door?”

“Yes.”

“Too bad you didn’t notice the handwriting—that is, whether it seemed to be a man’s or a woman’s.”

“I think, under the circumstances, I would be excused for omitting that,” was the reply.

“You said you heard something that you thought must be a rat,” went on The Thinking Machine. “What was this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Any squeak about it?”

“No, not that I noticed.”

“Five years since the house was occupied,” mused the scientist. “How far away is the water?”

“The place overlooks the water, but it’s a steep climb of three hundred yards from the water to the house.”

That seemed to satisfy The Thinking Machine as to what actually happened.

“When you went over the house in daylight, did you notice if any of the mirrors were dusty?” he asked.

“I should presume that all were,” was the reply. “There’s no reason why they should have been otherwise.”

“But you didn’t notice particularly that some were not dusty?” the scientist insisted.

“No. I merely noticed that they were there.”

The Thinking Machine sat for a long time squinting at the ceiling, then asked, abruptly:

“Have you seen Mr. Weston, the owner?”

“No.”

“See him and find out what he has to say about the place, the murder, the jewels, and all that. It would be rather a queer state of affairs if, say, a fortune in jewels should be concealed somewhere about the place, wouldn’t it?”

“It would,” said Hatch. “It would.”

“Who is Miss Katherine Everard?”

“Daughter of a banker here, Curtis Everard. Was a reigning belle at Newport for two seasons. She is now in Europe, I think, buying a trousseau, possibly.”

“Find out all about her, and what Weston has to say, then come back here,” said The Thinking Machine, as if in conclusion. “Oh, by the way,” he added, “look up something of the family history of the Westons. How many heirs were there? Who are they? How much did each one get? All those things. That’s all.”

Hatch went out, far more composed and quiet than when he entered, and began the work of finding out those things The Thinking Machine had asked for, confident now that there would be a solution of the mystery.

That night the flaming phantom played new pranks. The town constable, backed by half a dozen villagers, descended upon the place at midnight, to be met in the yard by the apparition in person. Again the dagger was seen; again the ghostly laughter and the awful cry were heard.

“Surrender or I’ll shoot,” shouted the constable, nervously.

A laugh was the answer, and the constable felt something warm spatter in his face. Others in the party felt it, too, and wiped their faces and hands. By the light of the feeble lanterns they carried they

examined their handkerchiefs and hands. Then the party fled in awful disorder.

The warmth they had felt was the warmth of blood—red blood, freshly drawn.

CHAPTER III

Hatch found Ernest Weston at luncheon with another gentleman at one o'clock that day. This other gentleman was introduced to Hatch as George Weston, a cousin. Hatch instantly remembered George Weston for certain eccentric exploits at Newport a season or so before; and also as one of the heirs of the original Weston estate.

Hatch thought he remembered, too, that at the time Miss Everard had been so prominent socially at Newport George Weston had been her most ardent suitor. It was rumored that there would have been an engagement between them, but her father objected. Hatch looked at him curiously; his face was clearly a dissipated one, yet there was about him the unmistakable polish and gentility of the well-bred man of society.

Hatch knew Ernest Weston as Weston knew Hatch; they had met frequently in the ten years Hatch had been a newspaper reporter, and Weston had been courteous to him always. The reporter was in doubt as to whether to bring up the subject on which he had sought out Ernest Weston, but the broker brought it up himself, smilingly.

"Well, what is it this time?" he asked, genially. "The ghost down on the South Shore, or my forth-coming marriage?"

"Both," replied Hatch.

Weston talked freely of his engagement to Miss Everard, which he said was to have been announced in another week, at which time she was due to return to America from Europe. The marriage was to be three or four months later, the exact date had not been set.

"And I suppose the country place was being put in order as a Summer residence?" the reporter asked.

"Yes. I had intended to make some repairs and changes there, and furnish it, but now I understand that a ghost has taken a hand in the

matter and has delayed it. Have you heard much about this ghost story?" he asked, and there was a slight smile on his face.

"I have seen the ghost," Hatch answered.

"You have?" demanded the broker.

George Weston echoed the words and leaned forward, with a new interest in his eyes, to listen. Hatch told them what had happened in the haunted house—all of it. They listened with the keenest interest, one as eager as the other.

"By George!" exclaimed the broker, when Hatch had finished. "How do you account for it?"

"I don't," said Hatch, flatly. "I can offer no possible solution. I am not a child to be tricked by the ordinary illusion, nor am I of the temperament which imagines things, but I can offer no explanation of this."

"It must be a trick of some sort," said George Weston.

"I was positive of that," said Hatch, "but if it is a trick, it is the cleverest I ever saw."

The conversation drifted on to the old story of missing jewels and a tragedy in the house fifty years before. Now Hatch was asking questions by direction of The Thinking Machine; he himself hardly saw their purport, but he asked them.

"Well, the full story of that affair, the tragedy there, would open up an old chapter in our family which is nothing to be ashamed of, of course," said the broker, frankly; "still it is something we have not paid much attention to for many years. Perhaps George here knows it better than I do. His mother, then a bride, heard the recital of the story from my grandmother."

Ernest Weston and Hatch looked inquiringly at George Weston, who lighted a fresh cigarette and leaned over the table toward them. He was an excellent talker.

"I've heard my mother tell of it, but it was a long time ago," he began. "It seems, though, as I remember it, that my great-grandfather, who built the house, was a wealthy man, as fortunes went in those days, worth probably a million dollars.