

Say Yes to Murder

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W.T. Ballard

CHAPTER ONE

William Lennox had a hangover. It was a mild hangover, brought on as much by lack of sleep as by an excess of alcohol. He had been tight the night before, but not, he thought, too tight. That was the trouble. If he could once get too tight, he might get sufficient sleep. Looking back on the five years of his Hollywood sojourn he thought that he had not had enough sleep in the entire period.

People seldom live their lives as they plan. Lennox had certainly not followed a pattern of his choosing. He had wanted an education enough to work his way through Northwestern, and at the time he had hoped for a teaching position.

Not that he had wanted to teach, but in the small town from which he came the teacher represented the highest in educational achievement. He had no clear picture of his life, no pattern to direct his steps.

His meeting with the editor of Chicago's greatest daily was accidental. At first he was a little puzzled and appalled at the workings of the police system and of the criminal courts. To put it in his own words, he was green as hell.

But he was a good reporter, once he learned that no one is entitled to any privacy and overcame a natural objection to obtrusion into others' affairs. He brought to his work a natural sense for news, imagination far above the average, and an utter lack of personal consideration.

He wanted now to write, to see his name upon the cover of a book, but once again an accident of fate altered radically the basic pattern of his life. His paper gave a beauty contest, a circulation-building gag.

Because of poor management, it had almost failed, and at the last minute it was dumped in Lennox' lap. He discovered suddenly an unknown talent. He was a showman, born. He loved the contest and the girls. In short, he made it a success and for his work was offered a place in Hollywood's leading publicity office.

Lennox had never had to ask for a job in his life, so he was not surprised when General Studios sent for him. He had submitted a story idea there, weeks before. But he was surprised when he was ushered into Sol Spurck's massive office, for Spurck was the production chief of the sprawling studio.

They had never met, but Lennox had seen pictures of the producer, smiling benignly out from the smudged pages of many newspapers. He said, "About that story?"

Spurck looked blank. "Story?"

"Why, yes," Lennox was puzzled. "Didn't you send for me to talk about the story?"

"Story," said Spurck, "I know nothing about it, you understand. It is you which I have been watching for a year. Your work, it is O.K. With a little training, we can use you."

"As a writer?" Lennox was still too surprised to think clearly.

"Writers," Spurck told him, "are a dime a dozen. What I need is a man with sense who doesn't think too much. A job I'm offering. The writing we will talk about later."

That was three years ago. The writing they had not talked about, and Lennox' mouth was bitter as he turned into the main studio gate.

A car came up behind him, its white-walled tires making an expensive sound on the damp concrete. He stepped aside and had a momentary view of the occupant as the car passed him.

The morning sun was warm on her sleek black hair. He knew that she was very beautiful, but she did not turn her head to see him standing there.

Spurck was at his desk, a short figure dwarfed by the massive mahogany furniture which filled the place. His moonlike, usually pleasant face was twisted into a scowl as he looked up. "Where have you been?"

"Sleeping," said Lennox. "Trying to get the alcohol out of my system so that there will be room enough for the Scotch that I'll have to put into me today."

There was six feet of Lennox, and his shoulders and back muscles were powerful under the carefully tailored suit. He had the Hollywood habit of always needing a haircut, but he had never gone in for sport clothes during business hours. He might have been a thirty-year-old bank president or one of the New Deal's

wonder boys. His face, aside from the look of cynical boredom and the myriad wrinkles which were gradually forming at the corners of his eyes, was intelligent and might have been intellectual save for the narrow drooping lines at the corners of his mouth.

“You drink too much,” said Spurck.

“And gamble too much, and see too many women. You have to do something. There’s too much strain in this business.”

“Look at me,” said Spurck. “Am I excited, I ask you? The answer of course is no. Mama I have at home which is my safety valve. A wife you need, a home, with children.”

Lennox thought of the women he had known. “Not children, Sol. Why propagate the race? We have enough fools in the world now.”

“You try,” said Spurck shrewdly, “to be hard. Honest, Bill. Hard is one thing which you can’t be. You couldn’t do no dirt to anyone. You can’t even say no.”

Lennox’ smile was bitter. “O.K., I can’t say no. I stay here when my heart’s a million miles away. But you didn’t get me out of bed to tell me this. Something’s happened or you wouldn’t have sent out that call. What’s the matter now?”

Spurck’s manner changed. He ceased to be a human being and became a businessman. “It’s Heyworth,” he said, drawing an enormous cigar from a big humidor and sticking it between his thick lips. “From the way he acts, you might even believe that his name was Shakespeare. This morning, he does not show up.”

Lennox was not excited. “You always have trouble with that ham. I warned you not to cast him in the Foster picture, but you wouldn’t listen. You told me that I was still jealous of Kitty and made some nasty cracks about my personal life.”

“Look,” said Spurck, “I am always the first to make a mistake, and then admit it, ain’t I? So I made a mistake, but now I’m asking that you find Heyworth. He’s drinking maybe. You find him, stay with him, you understand, until the picture is done, and don’t let him take one drink. That is all.”

One of the things William Lennox did not have was an official title. He was Spurck's watchdog, his unofficial eye. Through Lennox, Spurck managed to be in two places at the same time. It worked well and everyone was satisfied, everyone but Lennox. A thousand men would have loved to have his job, and not one of them could have held it for a week.

Excitement was all that kept him alive, and despite his constant grouching, he had to have it with him always or he would have died.

He crossed the reception room, past the rows of waiting hopeful people, and stepped out onto the sunlit lot, making his way directly toward the dressing rooms.

A maid, trim in black and white, answered his knock. Her eyes got uncertain when she saw who it was. "I don't think..."

Kitty Foster's face was heavy with cream as she peered out into the entry hall. "Who is it, Chart?" Then she saw Lennox and her eyes under the carefully plucked brows got cold and hostile. "Don't let him in."

Lennox came in. The maid blocked his progress, but he placed a hand under each of her elbows and lifted her neatly out of the way.

The actress glared at him for an instant, then retreated into the dressing room until she sank on the bench before the mirrored table. "What do you want?"

For an instant it seemed that he might strike her, but he was only reaching into his breast pocket for a cigarette. "Look, Kitty," his tone had not softened. "I'm asking for the studio. You were with Heyworth last night, first at Ciro's then at the Brown Derby in Beverly."

She was on her feet. "I've had enough of this jealous spying. I'm going to Spurck. I complained once before. Remember?"

The remembrance brought a dull flush to Lennox' face. "I'm not spying, you fool. The studio checked up, not I. Heyworth isn't here. Price wants to shoot. You're good, baby. Even I admit you are good, and I should know.

"You played me for a sucker for eight months, and anybody who can make it look attractive for that long is an actress. But the best actress in the business

can't make a love scene convincing if she has to play it alone. You need Heyworth, and we can't find him."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed, and the glitter came back into the dark pupils. "You mean that he isn't home?"

Lennox shook his head. "He isn't, unless his Filipino is lying. The studio has been calling the house since eight-thirty."

She put the knuckle of her right index finger between her rouged lips and sucked on it thoughtfully. It made her look like a discontented child, but she was no child, and she was angry. Lennox stood there, trying to guess why she was furious.

In a minute she told him, told him in sharp sentences as if she were short of breath. "Jean Jeffries. She followed us to the Derby last night."

William Lennox said, "Here! Here!" and frowned deeply. "That's no way to talk."

"I'll talk any way that I damned please." Kitty Foster's spike heel tapped hard on the floor. "The Jeffries kid butted in on our table as if she owned the place, and Leon couldn't do anything but offer her a lift home."

Lennox laughed with sudden understanding. "And they took you home first."

"You're lousy, Bill Lennox." She took a half-step forward as if to rake her long enameled nails down across his cheek.

"All right. He did take me home first and then he went on with her. I suppose that he's still with her—stayed the night, no doubt. Maybe she recited Chaucer to him or one of those other old French poets that she's always talking about, trying to show us all up because she's been to Europe, was educated there." Kitty dropped back onto the seat and buried her face in the crook of her arm. "Get out of here. Can't you give a lady a chance to cry in peace?"

3.

Nancy Hobbs was waiting for him at their regular table in Mike Lyman's. She was a brown girl with soft, warm hair tucked around the absurd little hat.

Looking at her, he thought what a difference there was in beauty. She was well-groomed, carefully turned out, but she did not look enameled, she looked like a lady. To him, she was his one remaining link with the life he had once known. As a green kid fresh from an eastern school, she had gone to work on his paper, and he had helped to break her in. Once they had eaten in the little restaurants which dot the Chicago Loop and planned the books that they would write. That seemed a long, long time ago.

She said: "You look tired and worried, Bill."

He shrugged. "I was so busy that I missed my morning Scotch," and gave the order to the waiter. "For yourself, you look swell and clean and nice, like a stick of peppermint candy."

He was serious. "You've got something, brat, that all the stars in town would give their remaining teeth for. Stay that way. I wish you hadn't had that chance to take over that Hollywood column. This place does things to people if they stay too long. It kills your perspective. It makes you live on excitement, waiting for things that never happen."

She said. "You're bitter, Bill, and once you were nice." There was sadness in her voice and shadows in the brown eyes which came up to meet his gray ones. But after a moment, she seemed to shake off the mood. She was flippant and very gay.

She said, "And what's worrying you this morning, chum? Don't tell me that Spurck has lost his toupee and that you can't find it?"

He said, "It isn't Spurck. It's Kitty Foster."

Nancy Hobbs did not like Kitty Foster, but she would rather have died than let Lennox see. "Has Kitty taken you back, my sweet?"

He said: "Lay off. I'm trying to think. I can't when you chatter."

She was silent with no sign of resentment. He broke a piece of French bread and chewed it savagely. "If we don't find Heyworth we can bury Spurck."

The girl's eyes narrowed with distrust. "What is this, a publicity gag?"

He wasn't pleased as, he usually was when the incident was mentioned. "I'm out of the publicity racket, sweet, and you know it. This picture is so near done that Spurck's already counting the gross. But we can't finish it without Heyworth. I've got to find him and sleep with him until it's done. The chances I take with my honor!"

She said seriously: "Chuck it! Pull loose, Bill. You used to be a decent pal. Now you're not much better than any of the rest of these two-timing mugs. Shove off for New York. Write that book you, were starting the night I first met you. Remember—five years ago?—Chicago..."

For a full minute he was silent, then he reached across and patted the back of her hand. "Sorry, brat, but it won't work. I've got to find Heyworth and help get this picture finished. After that I'll think about it."

She sighed, knowing she had lost. She didn't like the cynical lines etched around his mouth. She didn't like the nervous not-enough-sleep look shading the brightness of his eyes. "You don't even get your hair cut often enough now. What do I have to do? Play mother at my age?"

He watched her with the air of one humoring an indulged child. "All right. Here's a quiz question for you. How well do you know your Hollywood, Miss Hobbs? Do you know a dancer with a foreign education and the habit of quoting Chaucer in her cups is making a play for one of our leading men? What is the name of the dancer, and where the hell is Leon Heyworth?"

Her eyes widened. "You aren't by any chance talking about Jean Jeffries, are you? She's the only one in this village who knows that Chaucer isn't a kind of cheese."

"I am," he admitted. "It seems that she moved in on a twosome at the Beverly Derby last night, neatly cut Kitty Foster out of the picture, and disappeared with Heyworth under her wing."

Nancy Hobbs said flatly: "I don't believe it. She's a little cracked—who isn't—but O. K. otherwise. Heyworth is nothing but a worn-out stud. Her grandmother isn't going to like it a bit."

"Grandmother?" Lennox looked blank.

Nancy Hobbs mocked him. “And I thought you knew your Hollywood. Jean Jeffries is Mary Morris’ granddaughter. The old lady sent her to France. I think she intended to make a scholar out of her. It didn’t work that way. For all her culture, the little gal had itchy feet. When you’re born to dance you dance, even if your education crops out when you’re drunk.”

Lennox was frowning into his coffee cup. He liked Mary Morria. At sixty-five she was the best box-office attraction since Valentino. She’d been good a long time. He could remember her twenty years ago when, as a kid, he had sat high in the gallery of a Midwestern theater, sat and watched and worshiped.

No. Mary Morris would not approve of her granddaughter playing with Heyworth, and if Bill knew the old lady she would definitely do something about it.

He said: “This makes it swell,” and he sounded even more tired than when he had first come in. “This town can be beautifully dirty, honey—so full of heartbreak and sin.”

The girl told him: “They aren’t synonymous. Me, I like a little clean sin, but you can have the heartbreak.”

He pushed back the chair and rose, picking up the checks. “That’s the hell of it. I’m usually up to my neck in heartbreak—other people’s. I’d like to have time for a few troubles of my own.” He waited for her to rise, and then moved toward the exit.

4.

William Lennox paid off his taxi and looked at the apartment house. Either Jean Jeffries was a better dancer than he had supposed or someone was helping with the rent. He was not as a rule dirty-minded, and he much preferred to think that the help came from the girl’s grandmother.

He wanted desperately to give Jean Jeffries a break, not that he gave a damn about her, but to him anyone connected with Mary Morris should have feet without too much clay on them.

The building was one of those intimate places without a desk or lobby. The lack of both did not mean that the house was inexpensive. On the contrary, it was

exceedingly high-priced, but desk clerks could be embarrassing for tenants who liked to entertain at odd hours, and rumor said that the management catered to that type of tenant.

Jean's residence there did not lessen the suspicion which was already forcing its way into his unwilling mind. Mary Morris' granddaughter certainly had no business in such a place. It should have been reserved for the glamour girls who were still climbing up the ladder and who had not as yet reached the dignity of a home in Holmby Hills.

He was not naive enough to press the small black button opposite her mailbox. If Heyworth was still above stairs there would be no answer to the bell. The outer door was locked and he paused on the sidewalk, wondering how to get in.

This problem was settled for him as a woman crossed the small entrance and pushed open the ground glass door. She was blond, with the enameled finish of Max Factor and the House of Westmore, neatly turned out. She gave Lennox a speculative look, but he was too busy catching the door to give her more than a passing glance.

The entry was small and tiled. An automatic elevator and a stairway which looped like a climbing snake around the cage offered a choice. He chose the elevator and rode upward in the little car with a faint accompanying sense of claustrophobia.

The girl who opened the door was small and very dark. It startled him. He was so used to blondes. She said: "Yes?" impatiently, as if she dared him to give a good excuse for knocking on the door.

She wore a flowered housecoat with a long zipper up the front, and from the way the coat fitted he judged that there could be little underneath.

"I'm Lennox," he said, "from General-Consolidated. I want to talk to you."

He read the hesitation in her dark eyes, the careful way in which she measured him. "I... Yes..."

"May I come in?" He suited his action to the words and stepped partly into the entry.

She moved back a little. It was obvious that she did not want him there, but now that he was inside she surrendered.

The apartment was better than he had expected—a long living room done in white and gold with an imitation fireplace at one end. It had the professional look which all furnished apartments bear, as if the fixtures had been selected for renting purposes, not for comfort.

The girl was a stiff black exclamation point beside the door, unbending, unyielding, in every line of her slim dancer's body.

"You wanted to see me? Why?"

He turned around, found a loose cigarette in his pocket, and rolled it with little nervous gestures of his fingers. Bluntly he told her: "I want Heyworth."

Their eyes locked. She told him: "Heyworth is no business of yours."

A twisted, flitting smile lighted the tenseness of his face. "That, honey, is where you're wrong. For my sins, Heyworth is decidedly my business. I've got to find him and but quick."

"Not here," she said. "I don't know where he is. If Kitty told you..."

His words knifed at her. "And why should Kitty Foster have told me anything?"

She looked her surprise. "Because Kitty is the only one who could think that he might be here. She has an evil mind."

"Dirty," Lennox corrected. "Where is he?"

The dancer shook her head. "I don't know. He brought me home and left."

"And left his car parked around the corner in the side street?" He was suddenly serious. "Listen, kid. I don't like this job. I don't care to play nursemaid to a dressed-up rat, and your morals are your own affair, but Heyworth is needed at the studio. I've come to get him, and I'm not going to leave until I do."

He raised his voice so that it would carry to the other rooms of the apartment. "Come on out, Leon, and save us both trouble."

There was no answer, no movement of any kind within the white walls.

The girl was motionless, her eyes steady on his face. “You see, he isn’t here. Will you go now, please?”

He hesitated. She looked so damned young. He knew he was a sucker for that look. And there was Mary Morris to consider. He cleared his throat and felt his ears redden from embarrassment. “I should turn my collar around before I start the lecture,” he told her. “But Heyworth is a rat—the heir to a long line of rats.”

She flashed at him: “I can take care of myself.”

“A million girls should have those lines carved on their tombstones. You’re talking nonsense and you know it. You’re no wide-eyed lass from the tall corn country. A friend of mine spent dough to educate you, to make you something a lot of other kids would like to be. So what? So you toss it in the gutter and climb in after it.”

She came across the room. She moved with such slow deliberateness that he did not know what was in her mind until she slapped him. The blow was not a token thing. Each finger left its individual mark upon his cheek.

“You’re rotten.” Her voice was so choked the words did not come clearly. “Get out. Get out. Quick!”

He didn’t move. She was the second woman who had ordered him out that day, and both were tied to Heyworth. He wondered as he stared at her what it was the leading man had.

He caught her wrist before she could strike again. “That’s enough of that.” He forced her hand down to her side, and after a second the fight went out of her.

They stood there close together, and he was very conscious of her, so conscious that he dropped her wrist.

His voice was a little rough when he said: “All right. Trot him out.”

“He isn’t here.” Her black eyes were level, without waver, and he almost believed her.

“I’ll have a look,” he said, and turned toward the bedroom door.

She moved with surprising swiftness. She was before him, her slender body between him and the door. “No!”

Lennox was past argument. He wasted no time. He caught her as he had caught Kitty’s maid and lifted her out of his way.

At first glance he thought the bedroom was empty. It was a big affair with a too-lacy look, as though furnished for the inmate of a parlor house. The bed was wide, with a white, antiqued head of flimsy-looking wood. The bed table was sprayed to match, and the phone was ivory.

The bed itself was flawlessly made, and not so much as a wrinkle marred the perfection of its surface. He was ready to turn around and apologize, and then he saw the shoe.

It protruded a little from beneath the spread. For just a moment he thought Heyworth was hiding under the bed, and one corner of his mouth quirked up in the beginning of a grin. Then his lips straightened and his eyes narrowed, for the shoe was turned the wrong way. If a man were hiding there he would not lie on his back.

Lennox had a sensation almost of terror. His muscles across his stomach contracted, and for a while he thought he was going to be sick. Then he recovered himself and crossed to the bed in three long steps. He bent down, lifted the spread, seized the shoe, and pulled the man from his place of concealment.

It was Heyworth all right, and he was dead. He’d been dead for a long time. The blood around the knife, which still protruded from his shirt front on the left, was dried, caked and hard from the action of the air. Lennox straightened slowly and turned. He expected to find the girl gone, but she wasn’t. She was standing in the doorway watching him with unmoving black eyes.

CHAPTER II

“This makes it tough,” he said. The words had an inane sound. That did not trouble him too much. He realized that anything said under the circumstances would sound inane.

“Why did you kill him?”

She said: “I didn’t,” and left the words hanging between them in the still air.

“Who killed him?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Lennox said: “Now listen. He brings you home, he’s dead, hidden under your bed, and you don’t know who killed him?”

She began to cry. He hadn’t known she could cry, and there was nothing soft in the way she did it. It was more like a rapidly gathering storm, the sobs shaking her slim shoulders.

“I don’t know. He brought me home and he wouldn’t leave. So I did. I went over to a friend’s place. I spent the night there. When I came home less than an hour ago I found him there, just where you found him. All I did was pull the cover down so that... so that it would hide his feet.”

“You didn’t do a very good job.” Lennox sounded cynical. He didn’t believe the story. It was too absurd, too fantastic. Even a ten-year-old child should be able to think up a more convincing one.

She was far above the average mentally, and anyone who would recite Chaucer when drunk.... It might just be true. Truth always sounded more incredible than lies. He remembered that from his legman days.

“Who is this friend? Can she alibi you?”

Jean Jeffries shook her head. She had regained control and the sobs had stopped. “No....” Hopelessness had replaced the mask of self-confidence with which she had first greeted him. “She’s out of town. At Big Bear for the week. She left the

key to her apartment with me. That's why I went there."

He watched her reflectively. He wasn't considering her as an individual. Nor was he interested in Heyworth. Death, when it did not touch him directly, meant little. Three years on a Chicago police beat had immunized him to violence. He considered the murder only from the effect it would have on the studio, on the picture. And yes—on Mary Morris.

Mary was important, both in herself and as General's best current box-office attraction. Some publicity was very helpful—some worse than none—and the word murder connected even remotely with a player had marked the finish of more than one promising career.

"The first thing we've got to do is get that body out of here. It will be bad enough with Heyworth dead, but worse if he's found here."

She looked startled as if the possibility had not occurred to her. "Move his body? But how?"

He said: "That's my problem," and was already reaching for the bedside phone. He dialed a number and said to the man who answered: "Let me talk to Jake."

The girl's dark eyes had lost some of their starry expression. There was hope in the set of her shoulders, hope in the way she came toward him.

"Thank you. I didn't think..."

But he was talking into the instrument. "Jake, this is Bill. Get a truck. No, not from the prop department. Better rent one and wear whiskers when you do. Find an empty piano box. No. Come alone, and for God's sake, keep your mouth shut. Yeah. A Dig radio packing case will do if it's big enough. But make it fast." He gave the apartment number and hung up.

She tried again to thank him, and he looked at her as though he couldn't recall seeing her before.

She said: "I didn't know where to turn—what to do. I was like a child, praying—promising that if I ever got out of this jam I'd never, never do anything out of the way again. You're swell, Lennox. I've heard of you ever since I came to town. I didn't believe the stories I heard. I thought it was the same old malarkey—the

old Hollywood needle. If I can ever do anything for you..."

He told her harshly: "You're on the wrong wave length, sweetheart. I'm not doing this for you, or him"—he jerked his thumb toward the dead man—"or even for your grandmother. I'm just saving myself as much trouble as I can. The cops and the papers will ask plenty of questions even if that body is found in Heyworth's own garden."

He turned to look again at the murdered man. The knife stood out at right angles from the breast, not slanting either up or down. The handle was curiously carved, and he bent to examine it, saying over his shoulder. "Your prints aren't on this, are they?"

She caught her breath. "You mean, you think that I killed him and you're willing to move the body, anyway?"

He exploded. "I don't care who killed him. If your prints are on that knife, say so and I'll wipe them off."

"They aren't."

"All right. Go into the other room and sit down. When Jake shows up, send him in here."

Without a word she disappeared and Lennox looked around. There was no stain on the beige carpet, but there was a place on the polished floor which looked as if it had been wiped up. And the knife was in the wound so tightly that Heyworth had probably not bled much.

He wanted to be certain that there were no telltale marks left, so he moved the bed. No blood here. He couldn't find anything that might have given a clue that there had been murder save the wiped-up place on the polished floor.

He used his handkerchief on it, just in case, and then started for the connecting door intending to ask the girl if she had cleaned up the stain and what she had done with the cloth or with whatever she had used to wipe the floor, but he had another thought. He turned and went into the bathroom.

There were no indications of the tragedy here, no soiled towels or stains of any kind. Someone had done a neat job of cleaning up.

He returned to the bedroom, crossed it, and went on into the white and gold living room. The girl had been sitting straight-backed on the divan in an attitude of waiting. She turned her head quickly.

“Where was the body when you found it?” Lennox demanded.

“Under the bed,” her voice was steady. “I tried to move it, to shove him back farther out of sight, but he was so heavy.”

“Did you clean up that bare floor beside the dressing table?”

She looked startled. “Why, no, I didn’t clean up anything.... I didn’t see anything that needed cleaning up.”

Lennox frowned. If she was telling the truth, someone else had been at pains to clean up the apartment, yet they had left the body under the bed.

The girl said, nervously, “This... this Jake. Mightn’t he call the police?”

Lennox shook his head. “Jake would do a stretch if I told him to. He’s one man I can trust.” He turned without further words and disappeared into the bedroom.

2.

Jake Hertz was small and wiry, with a black mop of hair so curly that it defied the efforts of the stoutest comb. Barbers complained that Jake’s hair turned the edge of their scissors and that his beard dulled the sharpest razor—a complaint Mr. Hertz accepted as a personal compliment. “Even me hair is too tough for ‘em,” he was apt to remark after the third beer.

The box which he juggled into the room was bigger than he was, and he set it down with an air of proud proprietorship. “A honey, huh?”

Lennox nodded his approval. “Bring it in here.” He led the way to the bedroom.

Jake followed, and his expression did not alter when he saw the corpse. “Heyworth! Neat job. The bird that handled that knife knew how.”

“Think we can get him in?”

“Cinch,” said Jake, and went to work. “He won’t mind if he’s a little cramped.”

“No,” Lennox agreed. “I don’t think he’ll mind. Where are you parked?”

“In the alley,” Hertz said. “I came up in the freight elevator and no one saw me.”

The truck was a U-drive-it, rented in the name of Abraham Washington. For some reason he did not trouble to explain, Jake thought it sounded like a respectable name.

Outside the late afternoon sun beat strongly on Lennox’ back as they loaded the box onto the truck. He gave Jake instructions explicitly. He was to stay out of the way until dark, then leave Heyworth in the lower garden at the foot of the actor’s hillside lot. He was to take the box away with him and burn it in his own fireplace. That done, Lennox went back to the apartment and had the girl vacuum the rugs to remove any chance splinters.

When it was finished he told her: “That’s all, kid. Forget it happened. And if you want advice—which you probably don’t—head east.” .

They were standing facing each other, and he did not know what she was going to do until she suddenly came up onto her tiptoes and pressed her mouth tight against his. It startled him. It wasn’t unpleasant. He’d kissed women before and enjoyed it less. He fumbled, not knowing quite what to do, and the sound of the apartment buzzer made decision unnecessary.

“Better see who it is,” he told her, and took a careful seat at the end of the divan.

He couldn’t see the door from where he sat. He heard a rumble of voices and thought there was something familiar in the sound, but he couldn’t place it until the two men followed the girl into the room.

The first was a heavy-set man with a red beefsteak complexion and rather small, round blue eyes. The lower lip was a little too long, giving his wide mouth a discontented look under the shadow of his bulbous nose. Lennox couldn’t have been more surprised if Shakespeare had suddenly entered the apartment, but he hid whatever nervousness he felt with a grin.

“Hello, Floyd. The world is certainly democratic now. You never know when you’ll run into a cop.”

Detective Captain Floyd Spellman grunted. His surprise at seeing Lennox was so obvious it was comical. “So you’re the body?”

“Body?” said Lennox, and managed to raise his eyebrows. “I’ve been called a lot of things, but hardly a corpse as yet. Why? Are you looking for one?”

The second man was Stobert. He had a long narrow face with a bulging forehead so that his eyebrows sheltered the pockets of his eyes like coral reefs guarding the entrance to a lagoon.

He snickered loudly. “Little early to start your night work, isn’t it, Bill?”

Lennox said with dignity: “I don’t work by a time clock, Stobert. I’ve graduated into the executive class. Find the boys a drink, can you, honey?”

The girl looked startled, then moved to a small barrette and produced glasses and a bottle. “We’re out of soda. You forgot to bring some.” She had picked up the cue neatly—too neatly, Lennox thought, for he had seen the quick glance which passed between the homicide men.

It would be all over town tomorrow. William Lennox had a new girl. If you want to publicize anything tell a policeman.

He said: “Plain water will do,” and she went into the kitchenette.

Lennox motioned Spellman to a seat. Stobert had already taken one unasked. “What’s this about a body?” Lennox asked idly.

Spellman removed his hat for the first time since entering the apartment and wiped his forehead with a gaily colored handkerchief.

Lennox looked at it and said: “My, my.”

“From my wife’s aunt.” Spellman sounded apologetic. “That’s a hell of a thing to blow your nose on.”

The girl came back with a water carafe and some ice, and Lennox fixed the drinks.

“What about this body?” he repeated his question.

Spellman said: “Must be some mistake. Woman called in half an hour ago and said a man had been murdered up here. We’ll have to look around.”

Lennox caught the girl’s eyes and looked quickly away. “Must be a friend checking up on me.” He winked at Spellman.

The detective captain said: “I shouldn’t be doing this in working hours,” and drained the glass. “Have a look around, Stobert.”

Stobert went into the bedroom. After a few minutes they heard the faint sound of a flushing toilet. Spellman looked away, trying not to be embarrassed. Stobert reappeared.

“Nothing here. We’d better check the other apartments on the floor. Maybe they got the number wrong.”

Spellman apologized, and went out.

The girl said tensely: “Of all the stupid....”

Lennox shook his head. “You’re making the mistake he expects everyone to. That isn’t stupidity. It’s an act. If they come smarter than he is I don’t want to meet them.”

She smiled. “Anyhow the lipstick on your cheek looks convincing and they’ve gone.”

He was talking to himself. “I hope none of the other tenants saw us carry out that case. If they did, Floyd will probably be back.”

But Spellman did not come back. Lennox waited twenty minutes to be sure, then he told her: “Forget it ever happened, and get out of town.”

3.

There was no police car before the building, and he breathed easier. He wouldn’t have been surprised to find Spellman waiting for him outside. He went around the corner, pulled out the car keys he had rescued from Leon Heyworth’s pocket, and let himself into the Cadillac sedan. He was taking a chance in moving the car, but he dared not leave it where it was.

He went up Nichols Canyon rather than Laurel, since he was less likely to pass anyone he knew, and followed the curves of Mulholland around to the rear of Heyworth's place.

Below the property was a narrow fire-break road, used only by the rangers. A car might be hidden there for ages. He stopped the Cadillac behind a screen of bushes, wiped the wheel clean, and started down the path on foot.

It was a longer walk than he had taken for ages. The reflected sun still reddened the western sky, and at a long distance Catalina made a dark shape in the even sea. Lennox enjoyed himself on the walk. I should, he thought, exercise with regularity. It stimulates the brain.

But why stimulate something which you so seldom use? You certainly did not use it this afternoon. He found that he was speaking aloud, and laughed shortly to himself. The walk had given him a joy in living which he had not experienced in months. It had seemed so smart to move the body, so simple. But he realized that he stood a good chance of landing in the middle of a mess which was not of his own making, and he was swearing to himself as he paid off his cab in front of Sardi's and went into the restaurant.

The waiter brought him a Scotch out of long experience, brought him three more, and he had just finished the last one when Nancy Hobbs paused beside his booth. Her voice was squeaky with excitement. "Bill! Leon Heyworth's been murdered."

"Yes," he said without thinking. "I know."

"You know..." the girl's surprise was an obvious thing. It was like an unbecoming mask. "You know, but how?"

He'd been caught up by his straying, unguarded thoughts. It angered him that he should make such a slip. "I... I saw the headlines."

She sat down facing him, slowly, as if her legs were no longer capable of bearing up her weight. "It's not in the papers, Bill. No one knows it, no one but Heyworth's houseboy. He found the body not fifteen minutes ago and called my boy. They're friends. He didn't know what to do. I told him to call the police, then I came hunting you." Her eyes looked like deep brown pools of thought, worried, uncertain, ready to be hurt.

He said: “Wait, honey. I may know about it, but I didn’t kill him.” Nancy Hobbs breathed deeply. “Bill... I... who did kill him? How did you know that he was dead?”

He shook his head. “Honestly, I don’t know. I knew that he was dead, that’s all.”

Suddenly she was remembering their luncheon conversation. “Was it that Jeffries girl?”

“No,” he said, and he hoped that he was telling the truth. “Come on, eat something. I’ll order.”

“I couldn’t eat.”

Lennox looked at the girl in concern. “You could double for a ghost. Get this chop inside of you and smile, then we’ll get out of here.”

She managed to eat a little of the chop and played with the salad. Watching her he thought, This is what happens to my friends. She’s worried about me. She oughtn’t to be here. She belongs a long way away where life is real. She should be married with a home and kids. But suddenly he knew that he didn’t want her married. She was his pal, the only person he could run to, the only escape which the whole town offered. Life, he thought, as they rose and moved slowly toward the door, is so damned complicated.

Outside they paused to look up and down the crowded sidewalk. This wasn’t Hollywood. This was any main street of any village of America. Hollywood wasn’t a town at all, it was a state of mind.

Nancy said: “Bill, aren’t you going to tell me about Heyworth?”

He hesitated. He hadn’t intended to tell anyone. He said: “There isn’t much to the story. I went up to see the Jeffries girl and Heyworth was there—under the bed.”

He heard Nancy catch her breath. “Under her bed? You mean he was dead then?”

Lennox nodded. “He’d been that way for several hours. The kid claimed she wasn’t there when it happened. She told me she spent the night at a friend’s

house. I believed her, so I called Jake and had him take the body home.”

“Bill, you fool! You didn’t.”

He said defensively: “But I did. Why not?”

“Don’t you know that made you an accessory?”

He moved his shoulders beneath the soft brown topcoat. “I’ve been worse.”

“But to take a chance for a girl you don’t even know.... What’s she look like?”

He felt his ears get red. “Just like any other girl. My God, you aren’t jealous?”

“You ape,” she said. “I’ve always been jealous.”

He said: “No. What the hell difference does it make to Spellman whether the body is in Jeffries’ apartment or in Heyworth’s own garden? They never solve a Hollywood murder, anyway. All they hope for is a lot of space on page one. And I’m not going to have Mary Morris crucified to make a Roman holiday for the Los Angeles police department.”

She said in a changed voice: “I’d forgotten about her.”

“I haven’t,” Lennox said. “She’s swell. I saw her play in the jerk town where I was born. After I went to Chi I met her, and I knew her well for three or four years. She never did a dirty thing in her life. She’s worked hard and played the cards from the top of the deck, and she’s not going to be dragged into this, mess if they toss me in Folsom and throw the key away.”

Nancy was no longer arguing. “You’re a fraud,” she told him. “And to think you fooled me for years.”

The softness went out of his voice. “Don’t let it throw you. Just because I’d give Mary a break is no reason why I’d play a sucker role for anyone else. Come on, I’ll take you home.”

The house in which Nancy had established herself was not far from the apartment on Franklin where Heyworth had met his death. Lennox waited until the girl had gone inside, then he gave the driver Jean Jeffries’ address.

4.

Nothing was altered in the white and gold room, and again he had the feeling that it was for show—not for living. He wondered how long the girl had occupied the suite. Usually people managed to inject part of their personality into a home, even a furnished apartment.

But there was nothing here—no photographs, no magazines tossed carelessly about. He came in and put his hat and coat across the end of the divan. Now that he had come, he was at a loss for something to say.

“They found the body,” he told her. “I think everything will be all right as long as we keep our mouths shut.”

Her eyes fluttered nervously. “You really think so? Or are you saying that to make me feel easier?”

“I really mean it. Jake won’t talk. Certainly I won’t. And you?”

“But what about Kitty Foster?” she asked. “She knew I was with Leon.”

Lennox swore under his breath. He’d forgotten about Kitty Foster. “I’ll bet,” he said softly, “that it was she who tipped off the police this afternoon.” He pondered over this, frowning, considering what this might mean.

The knock startled him and he looked up quickly. “Expecting company?”

She said: “No,” rather hastily. “I think it’s the apartment manager. I complained about one of the faucets in the bath.”

She went to the door and returned, trailed by a tall thin man. The top of his head was almost bald, while his chin and upper lip were shielded by mustaches and a pointed beard. It was as if he were battling nature. Since he could obviously not grow an allotted amount of hair on his head, he had compromised on his chin. He looked perhaps sixty, but his eyes were younger.

He smiled when the girl introduced him. “Mr. Boren,” she said. “He’s the owner of the building. This is Mr. Lennox.”

Boren said in an eager voice: “Not Mr. William Lennox of General-

Consolidated? I read your name frequently in the gossip columns, sir. This is indeed a pleasure, a very great pleasure.”

Lennox gripped the bony hand indifferently. He was not interested in Mr. Boren. He wished the man would look at the leaky faucet and go. But Mr. Boren seemed a friendly soul. He evidently was a little flattered to find that Lennox was a guest in the house, and he meant to make the most of the situation.

Boren fumbled in his breast pocket, found a heavy leather glasses case, and placed the rimless spectacles across the bridge of his nose.

Something in the gesture stirred Lennox’ memory. Perhaps he had seen the man somewhere a long time ago: He sat there studying the contours of the face which showed above the neatly trimmed beard. The resemblance was fleeting. The card index of his mind fumbled over the name. If he had ever seen the apartment man before it must have been very casually. He was certain that he had never known another Boren.

The man was rambling on. After a minute he said: “There’s been a murder in Hollywood.” He almost smacked his lips when he said it.

Lennox looked up sharply. “Murder!”

The man nodded, his bright eyes on Lennox’ face. “It came over the radio a few minutes ago. Leon Heyworth was found stabbed in his garden. He’s under contract at your studio, I understand.”

Lennox managed to simulate surprise. “Heyworth murdered?”

Boren appeared suddenly to recollect why he was there. “A faucet,” he said, looking at the girl. “A faucet that leaks?”

She nodded and led him into the bedroom. Lennox sat where he was. If the news of Heyworth’s death was on the air, Spurck would have been notified and would be looking for him. Well, to hell with it. Let them look. Heyworth was dead and there was nothing to be done about it. They’d have to swallow the publicity, change the title of the picture, cast someone else in the dead man’s role and remake it. No one was indispensable, not even Leon Heyworth.

Sudden sound diverted his attention from contemplation of the future, and he

thought the girl or Boren was knocking on the bedroom door. Then he realized that the knock was coming from the direction of the door to the hall. He didn't know exactly whether to answer it or call Jean Jeffries. Finally he shrugged, crossed the living room, and opened the door.

Spellman was outside with his ever-present shadow, Stobert, at his elbow. "You here." He was as amazed as Lennox, but not so good at disguising it.

Lennox said: "Why shouldn't I be?" He was trying to think under cover of the words.

Stobert's nasal drawl had a nasty sound. "Maybe he lives here."

Spellman just snorted. He took a half-step forward and Lennox stood aside. Jean Jeffries and Boren came from the bedroom, and the manager was saying:

"The faucet needs a washer. I'll have it fixed first thing in the morning. The plumber will be here by nine, if that isn't too..."

The girl had seen Spellman. "Why, Captain!"

She sounded breathless to Lennox, and he covered the awkward pause by telling her: "I knew it was a mistake to give them a drink this '-afternoon. I think they've come back for more."

Boren was an interested spectator. Lennox knew they had to get rid of him now. It was as if the girl sensed the same thing. She said hurriedly: "Thank you very much. I'll expect the plumber at nine then," and moved him toward the front door.

Obviously he did not want to go, and he took as long as possible, but she finally swept him out of the entry hall and came back, her fatigue showing in the lines of her face, accentuating the cheekbones.

Spellman asked: "Who was that?"

She sank down in a French chair. "The apartment house manager checking on a leaky faucet. You should have warned us that you were coming, Captain. We still haven't any soda."

Lennox managed a laugh. “Maybe they’re still looking for that body.”

Spellman told him: “When better gags are pulled you won’t pull them. That’s just what we are doing—or rather, we’ve found the body. We want to know why.”

Lennox looked blank. “Listen, Floyd. I’ve lived out here for five years. But frankly, I still don’t understand double talk.”

Spellman’s voice was deceptively soft. “Perhaps you haven’t heard that Leon Heyworth’s body was found in his garden tonight. Someone knifed him. Doctor said he’d been dead several hours.”

“The apartment manager just told us,” Lennox said steadily. “He heard it on the radio.”

“Well?” said Spellman.

Lennox shook his head. “I still don’t get it.”

Spellman grunted. “I’ve talked to Kitty Foster. She swears Miss Jeffries was the last person to see Heyworth alive.”

Lennox said: “Oh! Kitty Foster.”

Spellman looked at him sharply. “Just what do you mean by that?”

Lennox’ shrug was expressive. “The age of chivalry is not dead,” he said. “I can’t talk about a lady.”

Spellman’s face reddened. “Now listen. You people all act as if you’re playing a game. I’m here to warn you now that murder is no game.”

William Lennox smiled. “Are you, by any chance, trying to accuse me of Leon Heyworth’s murder?”

The homicide captain fumbled. “You don’t sound as if his death was causing you any great grief.”

“Frankly, it isn’t. There are a number of people in this town I don’t like, and I

certainly couldn't play the part of chief mourner to them if anything happened. But I have a fair control of my temper. Up till now I've managed to curb my homicidal instincts. Last night I spent in a friendly bridge game at the Fairview Country Club. I was there until almost four.

"I ate at a drive-in stand at the corner of Wilshire and Robertson with two men whose names I hate to drag into this mix-up. We left at quarter to five—I remember seeing the clock. They dropped me at my apartment at ten minutes after. I was at the studio by nine. Unless you think I murdered Heyworth in the four-hour period, I'm afraid I'm out of luck as far as being a good suspect goes."

"Then why did Kitty Foster..."

"Kitty Foster," said Spellman shamelessly, "at one time believed she loved me. It's true that Heyworth brought Jean home, but remember, his body was found in the garden at his place—not here. By the way. Where was his car? From what Jean tells me I judge that he was driving himself last night."

Spellman moved uneasily. "It was parked in the fire road just below his place."

"So you think this little girl knifed him and then walked down from the hills? It must be all of four miles over mountain trail—and in the dark."

"She might have had help..." Spellman was fast being backed into a corner, and he knew it. "Someone with another car. Besides, he wasn't killed there."

"Wasn't he?"

"Dammit!" said Spellman. "You're worse than the District Attorney. There wasn't any blood around, and his body looked as if it had been forced into something: after rigor mortis set in, and there were splinters caught in the cloth of his coat. If you ask me, he was killed elsewhere and hauled there in a box of some kind. Also, no fingerprints showed on the steering wheel of his car. Does that make sense? There should be fingerprints on the wheel of any car—unless they've been wiped off."

Lennox looked at the girl. "Maybe Heyworth wore gloves when he drove. Did he, Jean?"

She frowned in an effort to recall. "I really couldn't tell you. I was in it such a

short time—just from Kitty’s place to my apartment. Before that, Kitty rode beside him. I was in back.”

Spellman swore. “You both talk like you’d rehearsed for a part But I warn you, you’re not going to put anything over. Let’s go, Stobert.”

Lennox said: “Wait a minute. I’ll go with you. Spurck will be having a hemorrhage if he’s heard. I’ll have to be around to hold his head.” He bent down, very conscious of his audience. “Night sweet.”

“Good night,” Jean said softly, and her arms came up around his neck. There was nothing faked about her kiss. It left him a little dizzy. “Call me before you go to sleep,” she whispered.

CHAPTER III

The pianist interested William Lennox. He was a tall man with a long, sad face, and he had once been a professor in a Chicago parlor house. It was surprising the people you saw in Hollywood that you had known elsewhere. It wasn't a great picture, or even a very good one. It was just the story of an old-time actor couple who return to the stage to save their children from making fools of themselves.

If Mary Morris had not been in the cast, it would have been just another program piece. She made the difference, she and the pianist, Strong.

Lennox watched the scene with real amusement. Strong was good. He'd never appeared in pictures before. Mary had gotten him the part.

There had been no use going home until he saw Spurck so he'd drifted to the Morris set, knowing that they were shooting. He looked around as they began to rearrange the cameras. Someone came up to his side and asked for a cigarette. He turned and saw the piano player.

"Hello, Ed. How's it feel to be a picture star?"

The man grunted. His hands were encased in loose white cotton gloves. He always wore them, even at the piano. Lennox knew that his hands were badly scarred from an almost forgotten fire. "Not so good."

Lennox was surprised. "What's the matter?" he asked, as he handed the man a cigarette.

Ed Strong shrugged. "Nothing. It's just a nutty business, that's all, and this director is the biggest nut in the bunch."

Lennox wasn't paying much attention. He watched Mary Morris move toward her portable dressing room, saw the maid come to meet her and hand a white envelope to the old actress.

Mary Morris took the envelope, tore it open, and removed the single sheet that it contained. Lennox was too far away to see her expression, but he did see her sway. Even as he came to his feet she fell, crumpled, rather, going down in a

little heap across the network of cables.

Lennox vaulted the director's empty chair, crossed the set at a half run, and pushed through the crowd of dress extras who had closed between him and the actress. He was conscious that Ed Strong was at his heels, but did not stop.

The maid was down at her mistress' side, cradling her head. An assistant director was shouting helpless orders, his thin face white beneath its Malibu tan.

"She fell at my feet..."

Lennox did not hear. The piece of white notepaper had fluttered to the floor. Ed Strong picked it up, held it for an instant, and passed it to Lennox, who stuffed it into his pocket.

Then he stooped, slipped his arms under the old actress, and picked her up. The crowd parted and he carried her into the portable dressing room, calling orders across his shoulder to the maid. Inside, he laid her on a couch and sent the assistant director scurrying in search of a doctor. Sol Spurck got there first, bustling into the room on his short legs.

A worried frown darkened the producer's benign fat face. "Always trouble," he moaned. "If it ain't one thing, it's the same. First—the story ain't right and I get a new writer. For five thousand dollars I should take a chance. And now Morris collapses when we are only half done shooting."

Lennox said tensely: "She's really sick, Sol. The doctor isn't here yet, but I don't need a doctor..."

"Phooey! Doctors! For a hundred dollars they can't tell you what is wrong. But then, they ain't been in this business, twenty-three years like me. Positively, I'm telling you, it's temperament—nothing but temperament."

Bill shook his head. "I wish it were, Sol. But Mary's too good a trouper to pull a stunt like this."

The tone Lennox used caught Spurck's attention and quieted him a little. He sank heavily into a chair and twisted at the arm nervously with his short fingers.

"It ain't that I'm hard-hearted," he protested like a misunderstood child, "but the

New York office is driving me screwy, y’understand. I wish those *schlemiels* were out here once. I wish they could see what we run into. Not only is Mary sick, but Heyworth got himself killed. Or maybe you heard.”

Before Lennox could admit he had, the doctor entered and hurried over toward the inner room. Spurck and Lennox watched him with the nervousness of newborn fathers. Neither wanted to speak. Heyworth’s death was forgotten for the moment, so was the unfinished picture. Mary Morris and her health meant more to them than any picture they might ever make.

The doctor was in the room for almost an hour. When he appeared, Lennox said anxiously: “How is she, Doctor?”

The man fumbled with his bag. He was small and round-headed, with a pink and white skin and an appearance of having been thoroughly scrubbed.

“To tell you the exact truth, I don’t know. She seems to have had some kind of a shock. She won’t tell me what’s the matter, but she’s in a highly nervous condition. I tried to give her a sedative. Sleep, I think, would do her more good than anything else. But she won’t take anything.”

“It’s all right for me to see her, isn’t it?”

“Well...” he agreed half-grudgingly. “But be very careful that you don’t excite her. I’m sending over a nurse at once.”

Spurck had come to his feet and was moving forward, but Lennox stopped him with a look. He opened the connecting door and slid through, nodding to the maid who turned as he entered the room.

2.

Mary Morris lay on the studio couch, her eyes closed, her delicate body covered by a brightly colored afghan. Her eyes opened languidly when Lennox knelt on the floor at her side. “Hello, Willie.”

He grinned. It was her pet name for him. No one else had ever dared call him that—not even his own mother. He reached under the woolen cover and took one of the thin, heavily veined hands in both his own. It was like holding a piece of ice.

“Hello, trouper!”

Two tears, put there by sheer weakness, forced their way under her eyelids and trickled down through the greasepaint which still covered her cheeks. “I can’t be ill tonight, Willie. I’ve got things to do.”

“The picture can wait,” he told her. “It will have to wait. Maybe Moyer can shoot around you for a couple of days while you get some strength back.”

She roused herself, tried to sit up, but he restrained her. “To hell with the picture. This is a personal thing, Willie—and damned important. Do you understand? I’ve got to get up.”

“You can’t.” His voice was finality itself. “Stop acting like a screwy dame and let me run the show. What is it you have to do?”

Her eyes were on his, probing, studying them in an effort to make up her mind. “A letter...” she finally said hesitantly. “I’ve lost a letter, Willie.”

Lennox drew the sheet of paper from his pocket and folded the old fingers around it. “No, you haven’t, honey.”

She stared at it, relief replacing the worry in her eyes, then she looked at the maid and whispered to Bill: “Tell her to leave.”

Mary Morris settled back with a sigh. “I must trust you, Willie. I’ve got no one else I can trust, and I can’t do anything myself. After seventy years you wouldn’t think this old carcass would fail me, would you?”

“There, there,” Lennox consoled. “What do you want done?”

She told him, and he frowned deeply as she talked. When she had finished she lay back on the couch exhausted, and he was more than glad to welcome the nurse the doctor had sent.

3.

Nancy Hobbs was sitting at his desk as William Lennox entered his own office. It was a small room, neatly furnished, with none of the flash of most studio offices.

The girl looked as if she belonged there. To Lennox it was always a relief to see her. The warm skin, the friendly, understanding eyes. She kidded him, yes, she even mocked him now and then, but there was none of the personal bitterness which underlay most Hollywood repartee.

He said, "I thought that you had gone home to bed."

She told him, "I got the flash about Mary Morris' collapse and came over. What happened, Bill? I've talked to Spurck's secretary, but they won't release a thing."

He sat down heavily on the corner of the desk. He was very tired and he needed a drink badly. There was a bottle in the second drawer and he pulled it out, his eyes questioning the girl. She shook her head.

"No, Bill. It's past my bedtime now."

He half-filled the glass from the water cooler, and took it neat. The smokiness came up into his nose, stinging it a little, the Scotch made a warm, comforting ball in the pit of his stomach. "I needed that," he said, and put the bottle back into its place.

"What is it, Bill?" Her eyes were on his face, noting the tired, sagging lines with more than a mother's interest.

"Jean Jeffries," he told her, and laughed without any mirth. "Everywhere I turn, I seem to cross her tracks."

"I wish," said Nancy Hobbs, using the tone of one who voices the impossible, "I wish that you had not gotten mixed up in this."

Lennox wished the same thing, but stubborn pride would not let him admit it to this girl. Instead he said, "This is not for publication, chum," and drew the sheet of notepaper from his pocket, putting it into her hand.

Dear Miss Morris,

Maybe you don't know me, but plenty of people in this town do and can tell you who I am. Your granddaughter is in trouble—bad trouble. I'd come to see you, but I'm afraid. If you could come to my apartment tonight it would be best. I'll fix the lower door so it won't lock. Wear old clothes and come to the above

address. It's apartment 504. Whatever you do, don't show this to your granddaughter.

Tina Kingstone

Nancy Hobbs was frowning when she handed the letter back to Lennox. "What has Tina to do with Jean Jeffries? She's nothing but a two-timing little tramp."

Lennox shook his head. "She's more important than that," he said, slowly. "She's a tramp, all right, but she's managed to make herself an important one. Don't forget, Heyworth is one of the men who paid her rent, and notice her address. She lives in the same building that Jean Jeffries does."

Nancy caught her breath. "Bill, I wish that you hadn't gotten mixed up in this. You think that Tina saw something... that she..."

Lennox' face looked like a tight mask. "Maybe it was Tina who called Spellman this afternoon. I thought that it was Kitty Foster, showing her jealous claws, but now I'm not sure. Tina could have seen Jake and me take Heyworth out in that box."

Nancy's concern grew. "What are you going to do?"

"What can I do?" He sounded angry. "I'll go over there. If Tina's wound up for a little blackmail, she's got to be unwound." He pulled out the top drawer and found the .38 police special.

The girl gave up. "O.K.," she said. "My car's across the street. Come on, I'll drive you over."

He didn't try to dissuade her. He had a vivid memory of a rainy Chicago night, when this girl had climbed into a second-story window and gotten a murderer's signed statement while half the city's police battered at the front entrance. In silence they went out to the car. In silence they drove to the apartment house, but he would not let her come in.

"You've got a kind face," he said. "Seeing it, Tina might not believe me when I threaten to torture her. I'm going to get as tough as Bogart and twice as vicious."

She looked at him a long moment, then she laughed. She, too, was governed by a

troubling sense of humor. That was their common meeting point, the cord which seemed to hold them together.

“You’re miscast,” she said. “You couldn’t play a villain realistically. You’re like a small boy, throwing out his chest and yelling, ‘I am tough.’”

“Is that so?” He was out of the car. “For two cents I’d tell you to come up and watch. I might even throw some acid in her pretty face, if I had some acid.”

He was still offended as he turned and left the car, but riding upward in the little elevator, his sense of humor came back, and he was grinning as he paused before the door of 504.

The door was slightly ajar. He knocked, his knuckles making a sharp loud sound in the quiet which gripped all the house. Nothing happened, and he knocked again, the grin fading from his face. Surely Kingstone would be there. She had made the appointment herself.

No sound reached him from within. He hesitated, then pushed gently on the panel. The door swung inward and he stepped carefully inside, knowing full well that this could be a trap. The room was a duplicate of Jean Jeffries’ apartment, but he was not interested in the room.

His eyes were focused on the girl who lay quiet on the thick nap of the rug. Never again would her name figure in a divorce action; never again would her slim slippers tap madly on some hotel dance floor.

She was beautiful in death. The harsh lines which had formed about her pretty mouth were washed away. She looked as she probably had when she left high school some ten years before.

Lennox bent above the body, noting the crimson patch staining the multicolored dress. The skirt was torn on the left side, exposing the short metal zipper at the side of the silk panty and the rolled top of her silk stocking. Runs threaded down from the stocking top to the calf and the slender ankle. There was a little chain around her ankle glittering through the thin mesh of the hose.

Lennox looked at the runs, his eyes narrowed and deepened to a black-blue with thought. Even in the privacy of her apartment Tina would never have worn such stockings; rather—far rather—she would have worn no stockings at all.

He straightened thoughtfully. His mind, released from the shock of finding her, was busy. There had been something concealed in that stocking—something the murderer had wanted. It had been taken hurriedly, violently, so violently that the runs had been left as mute evidence.

He looked slowly about the room, and his eyes came to rest on the period desk at one end. He crossed to it and went through the collection of old envelopes he found. Most were bills; a few private letters. He did not know what he was looking for. He did not know that Tina Kingstone had written down anything about Mary Morris, but he had to look.

There was nothing in the desk, and he turned away, his eyes again on the body, as if she might rise and give him the answer he sought. But she did not move, and his eyes shifted to the door as a slight sound caught his attention.

Jean Jeffries was standing there. Lennox had no idea when she had come. She could have been there all the time he had spent searching the desk. Her black eyes were on his face, intense, unreadable, yet questioning.

“Hello,” he said, and a thousand things came up to plague his tired mind. What was she doing here? Her apartment was on the second floor. He put it into words, not gentle words, but harsh and irritable.

She said: “The same applies to you also, Bill. You left me to go home or to Spurck. I find you here—and Tina dead.” The inference in her voice was unmistakable, and he laughed shortly.

“So even you are accusing me now.”

“Not accusing,” she told him, her eyes shifting to the rifled desk, “but I don’t understand...”

He was going to explain, then changed his mind. He remembered the warning in Tina Kingstone’s note. “Whatever you do, don’t show this to your granddaughter.”

He lied: “I came to see Tina and found her thus.”

“And searched her desk?”

He was suddenly angry. The girl before him was the cause of all this trouble. Except for her, he would be at home in bed where he belonged. Mary Morris would be O. K.; Heyworth might even be alive. He had an impulse to shake her until the white teeth rattled.

He stepped forward, and his arms went out to grasp her shoulders.

But she misunderstood the gesture. She also came forward, and she was within the circle of his arms, again pressing her face to his. Her body was warm and vibrant beneath the soft folds of the corduroy robe.

She took her lips away and said: "I'm sorry, Bill. I trust you. You know that—after what you did for me today. I'm sorry but it was a shock, walking in here, finding you... and Tina dead. I couldn't sleep. I had to talk to someone, and she was my friend—about the only friend I had aside from you. I came up..."

A voice said: "Miss Kingstone. Miss Kingstone, is anything the mat—" and Boren was standing in the entry looking at them. "Oh—I didn't know you had guests. I saw your door open and thought. There he stopped, for his eyes had gone beyond Lennox and the girl to the still figure on the floor. "Why..."

Lennox said: "Hello, Boren."

"Miss Kingstone? Is she hurt?"

"She's dead," said Lennox, and stood aside for the manager to pass.

He came on into the room hesitantly, paused at the dead girl's side, and stood looking down at her for a long moment. When he turned, the skin above the ragged edge of the beard was yellow and unhealthy looking.

"Bad business, Mr. Lennox. Very, very bad."

"Lennox said without interest: "This won't help your house."

The manager moaned softly as if the thought had not occurred to him before. "Fifty thousand I just spent redecorating and for new furniture. A nice, quiet, respectable house it's always been."

"A cesspool," Lennox corrected him. "If there's an apartment in town with a

lousy reputation it's this one."

Boren wisely ignored the remark. "You didn't kill her?" he asked, as if he hoped for an affirmative answer.

"No," Lennox told him. "She was this way when we came upstairs to say hello." He was wondering if there was any way to get Jean out of here before the police arrived, if he could keep her free of the investigation.

It certainly wasn't the type of medicine Mary Morris needed at the moment. But he couldn't afford to move a second body, even if it had been possible, and he most certainly couldn't afford to trust Boren. The best thing to do was call the police and try to bluff his way out. With this in his mind he crossed toward the phone.

Boren read his mind. "Do we have to call the police now?" he said.

"It will be easier now than later." Lennox was practical. "You don't expect me to hide a corpse, do you?"

"Of course not," the man said. "Certainly not." His beard wiggled up and down earnestly. "That's the last thing I'd expect you to do—hide a corpse."

Lennox looked at him suspiciously, but just then he got his connection, asked for homicide and then for Spellman. "Floyd," he said. "We've found that body you were looking for this afternoon. Yes. You'd better come out and have a look for yourself."

4.

Someone pounded on the door, and Lennox rose to open it. Spellman tramped in trailed by Stobert and a second man. He looked around, his eyes careful under their shielding lids. "What have we here?"

"A murder," said Boren, and washed his hands in the air. "It's not the fault of the house, Captain. Miss Kingstone had splendid references."

"If she did," Spellman told him, "she wrote them herself. Who finally caught up with her?" His question was directed at the room in general, but his eyes were on Lennox.

Bill shook his head. "I wouldn't know. Miss Jeffries and I came up to see if she wanted a drink. The door was partly open and we found her... We've..." He shrugged. "We called you."

"Thoughtful," Spellman said sourly. "I'm surprised. You people have gotten out of the habit of reporting a little thing like murder." He went over and looked down at the dead girl.

"A lot of guys in this town are going to sleep easier when they hear about this." He whirled around suddenly and stabbed a finger at Jean Jeffries. "How well did you know this Kingstone doll?"

She stammered, surprised by the directness of his attack. "Why... Not well—not well at all. I only returned from Europe a few months ago. I met her five or six weeks ago outside on the sun porch. We got to talking, and the evenings we didn't go out we'd get together and gossip."

Lennox said: "Lay off her, Floyd. She was with me."

"She could be in far better company," Spellman said shortly. "It seems mighty queer to me that you two would come up here at three o'clock in the morning."

Lennox didn't answer. The less argument they put up the better. Later in the car he said to Nancy Hobbs: "It was lucky you saw the police car coming and got out of the way. Spellman would have thought there was something fishy—one girl bringing me over to see another."

Nancy's smile looked a little grim, even in the darkness. "I suppose he figures you and the Jeffries girl are bathed in sin. Up to your eyebrows."

"Over our heads," Lennox admitted. "It's my reputation, you know, although what I ever did to deserve it..."

She said musingly: "I wonder what Kingstone was going to tell Morris.... I wonder who killed her."

He frowned. "That apartment house certainly seems to be an unhealthy place. If I lived there I'd move quick."

"Well, you don't—at least not officially—yet. In the meantime, here's your

place. And Bill,” as he opened the door and started to get out, “if you find any more bodies, give me a ring. I think you owe me that much.”

He promised and was grinning as he watched her drive away, then the grin faded, and he stood for a long time watching the reflected glow of the town on the fog-arched sky.

CHAPTER IV

Lennox did not know how long he had been asleep. He woke with a confused feeling that he had been in bed a long time. But he couldn't have been, for the sky outside the apartment window was just beginning to show gray. He lay there between sleep and wakefulness, wondering vaguely what it was that had aroused him. And suddenly he knew.

He wasn't alone in the room. He lay perfectly still, holding his breath, knowing that the slightest indication that he was awake might bring on an attack.

His gun was still in the side pocket of his coat in the wardrobe. He was fairly caught. Suddenly there was a subdued whisper: "Can't find anything. Let's wake him and make him talk." A second voice objected. "And tip our hand."

"Hell," said the first. "What difference does it make? He's got it, hasn't he? He must have taken it. Who else could?"

"Maybe she didn't have it in her apartment in the first place."

"Then what?"

The other man said: "I'm getting out of here," and the door into the living room opened.

His partner joined him swiftly and they faded through the opening.

The door had hardly closed before Lennox was free of the bed and diving for the closet. He found the .38 undisturbed in his coat pocket, clutched it, and raced across the living room to the hall door. The hall outside was empty.

Looking around he realized that he must have been sleeping very soundly. It was incredible that they had given the apartment such a thorough search without waking him. His wallet was gone, along with a collection of cards, his driver's license, and the accumulation of memoranda he had gathered through the years. His desk had been emptied and the contents pulled from his bureau drawers. They had carried them into the living room and dumped them in the middle of the floor.

Lennox shaved, dressed, and was in the corner restaurant below the building by seven-thirty. The waitress looked at him in surprise.

“Just getting in, Mr. Lennox?”

He picked up the glass of chilled orange juice and pretended to look hurt. “Why, Helen!”

“You mean you’ve actually been in bed?” she said doubtfully. “And you got up at this hour?”

He told her: “I’m a working man. I’ll have you know the wheels of commerce can’t turn unless I’m around to give them impetus.”

She gave him another disbelieving look and departed for the kitchen.

He picked up the morning paper and stared at the headlines. War news was sharing the spot with Hollywood that morning. Hollywood and Death. He thought that the respective headlines pretty well exemplified the policy of the different papers.

The *Times* gave Heyworth a two-column drop; the *Examiner* played up Tina Kingstone’s death, and the *News*, crowded for space, carried both stories under a single head. He read the three newspaper accounts in full, learning nothing.

Most of the facts on the Heyworth murder had come from the typed statement which he and Spurck had issued the preceding evening. His name figured in the Kingstone murder, but none of the papers connected the two killings.

That was a break—or was it? Perhaps there was no connection, merely the long finger of coincidence. He finished his breakfast and headed for the studio, wondering what he was going to tell Mary Morris.

2.

As soon as he was ushered into her room he knew that the actress was no better. He had been warned by the nurse before going in.

“You’ll have to be careful,” she told him. “I couldn’t let you see her at all but she’s been deviling me to call you ever since she waked up. You aren’t related to

her—or something?”

He looked at her sharply. “Of course not. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know,” she said slowly, “but I got the impression that she was speaking of you almost as a son.”

He smiled. “We’re friends—old friends,” he said, and went on into the sick room.

It was a cheerful room in a nice house on one of the drives curving up from Santa Monica Boulevard, through Beverly Hills toward Sunset. It wasn’t as pretentious as some homes occupied by lesser celebrities, but it was homey and comfortable.

Mary Morris had told Lennox once that it was the home she had always dreamed of—for years, she’d said. “I lived in a trunk and ate in the quick-and-dirties. That’s one thing I like about pictures. No sleeper jumps, no more hotels. I’m home... to stay. When my granddaughter gets back from Europe she and I are going to settle down and enjoy it.”

From the look of her she wasn’t going to enjoy anything too long. Her granddaughter was back, but she wasn’t here. Lennox frowned as he crossed to the bedside, then he wiped the frown off his face and stood smiling down at the old actress.

“Hi, trouper.”

“I’ve been waiting for you, Willie.”

“I’d have been here a lot sooner,” he told her, “but I did not want to wake you.”

“Wake me?” she was scornful. “Only fools and lazy people sleep. I’ve never had time.”

He said: “You’re going to take a lot of time in the next few days and get yourself thoroughly rested.”

“That,” she said definitely, “is what you think. But never mind me. What did you find out from that Kingstone cat?”

Lennox looked at her. “Where’d you get the idea Kingstone was a cat?”

“I asked my maid.” The actress’ eyes were fever-bright. “My maid knows everything worth knowing about anyone in this town, and all she asks is a chance to gossip. I asked her last night, after we got home, and she certainly gave me an earful. The dame really gets around.”

Lennox said: “And I thought I sent you home to sleep.”

“I did sleep,” she protested, “but I had to know. What is it, Willie? Blackmail?”

Lennox hesitated, not knowing what to say. If he didn’t tell her she would worm the news of Kingstone’s death out of someone. He decided on the truth. In the long run it would be better.

“I don’t know,” he said in a low voice. “I couldn’t talk to her, Mary. She was dead before I got there.”

The sick woman did not speak, nor did she move for a full minute. He began to fear that the shock of the news had been too much for her. But her eyes were open, and her breathing seemed, to his untutored eye, regular.

“Dead,” she said finally. It startled him to have her speak. “How did she die, Willie?”

“Someone killed her, Mary. She was dead when I got there.”

“Did Jean...”

He said: “No,” too hastily. “Of course not. Why should she?”

The old lips twitched as she tried to smile. “People do strange things—unaccountable things, my boy. I’ve known all kinds of people in all types of places. I haven’t been surprised at anything for years. Are you lying to protect me?”

“I’m smarter than that.”

“I hope so,” she said half to herself. “It’s never wise to put off anything that must be faced. I’m disappointed in Jean. I tried to keep her clear of the show business.

I love it, but it's not a good life, especially when one is young and impressionable. You get a false set of values."

Lennox patted her hand. "You're talking too much."

"That's all I'm good for, talking. I want you to understand, I've hardly seen Jean since she got back, but she's a nice kid, and Bill, she'll have my dough."

Ho managed to laugh. "It's the first time I've ever been propositioned by a girl's grandmother. Have you told her that you're sick?"

She shook her head. "This is nothing."

"Still," he said, "she has a right to know. I'm going to bring her to see you at four. You should rest until then."

He left the sick room, spoke to the nurse, and went down the hall. A man had been leaning against one of the porch posts. He flipped his cigarette away and straightened. "How is she?" Lennox recognized the piano-player, Strong.

"Better," he said, and was not certain that he was telling the truth.

Strong grunted. "That darn maid wouldn't let me see her. Gosh, Mary and I were young together." He was silent, his faded eyes staring out at the palm-lined street. "The first job I've had in months, and it folds."

Lennox couldn't be sure which the man was worried about, his job or Mary's condition.

3.

Spurck was in an uncertain humor. He had already fired the studio's highest-paid writer, had a battle with his leading producer, was fast working himself up to a point where he would wire his resignation to the New York office. There was one thing about the production head Lennox liked—when one of these moods attacked him he never took his ill humor out on the underlings who dared not fight back. He battled with men who were competent to look after themselves—Lennox included—and he was mustering his strength for his attack when Bill entered the high-ceilinged room.

“So!” he said, puffing out his cheeks until his face was perfectly round. “It isn’t enough that our best leading man gets killed and our best actress gets sick. No! You have to do something also. You have to get yourself mixed up in a murder. What is it you were doing at that Kingstone apartment? Or may I not ask?”

“You may not,” Lennox told him. “That was strictly my own business.”

“And a fine business!”

Spurck had been married for forty years and never had there been the slightest whisper of irregularity in his relations with any woman. Lennox knew that contrary to general opinion Hollywood was filled with men who were faithful to their wives. But Spurck’s conduct led all the rest, and he never hesitated to condemn the conduct of others.

“Now look!” Lennox said, knowing he had an argument on his hands. “I could have had legitimate business up there...”

“With such a woman it is doubtful,” Spurck said accusingly. “Mind you, I am not the first to cast a stone, y’understand? And when a girl is dead she is dead, no matter what she was before. But she is not the type which I would wish a son of mine to know, and I couldn’t regard you better if you were a son.”

Lennox said: “Thanks.” Once in a while Spurck’s uncontrolled emotions embarrassed him. “Look, Sol. No matter what the wiseacres around town will have to say, I had a perfectly good reason for being there last night, and in a sense it was business.”

Bill paused, and Spurck was silent as if expecting him to elaborate. He didn’t, and the production chief said plaintively:

“No one ever tells me anything.”

“This,” said Lennox, “has nothing to do with the studio. Let’s talk about business.”

Spurck was still not appeased, but he had no alternative. After an hour’s discussion it was decided to stop work on the Heyworth picture, and Lennox was assigned the unpleasant job of telling Kitty Foster. He dreaded it for blocks—all the time it took his cab to carry him through Hollywood and out to Holmby

Hills.

Kitty's house was huge, much bigger than it looked from the street, built of flat yellow stone split to almost the thickness of slate and trimmed at the corners with fire brick. The cab pulled around into the circular drive and stopped before the entrance.

Lennox told the driver to wait, got out, and punched the bell. The houseboy who answered looked uncertain as he saw who it was.

Lennox said, "Good morning, Togo," and stepped into the square entry hall. "Miss Foster up?"

The boy didn't know exactly how to proceed. Lennox helped him out. "She'll see me," he prophesied. "This is business."

The morning papers were scattered in crumpled disarray around the corner chair, proving that Kitty Foster had already seen the news.

Bill got a cigarette from a mirrored box on the low end table and looked around the room. Four years ago Kitty had lived in a court on Santa Monica, doing extra work, when Lennox had spotted her and arranged a bit in a General picture.

Now she was a star with a home of her own, four cars, five servants and half a dozen dogs. If she followed the usual evolution she would own a racing stable by the start of the following season. He had helped her with it all, serving as teacher, arranging the proper contacts, the proper dates.

The houseboy disturbed his thoughts. Togo said, "She say come down to the pool, please," and went hurriedly away, obviously glad to escape before the impending battle materialized.

Lennox went out the French door at the end of the hall, crossed the multicolored tile terrace, and went down the steps.

The girl half sat, half reclined on a beach divan in the shade of a striped umbrella. She wore a one-piece suit of white with cutouts fore and aft at the waist. There was a flowered beach robe across the table at her side.

"Hello, Bill. Come for a swim?"

He had spent hours in that pool. It was hot, and the water looked inviting, but he declined. “No thanks. On business,” he told her, looking at her keenly in expectation of a blow-up. “I’ve been talking to Spurck,” he went on cautiously. “Heyworth’s death naturally knocked the picture into a cocked hat. We’ll have to re-title and, of course, re-shoot every scene he was in. We may even have to rewrite it.”

“What a heck of a business!” she said explosively. “A man dies and all anyone thinks of is changing the picture so no one will ever recognize it. Cripes! Why didn’t I keep on selling thread.”

“You can always go back,” he said. “But the studio has to go on, and they have five hundred thousand tied up in the little epic already.”

Kitty made no effort to hide her anger. “You always pick a fight,” she complained. “When Togo said you were here my first impulse was to have you thrown out. Then I decided that it wouldn’t buy me anything to quarrel with you. But I’ve changed my mind again, Bill. I’m going to quarrel. And not only that—I’m going to hang a murder rap on you and make it stick!”

He tried to laugh, but his lips were frozen. She didn’t give him a chance to talk. “I wasn’t in love with Heyworth,” she said. “It was good business to have my name linked with his.”

“You never were in love with anyone but yourself,” Lennox said.

She nodded. “Yes I was—a long time ago. He handed me the old song and dance, and when he got tired he moved on. I’ve never forgotten it, William. As far as I’m concerned men are something to use. I used to be afraid of them. I used to think they were smart. Now I know better.”

“Yes,” he said, and his grin was bitter.

“Yes! Listen, Bill. I haven’t got anything against you. You gave me a lift, and I know it, but I also know that you can’t do me any more good. I’m not going to have it whispered around this town that any black-haired snip took Heyworth away from me—even if she is Mary Morris’ granddaughter.”

The skin along Lennox’ jaws felt as if it were stiff like parchment. “I don’t quite see what you’re getting at.”

“Don’t you?” Her voice was deceptively soft. “You will in a minute, chum. I know where you were yesterday afternoon. I saw you leave that apartment house, and I saw you drive Leon Heyworth’s car away. The police might be interested to know just why the car was parked in the side street below Jean Jeffries’ apartment when Heyworth was apparently killed in his own garden. Don’t you think they might be interested?”

He stared at her, wondering what appeal he could make that might perhaps touch her. He had no illusions. This woman was making no idle threat. She meant exactly what she said, and the worst part of it was that she could easily tell the police without involving herself more than she chose.

He wondered suddenly if she had actually seen him drive the Cadillac away or if she were merely making a shrewd guess. He had no way of telling. He could deny her charge, but Spellman was already suspicious, and Kitty was wise enough to have fortified herself with a witness.

He said, with a lot more confidence than he actually felt: “You’re doing some tall guessing, sweetheart. And you’re hitting very far off the mark.”

She smiled, her good humor returning. “No, William. You’ve got a ready tongue, my lad, and you’ve talked yourself out of a number of jams, but I don’t think you’ll manage to talk yourself out of this one. Did you kill Tina Kingstone?”

She caught him off guard. He’d been so busy thinking of Heyworth that he had forgotten Kingstone’s death. “And why in heaven’s name should I kill her?” he snapped.

Her voice was idle. “For the same reason that you would love to strangle me at the moment. Maybe she saw you when you carried Heyworth’s body out in that box...”

Lennox had played too much poker and pinochle with experts to let his expression change. “So now I’m moving bodies in boxes?”

“Accusing? Accusing...” Spellman looked at Lennox and his immobile face.

She smiled, not sweetly. “I read the papers, son. The police found splinters in the fabric of Leon’s coat. And that’s not all I know.” Then abruptly she said: “I wonder what I should wear when I testify at your trial.”

Lennox was beginning to get frightened, but not for himself. This girl was serious, and her inherent vindictiveness would carry her to almost any lengths. Jean Jeffries had taken a man away from her in a public restaurant. It did not matter that she had never loved the man or that he was now dead. If she could hurt the Jeffries girl, she would.

“And just when,” he asked casually, “are you going to communicate these suppositions to the police?”

“In a very few minutes,” she told him confidently. “I’ve already called Captain Spellman. He promised to be here by eleven. Do you want to wait?”

4.

Detective Captain Spellman had on a gray suit that was too small for him. As the big man settled in a chair Lennox feared the suit would part company at the seams. Spellman had expressed no surprise at sight of Lennox.

“I got your call, Miss Foster.”

Kitty said: “It’s odd to have the man you are accusing present when you testify. I find it embarrassing.” But there was no embarrassment in her manner. The smile that twisted her lips was maliciousness itself.

He said, “If this is another gag you two worked up, I’ll make you both sorry for it.”

“It’s no *gag*,” Bill told him. “In about one minute our little friend is going to pin a murder rap on my shoulders. If she only had evidence to back her charge, it could be serious.”

“Murder?”

“Yes,” said Kitty Foster. “Leon Heyworth’s death—or is that case already ancient history?”

Spellman swore. In all his years around Los Angeles he’d never managed to get used to picture people and their ways. “So you know something of Heyworth’s death. Why didn’t you tell it sooner?”

She met his look with widened eyes, a little starry, a little scared. Watching her, Lennox could not help a sudden surge of inner pride. The result of four years' work was evident. Whatever else this girl was, she was an actress, and she certainly had not been when he first lifted her out of the extra ranks. Spellman was her audience and she was playing directly to the house.

She nodded. "I was grief-stricken when I heard of Leon's death. We were friends, you know—just friends, but very good friends."

Spellman said: "I understand."

"So," she continued, "I got to thinking and realized that my duty to my dead friend and to society was greater than my duty either to myself or to the studio. Let me tell you what I know. I was with Leon Heyworth on the night he died. We went several places, ending at the Beverly Derby. There we were joined by little Jean Jeffries."

The way she said "little Jean" you pictured a girl of the Shirley Temple age. "They took me home, and that's the last I ever saw of Leon Heyworth alive."

A note of impatience had crept into Spellman's voice. "We know all that."

She said, "Of course," as if she were apologizing for her own stupidity. "The next morning Mr. Lennox came to my dressing room and asked me where Leon Heyworth was. He was quite insulting—so insulting that he made me angry. I did something I perhaps shouldn't have done. I drove out by the apartment where Jean lives, and I saw Leon's car parked a block down the side street."

She had Spellman's full attention, and she shot a triumphant glance at Lennox. But if she expected to see fear on the troubleshooter's face she was disappointed.

"A friend of mine has an apartment across the street. I went there and from the window watched Lennox enter Jean's building. It was then that I did a silly thing. He was in the building so long that I suspected something terrible must have happened. I know Lennox so well.... He and Leon always disliked each other. If Leon had been alive one or both of them would have left as soon as Lennox arrived. That's why I called the police. I told them to go to Jean's apartment because they'd find a body there."

"So it was you!" Spellman's face reddened a little. "You'd have saved us a lot of

trouble, Miss Foster, if you had given your name.”

She nodded contritely. “I know it.”

He forgave her with a heavy smile. “Well, better late than never. Go ahead.”

She took a deep breath. “I... I saw you drive in and then saw you leave, and I couldn’t understand it. I was just going to go myself when I saw Lennox come out. His manner was furtive. There is no other word for it. I knew he was up to something the minute I saw the way he acted. He looked up and down the street as if afraid to be seen. Then he turned and hurried up the side street as far as Leon’s car.

“I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw him unlock the door, get in, and drive away. I was puzzled. I couldn’t understand what had happened. And then I read in the papers that Leon’s body had been found in his own garden and that his car was parked on the fire road below his house.”

Spellman sucked in his breath noisily. “You didn’t see Lennox carry out a body or a box and put it into that car?”

The girl shook her head. “No,” she said honestly. “And I can’t figure it out, unless it was that truck.”

“Truck! What truck?”

Kitty explained: “Before that—quite a while before—a truck pulled into the alley behind the apartment building. I think it was one of those U-drive-it kind. It had a box in it when it pulled in, and the box was still there when the truck pulled away.”

“That’s it,” Spellman said slowly. “That’s it.” He faced Lennox, and a trace of sadness mingled with his exultation. “Sorry, Bill, but I have to do it.”

“Do what?” said Lennox, opening his eyes.

“Arrest you for the murder of Leon Heyworth.”

“That,” Lennox told him, “would be one of the most stupid tricks of your silly career. You admitted yourself that Heyworth had been dead a lot more than

twelve hours when he was found. I've already told you I have an alibi for the whole period during which he must have been killed."

Spellman grunted. "Alibi or no, we've got you. I'm sorry, Bill. I really am."

"She's not," said Lennox, getting slowly to his feet. "She's bursting with pride. So long, rat."

The girl's smile was sweet. "I'll bring you hot coffee, honey—and cigarettes. I've always wanted to visit in the death row. You meet such interesting people."

5.

Deputy District Attorney Young was a gray man with a dry, precise way of speaking and a politician's sense of values. He needed no one to tell him what this case would mean. There were a lot of big names involved, and the news value of the story was tremendous. He knew that until this went to trial he would find his name on page one almost any morning.

It was the Young luck. His chief was out of town on a good-will tour of South America, and if his luck held the case would have ended in a conviction long before his chief returned.

Martin Young was nonplussed. He had faced a great many wrongdoers during his years in public office. They were either sullenly silent, noisily defiant, or openly scared.

Lennox just looked amused, and Young demanded: "What do you find so funny?"

"You," said Lennox, and took a seat beside Young's desk. He casually pulled a loose cigarette from his side pocket, twisted it between strong fingers until he had spilled the tobacco out of each end. Then he crimped the ends carefully as if rolling a home-made and stuck it into his mouth.

Young said: "Stop that! There'll be no smoking here."

Lennox said: "I saw a good play once by a couple of Chicago newspapermen. They called it 'Front Page,' and you remind me of the sheriff. Maybe you saw it?"

Young had seen it, and he did not like the comparison. He turned angrily to Spellman. "Did you bring this man here for questioning or not?"

Spellman was secretly enjoying the discomfiture of the deputy district attorney, but he felt that the honor of the office should be upheld.

"I did," he said flatly. "This man is involved in the Heyworth death. I don't know whether he did the actual killing. We've checked his whereabouts on the night of the murder and he does have an alibi. But he certainly knows much more than he has told." Spellman went on to repeat Kitty Foster's story.

Young had the tips of his fingers pressed together and his elbows resting on the arms of his chair in his best attentive attitude. When Spellman had finished he blinked bleakly toward the big captain.

"Is there anyone to corroborate her testimony?"

Spellman nodded. "Yes, sir. The girl from whose apartment she watched the street. The girl's name is Beth Snyder. She serves as standin for Miss Foster."

Young swung his chair so that he faced Lennox without turning his head. "All right. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Nothing! Why should I?"

"Nothing!" The deputy district attorney was exasperated. "Do you realize the serious trouble you're in? I think not. Otherwise a man of your obvious intelligence would alter his attitude."

Lennox' smile was cherubic. "Thanks for recognizing my intelligence. Does it occur to you, Mr. Young, that perhaps the reason for my lack of nervousness is simply that I have nothing to be nervous about?"

"You mean you deny Miss Foster's statement?"

"A denial wouldn't mean anything," Lennox informed him. "Remember I'm not under oath."

"There are ways," Young said darkly, "of making you talk."

“The wrecking squad? Come, come, Counselor. You’ve been reading books and seeing B pictures. Certainly you don’t believe that the fine gentlemen—the Los Angeles police—would resort to anything as crude as a rubber hose, especially when the victim’s lawyer is waiting in your outer office.”

Young looked at Spellman, who nodded. “Sam Marx!” the police captain said dolefully.

Young said something not in keeping with his appearance. “That shyster!”

Lennox’ smile widened. “Sam will be glad to know your opinion of him. I’d hate to repeat what he called you just before I came in.”

Young changed his method of attack. “What about the girl—Jean Jeffries?”

“We can’t find her,” Spellman said, his face reddening. “Lennox phoned her somehow. At least she wasn’t at her apartment when we got there.”

“Young man,” the prosecutor said, trying to be very austere, “have you any idea what trouble you can get yourself into by refusing to co-operate with us? I think we will hold you for a few hours and let you think it over.”

“On what charge?”

Young pondered awhile, then said: “Merely for questioning. I think that will do.”

“No,” said Lennox, “I’m afraid it won’t do. You see, Sam expected something like that. He’s got Judge Connors waiting in his chambers. Charge me, Mister Young, and he’ll have a writ in fifteen minutes—unless you want to make the charge murder. If you do, I’ll slap a false-arrest suit at you now.”

“Sometimes,” the prosecutor said balefully, “the law is strangely helpless in the face of evildoers.”

A half-hour later he said to Sam Marx: “It’s a lucky thing you were in the office. Those buzzards were all set to put me to sleep on an iron bed.”

Marx was small, coming barely to Lennox’ shoulder. His black hair curled so tightly on his small head that it looked like a skull cap. He certainly would not have attracted attention in a crowd, but he was one of the smartest lawyers on the

coast.

His friendship for Lennox was part and parcel of the man. He'd been known to ask postponement of an important case in order to free himself to do Bill a favor. Lennox' friends were that way. He aroused a loyalty in them that could not be shattered by circumstances.

He said: "So you contacted Nancy and she got the girl out in time?"

Marx bobbed his head. His small round eyes glittered like two black shoe buttons as he watched Spellman move across the entry room. "Yeah. What goes on?"

Lennox told him; he had no secrets from Marx, and the little man listened with his full attention.

"You're screwy," was his verdict. He had said the same thing before and he would say it again. "You haven't got the sense that God gave a goat, in the name of Jacob, why did you move that body?"

"It seemed," Lennox told him, "like a good idea at the time."

"And it may get you ten years," Marx warned. "They can be tough about these accessory cases when they choose. What about that Kingstone murder? Is it tied up with Heyworth's death?"

Lennox shook his head. "That's what I don't know. And it bothers me plenty. If I could only get a lead or find someone who knows something."

"It seems to me," Marx said caustically, "that the one to ask questions of is this little dancer. Or have you been too busy looking at her black eyes to think of that?"

Lennox shrugged. "She claims to know nothing about it."

"And you told the cops you didn't either. If you can lie a little, is there any reason why she can't?"

Lennox didn't answer, and Marx said: "Then let's go after her. And we'll have to be careful. Even if you're out on bail, Spellman isn't going to lose interest. For a

bulldog with one idea he backs General Grant clear out of the picture.”

CHAPTER V

The house in which Nancy Hobbs had made her home was an unpretentious white box with green shutters and two-story pillars, built, as she said, in the best Vermont M.G.M. tradition.

But inside she had managed to inject the full force of her personality. The library-den, which served as a workroom, was lined with books. Not standard sets, such as one found in all the better movie establishments, but books to read, books kept by one who loved reading for the joy that only reading can afford.

He was thinking of this now as Sam Marx swung the small coupe into the driveway and pulled around the house. For two hours, he and Marx had played tag with traffic, trying to lose the two shadows who, under Spellman's orders, were attempting to make Bill's private life their own.

Nancy met them at the steps and led them across the big service porch, past shelves of fruit, of her own canning. There was a domestic streak in this girl, who could hold her own in appearance with any of the glamour maidens of the screen. It pulled him, wordlessly, giving him a nostalgic feeling as for something which he had forever lost.

His character had too many divergent qualities for him to be ever fully content. Like most men, he wanted to eat the cake and yet to keep it forever. His mind was more fully engaged on his own shortcomings than on the immediate problems which confronted him, and, In his present mental state, it was with distinct shock that he saw Jean Jeffries curled up like an expensive kitten on the divan in Nancy's den.

Here the furnishings were of leather, comfortably worn, chairs rescued from Doctor Hobbs' old-time study. Jean Jeffries did not belong. There was a polish about her which called for more modern surroundings.

And yet there was definite attraction, a force which pulled Lennox toward her despite his knowledge that she might be cheaply had. Other women in Hollywood had had the same attraction for him.

He was like a trained whisky drinker viewing the siren greenness of a daiquiri.

But the girl on the divan sensed none of this. With a glad cry of welcome she was on her feet and had flung her arms about his neck. “Darling! I’ve been so worried.”

Both Nancy and Sam Marx were unwilling witnesses to the scene, and the little lawyer’s hawklike face was tense in its displeasure. He was no more than Lennox’ age, but something in the tension of his small body gave him the stature of a disappointed parent.

Lennox flushed. He put her away from him without a kiss and said, to cover his confusion, “Everything is lovely. There’s nothing to worry about.” He dared not trust himself to look at Nancy Hobbs.

Marx’ words were an expressive snort. “Lovely, and you are out on five-grand bail.”

Lennox ignored the little man. Jean Jeffries’ dark eyes took on a serious look. “Bill, what do you want me to do?”

He considered her. “Look, Jean”—his tone was grave—“your grandmother is sick. She can’t stand any more shocks. I’m hoping she doesn’t learn that the police are hunting you.”

“But why should they want me?” She was a little scared. “I can’t tell them anything unless I tell them about you moving Leon’s body. I wish that you hadn’t done that, Bill. It would have been better if we had made a clean breast of the whole thing from the first.”

Marx said: “What is done, is done. What we have to do now is to straighten out the mess. If we could explain Heyworth’s death; why he was in your apartment; who knew that he was there...”

She said, slowly. “I... I’m afraid that I’m not much help. I didn’t even know him very well.”

“You didn’t!” Marx said explosively. “Then why did you force your way to his table at the Derby? Why did he take you home last night?”

She stalled, apparently trying to decide. “I... I guess I won’t be doing any harm in telling now... now that she’s dead.”

“Who’s dead?” Even with his sharp mind, Marx could not follow her words.
“Who are you talking about?”

“Tina Kingstone. She gave me a note for Leon Heyworth, a note I was supposed to deliver if I saw him at any of the night spots. I was to get it to him without anyone else knowing.”

Marx glanced at Lennox, then asked, “What was in the note?”

Jean Jeffries shook her head. “I don’t know. You see, at one time, Tina had been Leon’s friend...” she fumbled a little over the word.

“Anyhow he wasn’t coming to see her any more and she felt bad about it I guess the note must have sounded desperate—something about killing herself. At any rate, Leon managed to read it without Kitty Foster suspecting that he had a note.

“I thought for a moment that he was going to get up and rush out of the restaurant. Then he got control of himself and said he’d take me home—an excuse to get away from that Foster woman so he could see Tina.

“That’s what happened, anyway. We drove to my apartment and had trouble finding a parking place’. We had to walk nearly a block down the side street. When we got up to my place Tina was there, and they started to quarrel at once. It got worse, and I finally couldn’t stand any more.

“The keys to Tina’s place were lying on my desk. I picked them up and went to her apartment. She didn’t come up all night, so I supposed they had made up and were...” her face flushed, “were... making up. I waited all morning before I returned to my place. I hadn’t been there long when you came in, Bill.”

“And the Kingstone woman?” Marx asked.

Jean shook her head. “I didn’t see her. I don’t know where she went. I never saw her again alive. I stayed at home worrying about her all evening. Finally when I couldn’t sleep I went up to see if she had returned, and I ran into Mr. Lennox again.”

Sam Marx turned around and spread his hands. “That,” he said in a disconsolate tone, “gets us exactly nowhere. If you think Spellman is going to accept a murder suspect who is already dead, you don’t know him as well as I do.”

“At least,” Nancy suggested, “it may tie the two crimes together.”

“I was sure of that before,” Marx said. “It doesn’t stand to reason that murder would strike twice in the same apartment house without some connection existing between the two crimes. But where does it leave us? Nowhere!”

“Unless we could find a person who would gain by having both Heyworth and Kingstone dead,” Nancy said.

“This town,” the lawyer told her, “is lousy with that kind of person. Death is seldom so selective in hunting out the unsatisfactory citizens. No, that won’t help us. We need a definite motive—a clue. I’ll find out just how well Kingstone and Heyworth did know each other, but I think I’m in a blind alley. In the meantime...”

“In the meantime,” Lennox cut in, “I’ve got to take this little lady over and show her to her grandmother...”

“You fool!” Nancy said sharply. “You can’t go out of this house with her. If you do, she’ll be picked up. Don’t you think Spellman will think of her grandmother?”

Jean said unexpectedly: “Let them pick me up. I’m not afraid. I haven’t done anything.”

2.

Sam Marx turned away from the phone. “It’s all arranged,” he said. “I’ve told Spellman that I’ll have you in my office at six, and he agreed not to try to pick you up before.”

Jean Jeffries looked abashed. “I...” she began, “I don’t know exactly how to say this—and I don’t want you to misunderstand—but—I already have a lawyer.”

Sam Marx was quicker on the uptake than Lennox. He told her: “Don’t let that worry you. Who is your lawyer?”

“Bernard Austin. He’s my grandmother’s attorney, and I’d feel... I’d feel better if he was handling things. You don’t mind?”

“Mind!” Sam Marx said gleefully. “I’m tickled to death! Bill is enough trouble without trying to handle someone else. I’ll call Austin, tell him what happened, and have him at my office at six. You go ahead to your grandmother’s with Bill, and don’t worry about a thing. Better use my car. You won’t be as noticeable as in a cab.”

Lennox said: “Thanks.” He dreaded the meeting between the girl and Mary Morris, but he didn’t see any way out of it. He waited while Jean thanked Nancy effusively, and then took her out to Sam’s coupe.

In the drive across town he cleared his throat three times before he managed to say: “Look, Jean. That act we put on for Spellman was O. K. We had to have a good reason for my being at your place, but now that it’s coming out in the open we don’t have to go on with the monkeyshines.”

“Oh!” she whispered, and her eyes got big. “I’m sorry! Did I?... Is it you and Miss Hobbs?”

For some reason the words made him angry. “It doesn’t have to be anyone, does it?” he almost yelled.

“No,” she said in a small voice. “I’ve made you mad, haven’t I? And that is the last thing in the world I would want to do—make you angry—after all you’ve gone through for me.”

He was afraid she was going to cry and braked the car sharply. Someone behind them stepped on the horn, and Bill looked around, annoyed. The traffic was heavy, and he was forced to speed up. A motor cop passed them going the other way, and he felt a peculiar prickly sensation at the roots of his hair.

I’m getting to be a hardened criminal, he thought. I’m getting to the point where I jump at the sight of a cop.

He turned cautiously into the street where Mary lived, half expecting a horde of cops and reporters around the house. He was vastly relieved when they got safely inside without interruption.

The maid met them in the hall and uttered a little glad cry when she saw the girl; “Oh, Miss Jean! You’ve come. I am so glad.”

The girl nodded. "I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner, but I couldn't. How is Grandmother?"

"Better," said the maid. "I'm sure she's better. She's got to be! But that damn fool nurse won't let me go near her—me who's looked after her for forty years."

Jean patted the woman's shoulder. "I'm sure the nurse is taking very good care of her."

The maid sniffed. "Well, maybe," she agreed grudgingly, "but after all she's not show business. People in show business aren't like other folks, Miss Jean, and they've got to be treated differently."

The girl looked at Lennox. He said: "Ask the nurse if we can see her, will you, Rita?"

"She's quaint," Jean remarked as the maid disappeared.

Lennox looked around sharply, then smiled. "Very," he said. "She's always seemed that way to me. Years ago in Chicago she used to do her best to keep me out of Mary's dressing room. She thought I tired her."

The girl looked at him, startled. "You knew Mar... my grandmother in Chicago?"

His smile was a warm memory. "Very well. I thought she was swell then—and still do."

"And you don't think I've been a very good granddaughter?"

For an instant their eyes locked, and he sensed a hostility in hers that he hadn't noticed before. "Well," he told her slowly, "it's none of my business, but frankly I don't. I happen to know that she established this home in the hope that you would share it with her."

"That's true," Jean admitted in a low voice. "But what you don't understand is that I'm an individual, Bill. I have my own life to lead. Some of the things I want to do might have worried her. It's better for both of us that we live apart. In that way we escape any friction."

Before he could remonstrate the maid returned and motioned them to follow. Mary Morris was not alone. There was a man beside the window who turned as they came in, and Lennox saw that it was the old piano-player.

Mary said, "You know Eddie Strong, don't you, Bill? Jean, honey, this is an old friend of mine from Chicago. He knew you when you were a baby."

Strong seemed to be ill at ease. He stood there pulling nervously at the fingers of his white cotton gloves, his eyes, hooded by the shaggy graying brows, never leaving the girl's face.

"You were a pretty kid," he told her. "You still are."

"Thanks," said Jean Jeffries.

"I see," said the old actress, turning her attention to the girl, "that you've managed to get your name in the papers."

The girl was subdued. "Yes, Grandmother."

"Grandmother, nonsense! What the devil has got into you? It's those pesky European schools. You used to call me Mary before you went away."

"All right, Mary."

"Education," said Mary Morris to the room at large, "is a great mistake. Look at her."

Lennox did. He saw a faint line of color come up in the girl's dark cheeks, but she managed to laugh. Mary Morris sighed. "I suppose," she said, "we expect too much. We hope our children and grandchildren won't make the mistakes we made, but they always do. She's not bad looking, Willie, and she'll have a lot of money when I die."

Lennox said: "You're talking too much, and your words don't make sense. We've got to go. We've stayed too long already."

"Can I bum another lift?" It was Strong.

Lennox said, "Sure," his mind on other things. Dammit, everyone insisted on

linking him with Jean Jeffries. He was glad of the piano-player's company in the car. At least he would not be alone with the girl.

As he turned the coupe toward Wilshire, Strong said: "I saw in the noon editions that the cops had picked you up. Was it serious?"

Lennox shrugged. "Not very. I'm out on bail because I happen to have had an alibi for the time that Heyworth was killed."

Strong said out of long experience: "Alibis are good things to have when you need them, the trouble is that you seldom have one when you need it most. How'd Mary seem to you?"

Lennox shrugged. "Not good, not bad. I think with some rest that she'll be O.K."

"I hope so," Strong told him. "If I thought that anyone was trying to put anything over on the old girl, I'd fix them—good. You can drop me at the corner of Fairfax if you will."

When he had left the car the girl said: "Funny old duck. Mary seems to have picked up every stray that she came across in her life."

Lennox nodded, his eyes on the traffic-filled boulevard. "They don't make many like Mary. We should do everything we can to please her."

"Like marrying," the girl suggested.

3.

Sam Marx said nervously, "It's about time."

Lennox paid no attention. He looked around the lawyer's office to find it crowded. Spellman and Young were both there, so was Bernard Austin, standing at the window, looking down at the lighted street lamps along Broadway.

The building was old, built around a U-shaped entrance hall which ran up five floors to a skylight at the top. The halls were balconies, and the elevators mounted in open cages to the top of the structure. It was characteristic of Marx that he would choose such a place. There were no shining mahogany or expensive rugs in his office, and the glass in the entrance door bore the single

inscription:

“Sam Marx, Lawyer.”

Bernard Austin was an entirely different type. A big man, soft from good living and no exercise, he was the senior partner in a firm that had specialized for years in handling business for show people.

He seldom appeared in court and never in a criminal case.

Lennox was surprised when he stepped in and adroitly parried every question Spellman or Young put to the girl. He had ability and native shrewdness, plus an easy good fellowship that kept the deputy district attorney and the detective captain at arm's length. He pointed out that it had not been his client who had removed the body from the apartment. He added that his client had discovered the body so shortly before the arrival of Lennox that she had no time to report her find to the police.

She was a young, inexperienced girl, most of whose formative years had been spent in school in France. American ways were strange to her. What would they have done had they been in her shoes? Probably exactly what she did—trust Lennox' judgment and let him handle the whole affair.

Halfway through the questioning Sam Marx signaled Lennox, and they strolled out into the balcony-like hall and stood at the grilled-iron railing looking down at the entrance far below.

“That guy will have you in the gas chamber yet,” the little lawyer predicted sourly.

“He's doing a good job,” Lennox said. “I fully expect Young and Spellman to come out of there crying on each other's shoulders.”

“Sure,” said Marx, “he's doing a good job for her, but he certainly is twisting the knife around between your shoulder blades. It won't be long before they decide that it wasn't in her apartment that the body was found.”

Lennox sounded unconcerned. “That's for you to worry about.”

The lawyer shook his head. “This time I think I'll let them gas you and have it

over with. A fine life I have—getting you out of one jam after another. And for what?”

“I pay, don’t I?”

“Sometimes—when I catch up with you before the bartender does. Why don’t you marry that Hobbs girl, settle down on a hillside lot, and raise eight kids?”

Lennox changed the subject. “This is some building. A swell location for a Karloff picture. Can’t you see Boris chasing his victims around and around these balconies?”

Marx told him to shut up. “I work a lot at night—by myself,” he added. “I’m scared as it is, and you aren’t helping.” He broke off as there was a general exodus of police from the office behind them.

Spellman stopped to say to Lennox: “Remember, you’re out on bail. Don’t decide that the studio could use you in Sydney or Santos.”

He watched them crowd into the rickety cage. “If I had a nasty mind, I could almost hope the cable would break.” He turned and led the way back into his dingy office.

Austin was telling the girl: “Now there is nothing to worry about, my dear. Everything is under control. Of course they don’t wish you to leave the jurisdiction of the court, and you will probably be followed, but since you aren’t intending to go any place it won’t matter.”

“You were wonderful,” she said, and it shocked Lennox that she used the same warm tone she had employed in thanking him.

Austin expanded under the praise. “If I do say so, I think I handled that rather well for one who is unused to dealing with police officials. Now don’t worry just because you were unfortunate enough to become involved in this chain of circumstances. I’ve handled your grandmother’s affairs for years, and I think you can safely leave yourself in my hands.”

After the shaky elevator had absorbed them, Marx said with deep disgust: “And they call me a shyster. That guy is so smooth he could slide on sandpaper. I wouldn’t trust him to watch your dog, even if I didn’t like the dog.”

“Professional jealousy.”

“That,” said Sam Marx, “is something I don’t have to suffer from because I am the best lawyer in the United States. Now get out of here, and if you love me, the next body you find turn over to Spellman before it gets cold.”

4.

Not until his cab had almost reached Hollywood did Lennox remember the date he had with himself to get drunk. It’s getting bad, he thought, when an important engagement like that could slip his mind. But still it wasn’t too late to do something about it.

At the corner of Western the headlines caught his eye, and he thrust a nickel through the rear door window in exchange for a green-jacketed paper. The headlines said:

MOVIE EXECUTIVE QUESTIONED IN DOUBLE MURDER

Glancing down the double fourteen-point column, Lennox saw that he was the movie executive. The reporter had not spared the horses. Bill didn’t blame him.

Several motives were hinted at. According to the account, Lennox seemed to have been living a double, or even a triple life, complicated by Heyworth who also was playing around in the same general locations.

“There were three girls,” the paper said. “... the police have questioned a well-known star, Kitty Foster, and they are hunting for Jean Jeffries, dancer granddaughter of Mary Morris, in whose apartment the first murder took place.” There was even a picture of Jake. The police had searched him out and were holding him.

Lennox hadn’t known that. As soon as he could get to a phone he’d have to call Sam Marx and give the little attorney something else to tax his ingenuity.

There was also a column on Tina Kingstone. She was described as a soiled moth who had gotten too near the flame. Lennox grunted at this last. It was laying it on thick. Soiled moth, heck! A dragonfly who had been able to sting her victims fatally.

One thing in the paper annoyed him. It was a cautious interview with Spurck, in which the studio head had indignantly denied that he or anyone else connected with General had authorized or had known that Heyworth's body had been moved. Lennox, he stated publicly, had been an unimportant employee. He no longer was with the studio, and Spurck had no knowledge of where he could be found.

The ax had fallen. And even though Lennox had expected it, knowing that Spurck could do nothing else, the thought rankled. He wondered what the next editions would say when the reporters learned from Spellman that Jean Jeffries had been located and questioned by the police.

Hollywood has no definite rialto. The studios are too scattered, as are the homes of the various workers in the industry, for there to be any one central meeting place. But there is a definite beat made by the regulars with the knowledge that in the places visited they will find sundry of their kind.

Lennox made the rounds. Usually in each place he would have been invited to a dozen tables and asked to join as many parties, but tonight Hollywood seemed strangely blind.

He might have been a rancher from Elca or a farmer from Sabina, Ohio, for all the attention he received. He was neither surprised nor considerably dismayed, for he knew he had committed the one unpardonable sin.

He had brought unfavorable publicity on the industry, also he had ceased to be of importance. He was now merely William Lennox, ex-reporter, ex-publicity man, ex-trouble shooter. No longer did he speak with the mouth of the powerful General Consolidated Studios.

After the fourth drink and the fourteenth snub he said: "To heck with this!" and rode a cab over to La Cinega to eat a piece of beef at Lowry's. It was good beef, nice and red, and the giant potato which accompanied it was done to a turn.

He'd almost finished when a voice said: "Mind if I sit down?"

Lennox looked up, surprised that anyone should want to be seen with him. He saw Ed Strong and nodded. "Draw up a rock, Professor, and squat." Not until the man had worked his way into a seat did Lennox realize how drunk he was.

The piano-player put both elbows on the table and leaned forward, grinning crookedly. “No one calls me Professor any more,” he confided, “not since I walked out on Madam Kelly in Chicago.”

Lennox grinned as he remembered the Kelly place. He’d drunk many a bucket of beer there in his early newspaper days. It had been a nice house—overstuffed furniture, a set of antlers above the mantel—and the beer had always been cold.

“You didn’t always play the piano in a joint, Ed. What did you do before that?”

“Vaudeville,” said Strong. He had a little difficulty with the word. “That’s where I knew Mary.”

Lennox nodded and watched while the man ordered a drink. “You’re about the only guy in town that has me on his list tonight.”

The man waved his cotton-gloved hand expressively. “Me,” he said largely, “I don’t care. You could kill eight guys, see, or even ten, and I wouldn’t care. What’s a little murder in my life.”

Lennox said, “But I didn’t.”

“Sure you didn’t.” The piano-player rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully with a long finger. “Sure you didn’t.” He winked with drunken gravity. “Got a little business.” He seized the edge of the table and managed to drag himself to his feet. “Very important business. No smarty is going to fool Ed Strong. Not for long.”

Lennox said: “You’d better go home and sleep it off. The business can wait.”

“No,” said Strong. “Things are cooking, pal-o, cooking with gas, and there ain’t no one to stop them but me.” He turned, sighted carefully for the door, and started swayingly toward it.

Lennox watched him go, a frown of worry creasing his forehead. Ed Strong was no affair of his. The man could sleep in the gutter for all of him, but he couldn’t get the fact out of his mind that out of all the people he knew in Hollywood, only this piano-player had bothered to speak to him that night.

With a muttered oath of self-annoyance he rose, gathered up his check, and

hurried toward the door. He was just in time to see Strong being boosted into a cab which then pulled out into the heavy cross-town traffic.

Lennox had the feeling that he was starting on a wild goose chase, but in his present condition, Strong could well get into trouble. He motioned to a waiting taxi and told the driver to follow Strong's cab.

They crossed Wilshire and followed it on toward the edge of Culver City, where they turned left into Washington. Lennox frowned, for he had a hunch where the ex-professor was headed.

He knew Madam Honia's joint as a great many other people in the movie capital knew it. The place was tough, a combination restaurant and bar, with gambling on the second floor.

He almost leaned forward and told his driver to turn back, then he shrugged. It was as good a place as any to spend a couple of hours, and if the piano-player got into a jam, he'd be there to help.

CHAPTER VI

Madam Honia's was busy as Lennox entered the big dining room. To the casual observer it looked like any other combination restaurant and night spot. The bar along the right wall was separated from the supper room by a series of arches through which the barflies could watch the show from their high leather stools against the dark counter.

Inside it was warm and noisy from an orchestra that scaled its accomplishments on volume, not performance. Lennox gave his hat to the check girl and said, "Hello, gorgeous," as if he meant it.

He got a dimpled smile in return. "Hello, Mr. Lennox. You look like the devil. Murder doesn't seem to agree with you."

He said, "I should be drunk by now and I'm not," as if that explained it, and moved on into the bar where he had a neat brandy.

Eddie Strong was nowhere in sight. Bill frowned, looking around. He didn't know anyone at the bar, but several people in the supper room had turned their heads and then looked quickly away. He shrugged and moved toward the concealed door which opened on the stair.

Lennox' lips thinned. It was beginning to get him. Just a friendly town, he thought. When the knife falls everyone greases the way down to the gutter.

He paused before the grilled window of the cashier's cage and filled out a blank check for five hundred from a pad on the shelf. The man behind the grille took it in his soft white fingers and pretended to study it intently. Lennox watched him with narrow eyes.

"Don't you read English?"

The cashier said: "Are you sure this is good, Mr. Lennox?"

"Heck, no!" said Lennox. "It isn't good, and you know it. But I've never failed to pick up one yet, have I?"

The man shrugged. "Sorry. My orders are not to cash any more checks."

"You mean mine?"

Again the man shrugged, and he pushed the check out through the little window toward Lennox.

Someone behind Bill snickered, and a voice said, too loudly: "Did you hear that Sol was getting a new office boy?" Several people were standing close enough to laugh.

Lennox apparently did not hear. "Is Kreach around?" he asked.

The cashier did not answer. Lennox picked up the check, folded it carefully, and slipped it into his pocket as he crossed the room, went around a corner of the small metal bar and through the curtained doorway behind it.

He went down a short broad hall toward where a man with too-black hair and startlingly white skin was reading a confession magazine. The man dropped the magazine and came out of the chair with catlike grace.

"You can't go in there!"

The rage which had been smoldering in him for two days flashed to the surface. His hand snaked out, caught the front of the guard's coat, and almost yanked the man from his feet as he was jerked close in.

"I'm going in, lousy."

The man's hand moved toward his pocket, but it never got there, for Lennox' fingers were clamped about the slender bony wrist. "Try that and I'll break you in two." He pushed the man back into the chair with such force that it went over. The man's head struck the hard floor with the sound of a falling coconut.

The guard rose dizzily, one hand to the side of his head. He glared at Lennox in sullen anger. "Why don't you get wise to yourself?" he told Bill. "Your number is up in this town. You're all through."

Lennox did not answer. Instead he stepped past the man and pushed open the office door.

There was a woman standing beside the desk inside, and a man sitting in the swivel chair behind it. They both stared at Lennox as if he were an apparition straight from Mars.

Madam Honia was big and blond and well padded. She looked her part as thoroughly as Mae West ever portrayed a character, but she did not resemble Mae in any way. If anything, she was bigger, but there was no suggestive roll to her movements. She was quick—extremely quick for a woman of her size.

She overshadowed the seated man. He was small. His hair was black, and his black beady eyes were set in finely grained features. His face was split in the middle by a carefully waxed mustache.

The color came up under his sallow skin, and his eyes got dangerous, but he didn't say anything. Then Madam Honia spoke.

“How did you get in here?”

Lennox' grin was wholehearted. The guard had served as a whipping boy to work off his burning rage.

“I walked in.”

“Didn't Toni tell you you aren't welcome here?”

“Toni,” Lennox explained, “has a headache. I don't think he feels very much like conversation at the moment.”

Her eyes locked on his. They were big and blue and almost glassy. He had never been aware of it before, but she looked remarkably like a horse—and not a good-natured horse. “All right. I'll tell you that you aren't wanted. Maybe you'll believe me.”

Lennox ignored her. He walked directly to the desk. “The cashier turned down my check. I got the idea that he was acting on your orders.”

Kreach shifted his weight slightly. “We've had plenty of trouble with your paper and you know it. That bank account of yours is like a sieve—a rubber one.”

Lennox told him softly: “You never howled about my paper before. It's always

been covered.”

Kreach shrugged expressively. “Spurck always coppered your bets before. I hear he isn’t doing it now.”

The corner of Lennox’ mouth lifted in a sardonic grin. “Thanks, Kreach, but I’ll eat a long time after the boys up at Quentin have you on their table list.”

The man at the desk laughed. “You’re going to have us raided? Is that it? Your mind’s getting twisted, Lennox. You’ve got yourself mixed up with someone important. There isn’t a cop in town who would dare touch this joint.”

“Like that?” Lennox sounded interested.

“Like that,” Kreach told him blandly.

“You know,” said Lennox, speaking to no one in particular, “you give me an idea. Sometime it might come in handy.”

2.

As Lennox went back along the hall the chair which Toni had occupied was empty.

The crowd had swelled during his absence. He stopped before the little bar and spun a half-dollar across the surface. The white-coated attendant made a Scotch and soda without being told.

Lennox tasted his drink and then turned and hooked his elbows on the edge of the bar so that he faced the room. No sign of Ed Strong. He wondered whether the piano-player had gone on.

The blonde who had shown him her back when he first arrived swept past with a dark-haired youth in tow. Her eyes met Lennox’ brooding ones, and she said with studied sweetness.

“Why, it’s Mr. Lennox! My dear, I didn’t recognize you.”

“It’s age, sweetheart,” he told her. “Age dulls the eyesight.”

Her cheeks reddened beneath her heavy theatrical make-up and she moved hastily away. Lennox followed her with his eyes and then stiffened as the crowd parted and he saw Ed Strong at one of the tables. He set his glass on the bar and went forward, but as he did so Strong came out of the crowd around the gambling table, his hands filled with silver.

Lennox saw that he was still drunk and caught his shoulder. "Wait a minute, Ed."

Strong turned to blink at him. "Lennox. Every place I go, I meet Lennox. How are you, pal-o?"

"I'm fine," said Lennox, "but you seem to be a little the worse for wear. Why don't you hike home and sleep it off?"

"Got business," said Strong thickly. "Gotta find someone. Very... very important."

Lennox said, "You'll just lose that dough." He had an idea. "Give it to me. I'll get you a check in the morning."

"Sure," said Strong. He was a very amiable drunk. "Sure, pal-o."

"And go home," said Lennox, taking the silver dollars from the man's hands. "Go home and sleep." He hesitated for an instant, then he took Strong's arm, piloted him to the stairs and downward to the street.

Lennox gave the cabman two dollars. "Take him home and pour him in." He watched the cab pull away, then turned and went back up the stairs toward the gambling room. He was being a damn fool. He knew it, but he didn't like being tossed out of the place. A man had to assert his rights. At the top of the steps he paused, realizing that he was a little tight, then he moved forward toward one of the roulette wheels.

The rat-eyed croupier glanced up sharply, then away. Lennox ignored him. He watched the wheel, gauging its rhythm, then bet twenty dollars on the black. Sixteen came up and he lost.

He doubled the bet and a green number showed. Then he switched to the middle group, won, and let it ride. He won again and shoved the whole pile onto black. Four came up, and he collected his winnings, moving with them toward the crap

table.

From the corner of his eye Lennox saw Kreach come through the curtained doorway. He was alone. Madam Honia was no place in sight. Kreach paused to survey the room, his jet-black hair, heavy with oil, gleaming under the lights. Then he came forward on his extremely small feet and stopped at Lennox' side just as the dice were passed to Bill.

"You're through, Lennox."

William Lennox turned slowly, deliberately, to face the man. He sensed that the whole room was suddenly quiet, that everyone had his eyes on the crap layout.

"Meaning?"

Kreach said: "Just that. We don't want your play, and we don't want you."

The dice rattled in Lennox' right hand, with his left he pushed the whole pile of money onto the line. Then he sent the red cubes jumping across the layout to rebound halfway back across the table. They turned up, a six-one.

Lennox' eyes met the croupier's black ones. "Pay off, mister."

The man hesitated, looking at Kreach for instructions. The gambler nodded imperceptibly, and the man counted out stacks of silver dollars which he shoved in front of Lennox.

Bill gathered them up slowly. Their weight made his coat pockets sag. He shoved one back toward the dealer as a tip, then turned.

"O.K., Kreach. I thought you were yellow. Now I know it." His voice carried across the deathly quiet room. He brushed past the gambler and walked toward the doorway which led to the stairs.

But he did not descend the stairs, for as he came through the doorway he saw a figure hurry across the landing and start upward toward the third floor. Lennox swore sharply under his breath. The hurrying man was Ed Strong.

For a moment the studio troubleshooter hesitated, then he turned and followed Strong up the steps to the third floor.

3.

It was with mixed emotions that Lennox climbed those stairs. He knew that Strong was drunk, and he had assumed that the man was already home in bed. He wondered again why he was going to so much trouble. If Strong wanted to keep wandering around, it was certainly none of his business.

The piano-player had reached the third floor, but he did not turn toward the front of the building where a big living room took the place of the old-fashioned parlor of a bygone era. He turned instead and went down a corridor resembling a hotel passage into which doors opened on either side—closed doors.

The man moved to the end, tried a door on the right, and found it locked. With the air of a conspirator he pulled a bunch of plain skeleton keys from his pocket. The third one fitted, and he pushed the door open and stood in the entrance peering into the room.

Lennox came up behind him, his feet making no sound on the heavy hall runner, and looked across Strong's shoulder. It was a long room, more like a cell than a bedchamber. But there was a bed, a plain affair similar to the type found in hospitals. There was also a chair and a dresser.

A girl sat in the chair, staring at them with blank, unmoving eyes. She had black hair and a small, oval, good-looking face. She sat motionless as a statue, and her eyes remained vacant, unchanging. Nothing about her gave evidence that she knew that the door was open, or that they were standing there.

Lennox said: "What the heck?" He said it in surprise, but he did not raise his voice.

Ed Strong jumped as if he had been shot. He swung around and his gasp as he saw Bill held relief as well as surprise. While he was doing this, he didn't seem very drunk. He quickly locked the door. Then he caught Lennox' arm and pushed him along the hall.

And suddenly he was drunk again, reeling. Lennox did not understand the change for an instant, then he did, for Madam Honia had appeared from the front room.

"What are you guys up to?" She sounded hostile.

Strong came out and slapped her affectionately. "Old friend," he mumbled. "Wan' you should meet my old friend. Her name used to be Kelly in Chicago. Used to work for her...."

"Shut up!" she said and glared at Lennox. "I thought you were told to get out of here."

Bill nodded. "I was, but..."

"Then get out."

Strong said: "Now, now. Is that the way to act? He's a good guy, madam. Just because the old knife is out for him doesn't mean he isn't a good guy. He's got troubles, and he's looking for a little fun." The piano-player pushed her aside and waved Lennox through the arched entrance into the parlor.

Two men were there already, talking to half a dozen girls who were lined up primly on a long cushioned seat. A juke box against the far wall played monotonously, and Strong glared at it.

It was obvious to Lennox that Madam Honia was undecided what to do. She wanted to get rid of them, but her long years of training in the business had taught her discretion.

She came over to his side and said in a low, urgent tone: "Look, pal. Kreach told you to get out a couple of hours ago. He thinks you're gone, and he is a very indiscreet character when he gets aroused. Why don't you be the bright boy and bow out before anyone gets rough?"

He said: "I like it here."

She looked at him helplessly, then shrugged. "O. K., you asked for it." She crossed the room and pressed a buzzer twice.

Strong turned around and said reproachfully: "Now what did you do that for?"

"Because," she informed him, "neither of you have sense enough to keep out of trouble."

"We'll go," Strong said resignedly.

“No,” she said, looking more like a horse than ever, and there was something in her eyes Lennox did not like. “No!” she repeated, “I think we’ll keep you around until you sober up. I don’t like you wandering around that hall. You know the rules.”

Suddenly Strong wasn’t drunk any more. He was scared. Lennox knew that. Strong said, “Now Mabel. Please...” And then someone came up behind Lennox and the pressure of a gun was against the small of his back.

“So you’re still here?” It was Toni the guard.

“Take him out,” said the woman. “We don’t want any trouble. Strong is drunk. I’m going to put him to bed.”

The other two men in the room paid no attention; neither did the girls. Lennox, too, was scared, but not so much as the piano-player.

Strong’s knees wobbled noticeably, and he begged: “Honest Mabel, I was just drunk. I’m sorry.”

“You’re still drunk,” she said.

“No. I’m sober now.” And he was. Lennox couldn’t decide whether the other part had been an act or not. If a man gets really frightened it drives the alcohol fumes out of his head.

Bill said: “I won’t go without Strong.”

Toni’s voice was soft. Toni’s mouth was close to his ear when he said: “Don’t make me get tough, honey. Don’t make me bust you.”

Eddie Strong ventured a look at Lennox, and the madam took his pipe-stem arm and steered him to the far side of the room. In a few minutes he came back. “It’s all right, pal-o,” he told Lennox. “It’s all right,” he repeated in a steady voice, but he was still a little frightened. “Nothing will happen to me.”

Lennox wasn’t sure. Strong said: “I’ve known Mabel thirty years. Nothing will happen to me.”

Lennox went downstairs with the distinct feeling that he was deserting the man.

He didn't know what else to do. The only reward a continued protest would earn him would be a beating. There were plenty of bruisers around the place to handle it, and there had been nasty rumors of other beatings under that roof. Madam Honia ruled the place with an iron hand. Or perhaps it was Kreach; Lennox did not know, and he wasn't anxious to find out. But he was sore, burning inside.

He went on down the steps, through the bar, and out onto the street. Not until he started to get into his cab did the weight of his coat make him remember the silver dollars bulging his pockets.

4.

Pete Corrigan had been head of the vice squad for almost four months. He was a small man with the irregular features which mark the true Celt. If any doubt existed as to his blood origin, his flaming red hair and freckled cheeks would have settled that.

He was about fifty, and he had come up through the department the hard way. No office politician, he had waited twenty years to become a lieutenant, but once he had a chance to show what he could do ability and utter fearlessness had brought his captaincy quickly.

Corrigan swung around when Lennox came in and stared at him with unblinking blue eyes. "Hello, sonny boy. You sure as heck managed to get yourself into a sweet spot."

Lennox grunted. "I know it." He sank into a chair, pulled out a loose cigarette. When he did, the silver in his pockets clinked alarmingly.

"What the heck?" Corrigan said.

For answer Lennox dragged the silver out and stacked it on the desk. It made quite a pile. Corrigan grinned. "If the boats were still running I'd say you'd been gambling on the high seas."

"A lot nearer than that," Lennox said, and paused before he added, "At Honia's."

The smile stayed on Corrigan's lips. "Are you trying to kid me? I know the spot is running, of course, but they keep it quiet and orderly. They only pick on movie dough, and most of the suckers who go for their entertainment can afford to lose.

In a town with as much spare cash as Hollywood you gotta have a joint or two for the boys to let off steam in. We watch it because it's easier to keep an eye on a place we know than to close it and have half a dozen other joints spring up in its place."

Lennox knew the man was telling the truth. However, he'd come down there for one purpose.

"That isn't the story I heard."

Corrigan stared at him. "What story did you hear?"

Lennox said: "Kreach threw me out. I told him I'd have him closed, and he laughed. 'You can't,' he said to me. 'We've got protection.'"

"Oh. Protection is it." The word angered Corrigan. It represented everything he had fought against in his thirty years on the force. "So he thinks we're laying off because some pipsqueak politician is protecting his joint." He glared balefully at Lennox, then his expression changed slowly and his eyes got crafty.

"Look, Bill. Come clean. This isn't like you to turn someone in just because they tossed you out on your neck. There's something else behind this. What are you up to?"

Lennox hesitated. For reasons of his own he did not want to mention the doped girl he had seen. He said finally: "Eddie Strong took me in there, and they wouldn't let him leave with me. I don't know why, but I'm worried. I haven't anything definite, but I thought a raid..."

Corrigan was thinking to himself. "So Kreach thinks he has protection. Well, heck!" He reached for the phone. "It's quiet tonight. I think I'll just give him a sample of the kind of protection he actually has. Want to ride out with us?"

Lennox did not want to go out in one of the squad cars. He shook his head. "It's none of my business. I opened my mouth too far as it is. I don't have any inclination to stand around and yell I-told-you-so to Kreach when you bring him out. Go ahead, pull your raid and let him worry."

He took a taxi out to the scene and ensconced himself in a strategic position nearby. It was a good raid, and well executed. Lennox, during his newspaper days,

had witnessed several, but he never seen one more neatly handled.

Lennox viewed the proceedings from the shadow of a building across the street. He saw the gambling dealers led forth, then the girls.

And last came Toni, Madam Honia, and Ed Strong. There was no sign of Kreach. Perhaps he had been warned; perhaps, through luck, he had not been in the building. But Lennox did not care. He was so relieved to see the piano-player alive that he felt like shouting.

CHAPTER VII

Fog, settling into the hollow, seemed to add to the cold dampness of the night and made the stuffy heated air of the bail-bond office a pleasant change.

The radiator; pounded and sputtered by turns as if it had been unused so long that its pipes were badly clogged. The bondsman's runner was short, with a thick neck and thicker glasses. He squinted through the glasses as if it were hard to see even with the help of the lenses. He grinned at Bill and said:

"This ain't a bad racket. Not as good as it used to be before they got all these rules and regulations, but it's better than working in a factory."

Lennox glanced at his watch. It was twenty after two, and he yawned heavily, wishing he had a drink. "How soon will the wagon from Pico be here?"

A squad car whirled up the dark street from the direction of Pasadena Avenue and slid to a stop against the opposite curb. The bondsman rose and peered through the dusty window, then turned and shook his head. "That's not Pico." He went over to the scarred desk in the corner and picked up the phone.

"Hey, Sarge. What the heck happened to Pico?" He listened for a minute, then said, "O.K." He hung up and put his frayed cigar butt in the overflowing ash tray, getting a fresh one from his pocket.

"They got a big load tonight. They'll be half, maybe three-quarters of an hour late. Who is this guy you want me to take out?"

Lennox said. "His name is Strong. He got picked up in a raid. He's probably still drunk."

"They mostly are," said the bondsman indifferently. "If it wasn't for booze, I'd have to close up. I thought from what Sam Marx said on the phone that your pal was in a real jam."

Lennox shrugged. "Let's go outside for a while, the air is crummy in here." He heaved himself out of the hard chair, walked to the door, and pushed it open.

They stood in the darkness, silent, staring across the empty windswept street at the lighted windows of Lincoln Heights Jail.

Three men came out of a bail-bond office farther down the block and walked up the roadway without seeing Lennox and his companion in the darkness.

One of the men in the road was Kreach, and the bondsman said in a low voice, "That's Inky Kreach. Wonder why he's down here?"

The short hairs at the back of Lennox' neck were tingling as he watched the men pass. The bondsmen muttered: "I haven't seen Inky down here for months. Do you suppose that they knocked off some of his girls?"

He got no answer, for a wagon and two squad cars whirled beneath the bridge and came on down the street to stop before the entrance to the jail.

"There's Pico," said the bondsman. "You better point out this guy Strong. He might not be booked under his right name."

Bill stepped down off the stone porch, but he was careful to remain in the shadow. He did not care to meet Inky Kreach at the moment.

The bondsman was not so cautious. This was an old story to him. Each night, three hundred times a year, he stood and watched the various precinct wagons spew out their loads of human refuse into the gaping maw of the big jail. As he came forward, he nodded to one of the uniformed guards.

"Big load, huh?"

"Yeah," the guard said, and yawned. The routine was old to him—as old as history. He looked bored while he watched the girls pile out of the wagon.

Some were laughing, others silent, a few noisily vindictive. None seemed scared, but Lennox was not watching the girls, for he suddenly had seen Ed Strong get out of one of the squad cars. He touched the bondsman's arm and nodded toward the piano-player.

The bondsman nodded. "He looks old enough to know better," was his only comment as he headed for the booking office.

Lennox retreated to the shelter of the steamy room and waited for an interminable length of time. He was just about ready to get another breath of air when he heard the scrape of heavy leather soles on the stone porch and saw the door open.

Ed Strong came in, followed by the bondsman, who was half-carrying a girl. Lennox stared. In the bad light it took a full moment for him to realize that it was the doped girl he had seen earlier at Madam Honia's.

"What the heck?" he said.

Gregory paused and wiped the beads of perspiration from his greasy face with the sleeve of his dark suit. "Mister, I never had a tougher job."

Strong had turned and was helping to put the girl into a chair. He didn't look at Lennox.

Bill said, "What's the idea?"

The bondsman shrugged. "Your pal wouldn't come until I sprung the dame, and I never had a tougher job. Kreach's bondsman raised hell. He claimed I was cutting in on his business, and if you think that I'm not scared of Inky Kreach, you're crazy. He's a tough baby to monkey with. If you hadn't been a friend of Sam Marx..."

Lennox wasn't paying any attention. He was looking toward Strong. "What's the idea, Ed?"

Strong was sober. There was an acrid odor of stale whisky about him, but no sign of drunkenness. "My niece," he said shortly, and turned his attention to the girl.

Lennox started to say something else, changed his mind, and looked at the girl instead. "Get a cab," he told the bondsman, and heard the door close as the man went out. He wondered if the girl would ever snap out of it. She certainly didn't look it.

The door opened finally, and Gregory stuck his head in. "Cab outside." Ed Strong stooped and caught the girl up in his arms. Lennox followed. Time enough to question Strong later.

The cabman was big, with a low forehead and thick, coarse hair. You could tell from the way he watched as they put the girl into the taxi that he didn't like it.

"Drunk," said the bondsman, glancing warningly at Lennox.

Strong heaved an audible sigh of relief as the darkness closed about them. Even Lennox felt better. It was like being enveloped in a protective sheath.

The hacker came around the cab and climbed under the wheel, his weight making the springs sag as he settled into place. "Where to?"

Strong spoke first, he gave the man the number of Lennox' apartment. "You don't mind, Bill. I don't dare to take her to my place. It's the first spot that they'd search."

"O. K," said Lennox. "But you might tell me what this is all about."

The girl was between them, and Strong slipped one arm around her shoulders to steady her as the cab started. "Later, Bill, later, and thanks for springing us."

It was a dark and deserted hole in the center of a thriving city. All they needed now was an air-raid warning and the accompanying blackout. Faintly you could hear the rumble of the late traffic on the Parkway and the low moan of a freight engine in the distant rail yards.

They turned into Pasadena Avenue, and Lennox realized that Ed Strong was staring back through the rear window of the cab.

"What's the matter?" He, too, was looking through the small opening. Behind them was another car, its headlights showing like yellow balls in the gray of the fog.

Even as he looked the lights swung out as if the car were preparing to pass, but it did not. It pulled abreast and swung inward, forcing the cab toward the curb.

The driver swore, jamming on his brakes viciously. The right rear wheel gripped first, throwing them sideways. The cab climbed the curb, and as it did so both the driver and Strong wrenched open their doors. Lennox never knew which of the men struck the ground first. It seemed to be a tie, and they both struck running.

Unconsciously Lennox had thrown one arm around the girl's shoulders and braced himself for the shock as the careening cab headed directly for a light pole. They struck with jarring impact, but after the first shivering shock Lennox was surprised to find that they were still on the seat and that no glass had broken.

In the street, the black car's brakes howled as it slid to a stop some fifty feet beyond the cab. But before it could reverse a red searchlight came out of the fog and a siren wailed in the night.

The black car started with a jerk and went rolling away down the street. The next minute a police prowler shot by in hot pursuit, its siren going full blast as it picked up speed.

Lennox watched the tail lamps bob ahead until they were diffused, then obscured, by the gray curtain. He opened the door of the cab and stepped out, calling Strong's name as he did so.

Nothing happened, and there was no movement in the darkness. Both Strong and the driver seemed to have vanished. He hesitated, then climbed under the wheel and reached for the key.

Not until then did he realize why the crash had not been worse, but he knew now. The switch was turned off. The driver must have cut it instinctively before he jumped, and since the cab was in gear the motor had served as a brake.

Lennox hated to leave Strong, but he felt that with the girl in back it was safer to get out of the neighborhood as quickly as possible. The engine started with a roar. He put the car in reverse and tested it gently, backing cautiously down off the parking into the street. It ran all right, and Lennox sighed in relief, then looked around at the girl.

She was crouched in a corner of the rear seat. He watched her for a moment and shrugged, then put the car in first. With luck he could get out of the neighborhood before the police car returned. He had driven several blocks before he remembered his hat, took it off and dropped it on the floor. Cab drivers sometimes go around without caps, but never in a snap-brim Stetson.

Whatever damage the pole had done to the bumper or fender, it had not affected the mechanical performance of the taxi. Bill turned back toward the Parkway, managed to get up into it, and went through the tunnels as far as Sunset. Here he

turned west, still not decided where he should take the girl. He'd crossed Western Avenue before he thought of Nancy Hobbs and headed for her place.

Nancy Hobbs was sleepy. She wore a robe of white toweling over dark silk pajamas. Her feet were tucked into black mules, and her face still had a flush put there by heavy sleep. She opened the small grilled window in the middle of the thick oak door and peered out.

"What is it?"

"Me," said Lennox.

"Bill!" She fumbled with the night chain, and in another minute she had the door wide. "What is it, Bill? What happened now?"

The girl was still in the same position in the back seat, and he picked her up and carried her in, figuring it was easier than making her walk. Nancy held open the screen. She expressed no surprise at his burden.

"Crusading again?" she inquired.

Lennox did not answer until he had deposited the girl on the couch in the den, then he picked up the phone and called one of the studio doctors.

"Hello, Bob?"

The doctor sounded sleepy and ill-tempered. Lennox said: "This is Bill Lennox. I've got a girl here who's been doped. No, I don't know what was used. Yeah. I wish you would. And quick. What do I do until you get here?" He listened attentively, then hung up.

"Come on, help me, Nancy." He got the girl off the couch with difficulty. Her legs seemed made of rubber, persistently bending at the wrong places.

"How about some hot coffee, kid?" he asked.

"Fine," Nancy said and left Lennox alone with the girl.

He kept her walking back and forth, back and forth. He opened a couple of the windows, and the damp fog-laden air rolled in. It was getting light outside before

the doctor arrived—a gray, cold, unhealthy-looking light which gave no promise of a nice day.

2.

The doctor said: “I think she’ll be all right now.” Almost two hours had passed since he had come, and they had all been very busy.

Nancy said, “I’ll get you some coffee,” and vanished into the kitchen.

The doctor looked at Lennox. “You never were one to tell your business, but if you want my opinion, that girl has been systematically doped for several days.”

The doctor nodded as Nancy Hobbs appeared in the doorway. “Bacon and eggs?”

The doctor said: “Thanks, but I’ll have to rush along.” Lennox went with him to the door. When he got back he found her frying bacon at the electric stove.

She turned from the stove. Her face was flushed a little, her hair soft and careless, caught back with bobby pins. She looked like a little girl in the blue corduroy house coat. “Who is she?”

“I don’t know. I got her out of Madam Honia’s via Lincoln Heights Jail.”

“My God,” said Nancy Hobbs.

“An infant swearing. Has your mouth been washed out with Sweetheart soap recently?”

“What are you going to do with the cab?”

He snapped his fingers. “I’d forgotten. I’ll have to get it away from here by daylight.”

“It’s daylight now,” Nancy was practical. “You’d better run it into the empty half of my garage.”

He took her suggestion, glad to escape for a moment from her questioning. When he came back, the scrambled eggs were ready, arranged neatly between

chopped parsley on the small plates.

He said, "A slug of Scotch would help the day."

"You'll start it with tomato juice," she told him. "If you don't know when your stomach has been sufficiently insulted, your friends will have to tell you. Sit down and eat."

He surprised himself by doing just that. When he had finished the second cup of coffee, he sighed his content. "You're all right, Nancy."

"I'm a fool," she sounded almost vicious. "If you brought a whale to this house, I'd probably flood the cellar with water."

He grinned. "You haven't got a cellar."

"Then I'd dig one." Her brown eyes as they came up to meet his were more stormy than he had ever seen them. "Don't bother explaining about the girl."

He said. "Why, Nance." His grin faded and they looked at each other silently across the table. "Why, kid..."

He wanted to say something to her, but he didn't quite know how. He was conscious in a vague way that the easy companionship which had been theirs for years was missing. He said, surprised to be a little embarrassed, "That girl upstairs... she's... she's Ed Strong's niece. I don't know why she was where I found her. I won't know until I locate Ed I... I had meant to leave her here."

"Of course," said Nancy, and again she had turned on the bright flippant manner which was what she called her Hollywood face. "The doctor will send a nurse, the nurse and I will watch over her. Now, you go home and get some sleep. Remember you don't belong to yourself. You're out on bail, and it isn't fair to the County of Los Angeles to dissipate the health of its most valuable prisoner. Do you want them to have to carry you to the gas chamber in a wheelchair?"

He knew that he was supposed to laugh, but his lips felt a little stiff for laughter as he rose to go. "Thanks, pal."

3.

Floyd Spellman was trying to be humorous and, instead, being heavy-handed. When Lennox opened his apartment door, Spellman and Stobert were standing in the hall, and Spellman said: "I've been promoted. I haven't my new badge yet, but I'm looking for a stolen cab."

Lennox didn't say anything. It was a full hour since he'd left Nancy Hobbs's house. He'd had a shave, a shower, and three drinks. He felt almost as if he'd had some sleep.

"So you're looking for a stolen cab? Maybe I have it under the bed."

Spellman grunted. "Stow it. Now listen, Bill. I wouldn't be hunting a stolen cab if I didn't think there was something screwy about the deal. I wouldn't even know anything about it, but one of the lads over in the department is smart.

"This hacker came in with a complaint. He said that he'd picked you up in front of Lincoln Heights about three-thirty, that you had a girl with you, and that there was something the matter with her. He recognized you from your picture in the evening paper."

Spellman waited a full minute for Lennox to say something, and when he didn't the police captain continued: "The cab driver remembered the bondsman who helped you put the girl into the cab, so we went over and checked him. We found that you'd gone bail for one of Inky Kreach's girls, then I checked with the vice squad and found that you'd been responsible for the raid on Madam Honia's place. What are you up to?"

Lennox stifled another yawn. "Nothing."

Stobert came out of the bedroom. "The bunk hasn't been touched, skipper. The guy hasn't been in bed."

Lennox laughed. "You didn't need to look at the bed to guess that. You should have been able to tell it by the circles under my eyes. They feel like someone burned them into my cheeks with a red-hot poker. No, Stobert, I haven't been in bed. Have they got a law in this town now that says a man has to sleep in a bed? I usually hang from the chandelier."

Spellman said: "We still want that girl. Keep on being funny and we'll drag you in for stealing that cab."

Lennox laughed more heartily. “What a come-down—from murderer to hot-car specialist. If I were going in for auto theft, I certainly wouldn’t pick on taxis. I don’t like them that well.”

Spellman glanced at Stobert as if expecting help. Receiving none, he climbed slowly to his feet and moved heavily to the door. It had hardly closed behind his retreating bulk when the phone rang.

Lennox heard Jean Jeffries say: “Bill, I’m glad I caught you. I’ve been so worried. I called you several times last evening, but there was no answer.”

He said: “I was getting drunk and being thrown out of places.”

“Oh, is that all,” she said, and sounded relieved. “I was afraid you’d been arrested again.”

“No such luck.”

“Luck?”

“For my enemies,” he explained. “I have them under every stone.”

“Are you still drunk?”

“A little,” he admitted. “I must have been pretty tight last night. A joint got knocked over and I was tender-hearted. I thought it would be fun to bail out one of the girls, only I drew a lemon. There was something the matter with her. Maybe she was nuts.”

“Nuts? What did she say?”

Lennox chuckled as if he were enjoying the joke on himself. “That’s the point. She didn’t say a word. The cab we were riding got tangled up with a hit-and-run driver and pushed itself against a light pole. The cabman lit running, so I drove the hack myself with the dame in the back seat. At least I thought she was. When I got where I was going she wasn’t.”

“You mean she got out?” Jean Jeffries asked a little incredulously.

Lennox said: “Your guess is as good as mine. What about some lunch?”

“Then you aren’t sore?”

“Sore?” he said, and sounded surprised. “Why?”

Jean said: “After the way Mr. Austin talked about you last night when he was trying to clear me. He put you right in the soup.”

“Don’t let that worry you,” Lennox told her. “Forget it. How about dinner?”

She said, “Yes, at seven,” and rang off. With a sigh Lennox called casting and got Ed Strong’s address. Then he left the apartment and was driven across town in a cab.

Strong wasn’t home, but the large lady who ran the boarding place let Lennox see the room in exchange for a dollar.

“He often stays out all night,” she volunteered, “and such an old man, too.”

The room wasn’t locked, and Lennox pushed open the door and stepped in. There wasn’t much to see—a thin-mattressed bed, a worn dresser, two chairs, and a trunk. The trunk was unlocked and he pried ruthlessly into the contents. His search netted a collection of well-worn clothes and a bunch of pictures.

He carried the pictures over to the window for better light and stood frowning down at them. They were all old, probably going back forty years. They showed a younger Strong in various poses, at a piano, in front of a vaudeville theater, dressed in top hat and tails about to throw a knife at a pretty girl standing before a backboard.

Lennox examined the picture, trying to find something familiar in the girl’s features, then he thrust it into his pocket and carried the rest of the collection back to the trunk.

In the lower hall, he called the landlady and left a message for Strong to get in touch with him as soon as the professor came in. He’d expected to hear from Strong long before this. The man’s continued absence bothered him. Who was the doped girl and what in the devil was he supposed to do with her?

He thought about it all the time that his cab took to reach Hollywood Boulevard. From a drugstore he called Nancy Hobbs. “How’s my little guest?”

“She’s gone, Bill. The nurse came down about an hour ago, and when she went back upstairs the girl had vanished.”

Lennox swore under his breath. “And that’s not all.” Nancy was still excited. “There’s a man watching the house from across the street. I didn’t notice him until just before I answered the phone.”

He said: “Take it easy. Don’t worry.” He said it with more confidence than he felt. “I’ll have Jake come over and stay.” He hung up and called the studio, only to learn that Jake didn’t work there any more. That made Lennox mad. It was all right to fire him, but to can Jake for moving a body was carrying the joke into the realm of the ridiculous.

He finally reached Jake at home and told him to go over to Nancy’s and see that nothing happened to her. Then he made the rounds of a dozen agencies, going through their files of old photographs. He also sent off a dozen wires, telling them to reply to the Boulevard telegraph office.

That done, he had lunch at the Derby with an old-time booking agent who used to work out of Chicago. “Remember Ed Strong?” he asked. “Used to play the piano and do a knife routine?” The man nodded and Lennox went on. “Who was his partner?”

The ex-booker shook his head. “You got me, Bill. That was a long time ago. The only reason I remember is because Strong was good with the knives. But the trouble was that he’d rather play the piano.”

Lennox thanked him and paid for the lunch. He seemed to be in a dead-end street. He couldn’t find Ed Strong to question him. The doped girl was gone, and no one else knew the answers. Yes! He snapped his fingers. There was one other person who might know. He wondered as he got a cab why he had not thought of her before. Mary Morris had known Ed Strong for a lot of years, more probably than either cared to remember.

CHAPTER VIII

Lennox got out of his cab and turned around to stare at the cars parked in the circular driveway. Spurck's limousine was there, but there were also the doctor's car and an ambulance.

He frowned and hurried up the steps. Was Mary worse? What had happened? He punched the bell after trying the door and finding it locked.

It seemed a long time before the maid answered, and when she opened the door he saw that she was crying. He caught her shoulders and almost shook her. "What's happened?"

"It's Mary," she choked. "Dead."

Lennox pushed her gently aside and stepped into the house, hurrying down the hall. Sol Spurck turned around as he entered the long sunken living room, and for a moment neither spoke.

Spurck jerked his thumb toward the bedroom. "In there."

Bill went in. The doctor stood at the far side of the room talking to the white-capped nurse. The woman's face was red and angry looking. The doctor turned as Lennox came in and asked:

"What was it? Her heart?"

The doctor shook his head. "I wish it had been. I'm not sure, but I think..." He stopped for a moment as if to choose his words. "We've already called the coroner and the police," he added significantly.

Lennox said sharply: "Can't you tell me what happened?"

The doctor cleared his throat. He was one of those fussy men who hate to put anything directly into words. "I mean," he said slowly, "that I can't sign the death certificate. I think she died from an overdose of sleeping powder. An autopsy will be necessary to be certain."

Behind Lennox, Spurck groaned, "Another murder!"

Spellman and two officers in the uniform of the Beverly police shoved their way into the room. Lennox looked at the big homicide man.

“What are you doing here? This isn’t your territory.”

Spellman said: “The news of her death came in on our teletype, and. I just came on out I think this must have something to do with those other murders.”

Lennox didn’t feel like talking about it; he felt terrible. The maid was in the hallway crying openly. Bill went over and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Take it easy, Rita. Tears don’t help.”

She tried ineffectively to wipe her eyes with one corner of her white apron. “Mary knew she was going to die, Bill.”

“Nonsense!” he said sharply. “Your imagination is running away with you.”

The woman shook her head stubbornly. “That’s why she wrote you that letter.”

Lennox stiffened. “What letter?”

Rita went into the big kitchen and returned with a white envelope which she handed to him. Bill took it and turned it over slowly. “When did she write it?”

“This morning. She made me promise that if anything happened to her I would get it to you.”

The envelope was not sealed. Lennox pulled out the folded sheet Suddenly he said: “So you read it?”

He could see the words of denial form on her lips, but she did not utter them. Instead she said: “Yes, I read it.”

He unfolded the note. The writing was a weak scrawl, not the precise script that he remembered. It read:

Dear Bill,

I have a hunch I’m washed up. I’ve always played my hunches, so I’m playing this one. If anything happens to me, I want you to look out for Jean.

She's wild—maybe it's my fault; maybe it's just the blood she has. I suppose there's no use looking for the reason. I did the best I could for her, and I apparently didn't do a very good job. Maybe you can do a better one.

Mary

Lennox folded it and slipped it into his pocket quickly as Spellman came out of the bedroom followed by the two Beverly officers.

"The Doc is right, I guess," the big man said shortly. "We can't figure whether the nurse made a mistake or whether..." His voice trailed off suggestively.

"Whether what?"

Spellman fidgeted Uncomfortably. "Well... She was pretty old and kind of tired and..."

"Not Mary," Lennox cut in. "Mary was a fighter. She'd never quit, Floyd. She wasn't the quitting kind. Remember that theater fire in St: Louis when she held the audience in their seats while the firemen got the blocked exits cleared?"

"This is different," the homicide man grumbled. "Sometimes a person will bump themselves off when they have all the courage in the world. It takes courage to do a thing like that. Heck, I couldn't!"

"And neither could Mary. She was an extrovert, too," Lennox told him. "If she died from an overdose of sleeping medicine, it was either an accident, or..."

"You mean maybe the nurse killed her?"

"Why should the nurse want to kill her?"

Spellman said: "That was exactly what I was going to ask you. We've checked up on her record. The doctor swears she's O.K., and as far as we've been able to find out so far she never had any contact with Mary Morris or anyone close to her before being called on this case."

"O.K.," said Lennox and turned around just as Jean Jeffries appeared in the front doorway.

She saw Lennox before anyone else. "My grandmother... How is she, Bill?"

He asked, almost brusquely: "What are you doing here?"

She was uncertain. "I... Why, someone called me and told me to come out here at once."

"I called," said Spellman.

Lennox walked over to the girl's side and put one arm around her shoulder. "It's all right, honey. Take it easy."

She stiffened in the circle of his arm. "Take what easy? What's the matter?"

"Mary's dead," he said, and his voice sounded foreign even to his own ears.

"Dead!" It was as if she did not understand, as if she could not comprehend the meaning of his words. "Not Mary..." She looked from one to the other as if hoping someone would tell her she had heard wrong.

"How did she die?" The words were little more than a whisper.

"We're not sure," he told her, "but the doctor wants to investigate further."

"You mean an autopsy? I won't have it." Suddenly she was crying, her little nose dug deep into the rough tweed of his shoulder. "I won't have her... at the morgue."

"Easy, honey, easy," he said, and looked around for help. Only the maid Rita answered the appeal.

She took the girl into her arms. They clung together—two women with a common grief.

Lennox watched them, then looked at Spellman. Bill's lips formed the words: "Make the questioning easy."

Spellman was not entirely without heart. He nodded to show that he understood, then he, Rita and Jean disappeared into the kitchen, accompanied by one of the Beverly officers.

They had no more than vanished when there were steps on the porch and Bernard Austin appeared in the doorway. The attorney was out of breath as if he had been running.

He said to no one in particular: "I wasn't in my office when the call came. They had to track me all over town. What happened?"

Lennox gave him the details; there didn't seem to be anyone else to take charge. Spurck was useless; the production chief had settled down into one of the high-backed hall chairs and buried his face in his hands.

The lawyer listened intently, his eyes shielded by drooping lids until they were little more than slits. "I can't believe Mary would kill herself."

Lennox said: "I can't either, but unless we suspect the nurse, it's either that or an accident. Or," he added as an afterthought, "Rita."

Austin looked horrified. "Surely you're not serious? Why, Rita has been with Mary Morris for forty years. They were almost as one person. I tell you it is impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible," Lennox said coldly, "when you're dealing with murder. How do we know what the maid thinks about? How do we know whether or not her whole life isn't warped by jealousy of her mistress. And there's another angle—the one of profit. Do you happen to know whether she is mentioned in Mary's will, and if so to what extent?"

Austin coughed. "I know," he said discreetly, "since I drew the will, but I'm not certain it would be exactly ethical..."

"Ethics be darned!" Lennox was losing all patience.

Bernard Austin stopped him before he could reach the door. "Just a moment, Mr. Lennox. I'm older than you are—a lot older—and I've lived through other trying circumstances. I've found that it never pays to go at things hurriedly but, since you and I will have to work together, it might be wise if we settle any personal feeling now." Lennox stopped. "Work together?"

The lawyer nodded, and from his expression Lennox judged that he was not happy. "Yes. Work together," he said. "Mary Morris changed her will yesterday.

She named you as one of the executors.”

For some reason it struck Lennox as funny. He had an insane desire to laugh. Funerals always had affected him the same way. It was as near nervous hysteria as he ever came.

“So I’m an executor? Did she leave very much?”

Austin looked more reproving. “About four million.”

“Four million!” And he was an executor. The thought sobered Lennox, but he, was so tired that it was hard to control his nerves. Four million... And Mary’s granddaughter would get the greater part of it—maybe.

2.

Jean Jeffries said: “I’m going over to my apartment. I can’t bear to stay here. Rita will stay and look after things for the time being. Will you take me home?”

Lennox nodded. He saw Austin coming down the hall. The lawyer asked: “Are you all right, Jean? Is there anything I can do?”

Her voice caught. “If you could keep them from taking her body to the morgue...”

He shook his head regretfully. “I’m sorry, but there were two quite large insurance policies. They have a perfect legal right to perform an autopsy.”

She nodded. “I’m silly, but the thought of the morgue horrifies me. Mr. Lennox is going to take me home. If there is anything I should know, or if you have to reach me, I’ll be there.” They went down the steps and out to a cab.

As they got in she told him: “It’s strange. When did we meet? Day before yesterday. And yet I feel as though I’ve known you for ages.”

He didn’t answer. He wished she would stop talking, but she did not stop. She said: “Austin tells me that my grandmother changed her will yesterday and that you are one of the executors. I suppose we will see quite a lot of each other if only for business reasons.”

“If I’m not in prison,” he said.

She caught her breath. “How stupid of me. I’d forgotten you are still out on bail.” She reached over and grasped one of his hands in her gloved one. “Bill, there will be quite a lot of money coming to me from my grandmother’s estate. I want you to know that all or any part of it is yours. That we will get the best lawyer in America, and...”

Lennox’ old humor flashed to the surface. “I’ve got the best lawyer in America. He admits it himself.”

They went into the empty lobby. The place appeared deserted, but as they stepped from the elevator at her floor the owner-manager, Boren, came along the hall.

“I’m terribly sorry to hear about your grandmother’s death, Miss Jeffries. The news came in over the radio half an hour ago.”

“Rather a habit of yours—listening to the radio, isn’t it?” Lennox asked.

Boren smiled, showing his too white teeth. “I keep it on most of the time,” he admitted. “I especially like to listen to the police calls. I find them very interesting indeed.”

After they had the apartment door closed, Lennox said:

“He seems to be a friendly soul.”

The girl nodded. “He is. He’s really quite nice. He’s done innumerable little things for me since I moved here. I’m surprised you don’t like him.”

Lennox shrugged. “I neither like nor dislike him. He’s just something I keep finding underfoot and stumbling over. How about dinner? I promised you that, I think.”

She said: “Would you mind terribly if I broke the date? After what happened, I think I’d like to be alone for a little while.”

She raised her face as if expecting him to kiss her, but apparently he did not see, for he was already turning toward the door. In the hall he paused for an instant.

Sounds reached him. It might have been sobs. He could not be sure.

As he stepped out of the building he saw that the sun was just settling beyond the shoulder of the hills. The fog was gone, the air warm, and a couple of faint stars showed themselves in the arch of the evening sky.

The street was fairly full, people walking aimlessly, people hurrying. He had never realized there were so many pedestrians on Franklin. He stood on the corner, trying to catalogue them in his memory. He paid no attention to the women, or to the men accompanied by women. There were perhaps half a dozen men alone.

He started on, crossing to the south side of the street at the Beech-wood light. Another block and he rounded the curve and walked down Argyle toward Yucca, pausing at the big market which faced the intersection and going to the phone.

He took the receiver from the hook and stood sideways in the booth so that he could peer out through the glass panel of the door.

A man in a double-breasted suit had stopped before the market and was reading the headlines on the racked papers. There was nothing suspicious about him, except that he had followed Lennox all the way down Franklin and that he continued to wait.

Bill dialed Nancy's number and when he got the connection said, "That girl didn't come back yet?"

Nancy sounded disgusted. "Of course not. And Jake won't let me go out of the house. He's here with a ball bat, looking like an Asbury version of a Five. Points bruiser. He's kept the nurse here, too, and she's about to have hysterics."

"Is Jake still there?"

"Of coarse he's here." She sounded even angrier. "He almost killed a Fuller Brush man an hour or so ago. Me, I think that he's nuts. I wish that you'd come and take him away, and the next time you need a hiding place for your women count me out."

Lennox did not laugh. "Let me talk to Jake," he said, and waited.

The ex-cabman answered. “No one’s gotten in here since I come, Chief. If I’d have been here sooner, that dame would never have vanished. Me, I can’t figure how they got her out.”

Lennox said, “Maybe she just evaporated.”

“That’s it!” said Jake, not having the remotest idea what the word meant. “She just evaporated.”

“O.K. Now listen, Jake. I’m at the corner of Yucca and Argyle—or I will be. There’s a guy in a blue suit trailing me. Get in your car and come on over here. We’re going to ask this bird some questions.”

“Whee!” Jake said joyfully. “I’ll be right over, Chief.”

He crossed to the traffic island and then to the far sidewalk, turning back toward Franklin. He covered almost half a block when he apparently changed his mind and right about-faced. The man in blue had just crossed Yucca. Lennox started toward him.

Caught by this maneuver the man hesitated. He dared not turn toward Vine, for Lennox might cross the wide street toward the market. He compromised by bending over and pretending to tie his shoe. Lennox passed so close that his trouser leg brushed the man’s coat sleeve.

He saw Jake come up Yucca in the car, cross Vine, and make a U-turn around the island, pulling up at Lennox’ side as the man in blue straightened. Lennox jerked his head slightly and walked for several feet down the street, then he swung about just as Jake left the car. The man was trapped between them and he sensed that something was the matter. He stopped.

Both Jake and Lennox kept going. Another few steps and they would meet at the man’s side. Their quarry turned, evidently fearing Lennox. He did not glance at Jake, but as he tried to pass, Jake stuck out his foot and the man sprawled headlong over it. As he fell a .38 Special jumped from his shoulder clip and skidded along the sidewalk. Before he could move, Lennox had one hand, Jake the other, and they were hoisting him to his feet.

“You’re hurt,” said Lennox. “Here, get him to a hospital.”

The man tried to protest that he was all right, but they gave him no chance. Before he realized what was happening he was in the car. Jake hurried around the car and slid under the wheel. Lennox scooped the gun up from the sidewalk and in the same movement pressed his bulk in beside the man.

The man was suddenly very scared. He had a long narrow face with high cheekbones and black deep-set eyes. He might have been an Indian from his appearance, but he wasn't as stolid as an Indian is supposed to be.

"Lemme out! You've got it wrong, mister. I wasn't following you. Why should I follow you? I never saw you before in my life."

"You're lying," Lennox said coldly. "You followed me all the way down Franklin. You stopped in front of that market and waited while I made a long phone call. You shouldn't have done that. You should have guessed by the way I acted that the game was up. Why were you trailing me?"

The man's face turned a yellow color which changed to a dirty green. Lennox feared that the man was going to be sick, but he gulped only twice and seemed to be trying to swallow his tongue. Then the light blinked to green and the car moved across the intersection away from the policeman. They all felt better.

Jake sounded breathless when he said: "I thought we were going to be combing the law out of our hair."

Lennox' tone was icy. "Our friend here won't believe we are serious."

"Wait until we get to the house," Jake promised. "I left my bat there. I'm a heller with a bat. You never saw me bust a head, did you?"

Their passenger shivered. "If this is a joke..."

"We never joke," said Lennox. "We were brought up to consider jokes a vile form of humor. I hope the bat is strong, Jake. I'd hate to think there was a chance of it breaking and forcing me to finish the job with a gun."

"Look," said the man with simulated bravado, "fun's fun, but I've had enough. My name is Forrister and I work for the Nick Bowers Agency."

"Where's your bicycle?" Jake inquired. "All the Bowers operatives I ever seen

rode bicycles and wore nice tan uniforms.”

The passenger was sweating. “That’s our home-protection patrol. We have several departments. On the level, I’m with Bowers. You can find my badge, card, and stuff in my pocket.”

Lennox looked at the man’s face. The green had faded out, leaving it a dead white. There was no color anywhere. “If you’re with Bowers,” he said, “why the devil were you trailing me?”

The man was eager to talk now. “I was hired to, that’s all, brother. I was just working for my bread and butter. I’ve got three kids and a sick wife.”

“Skip it,” Lennox told him wearily. “You were paid to follow me. Who paid you?”

“We’re not...”

“You’re not supposed to get caught, either. Come on. Unless you want a cracked head keep on talking, and you’d better make it good because I’ve always been hard to convince.”

“All right,” said the man. “An actress—an old dame. Her name was Mary Morris.”

Lennox almost pulled the trigger of the gun in his surprise. “Mary Morris hired you to follow me?”

“Well... Not exactly you.”

Bill lost his temper. “Gosh darn it! What is this—a quiz program? She either wanted me tailed or she didn’t, isn’t that right?”

“It was her granddaughter I was to keep tabs on,” the man sputtered quickly. “Me and my partner was to camp but at the apartment house where the girl lived and keep track of anyone that she went out with or anyone that came to see her. If we didn’t know them by sight, we was to follow them until we found out who they were.”

“And you don’t know who I am?” Lennox said suspiciously.

Some of the man's self-confidence had returned as the prospect of being worked over by Jake's bat diminished. "No," he said indifferently. "Why should I?"

They had just crossed La Brea west on Sunset. Jake pulled to the curb beyond the sandwich stand and Lennox got out. The man's pockets yielded a badge, a card, some other identifying papers, and a typed order which was substantially what he had just finished telling Lennox.

Lennox returned them. "All right. Scram." He broke the gun, dumped the bullets on the ground and passed the empty weapon to its owner. "You ought to tie it on better."

Lennox got back into the coupe. "Nancy's," he told Jake. "Well, that proves one thing I knew already."

"What?" said Jake.

"That Mary Morris didn't kill herself. If she'd been planning to, she certainly wouldn't have hired those detectives this morning."

"Cripes!" said Jake, and his eyes were like marbles. "Cripes! Is Mary Morris dead? I wonder whose number is coming up next?"

3.

Nancy Hobbs had the door open before Lennox reached the top step. He'd never seen her so excited. She was like a kid who hears the engine on the next street, yet knows she has missed the fire.

"I can't understand it," she said. "One minute the doped girl was there; the next minute she was gone. It doesn't make sense. The nurse was in the room with her. She came out into the kitchen, and when she got back the bed was empty."

"Where is the nurse?" Lennox asked.

"Upstairs packing her things." Even as she spoke they heard the woman's heels in the upper hall, and she came down the steps carrying a small suitcase.

Lennox walked over to meet her. The nurse paused on the lower step so that her eyes were almost level with his. "I'm glad to be out of here," she said. "I don't

like any of this. If I were the doctor, I'd report it to the police."

He tried to smile. "There's nothing to get worked up about."

She sniffed. "That's a matter of opinion. From what I've read in the newspapers, I wouldn't want to trust your judgment too far." She started past him, but he blocked her passage.

"Just a moment, please. What shape was that girl in? I mean, do you think it would have been possible for her to have walked out of here by herself?"

The nurse looked at him, and for an instant it seemed that she wasn't going to answer. Then she said: "I don't know, Mr. Lennox, and that's God's own truth. It's hard to tell about people who are under the influence of dope.

"It is very possible that she had recovered more than we realized and that she could have left here alone, but I'd hate to swear to it," He nodded and backed out of the way. "Thank you. I know you feel as if you've been in a den of murderers and thieves. I can only tell you that you're mistaken. If you want to do me a great favor, you'll not talk about what happened here." He drew some money from his pocket and overpaid her.

After she had gone Nancy said: "That was a mistake."

"What was?" he asked abstractedly.

"Paying her too much. Now she will be certain that you've got something to hide and are bribing her to keep silent."

"You think of everything," he told her sourly, then paused for a long moment before he added, "Did I tell you that Mary Morris is dead?"

"No," she gasped. "When... how did it happen? Tell me about it, Bill."

He explained briefly. "They're going to have an autopsy to ascertain the cause of death. They're trying to suggest that she killed herself."

Nancy shook her head slowly. "Not Mary. Mary would never kill herself. She'd have gone down fighting."

“Maybe,” he said tentatively, “she thought her granddaughter was involved in Heyworth’s death.”

“She still would have stuck around to help.” Nancy sounded positive. “Remember how she fired that manager of hers? Practically threw him out of the theatre single-handed.”

Lennox got a peculiar expression on his face. “That’s right, she did. I’d forgotten about that.” He was silent, thinking.

Jake had been an interested listener. “Here’s an idea,” he said in his guttural voice. “The old lady is a firebrand, see! She hears that her granddaughter is buzzing around with the wrong characters, so she hikes up her skirts and goes over to the gal’s apartment. When she gets there this Heyworth louse is working on Kingstone. The old lady is so mad she can’t see straight and thinks that Kingstone dame is her granddaughter.

“She’s got a knife, and blooey!—Heyworth is deader than a herring. Then Kingstone tries to tag her for some dough. So the next night the old gal gets up from bed, hikes over, and takes care of the Kingstone doll. See? She’s killed them both. There ain’t nothing left to live for, so she drinks a double shot of this sleeping medicine and that’s all.”

“You’ve been going to pictures,” Lennox accused.

“He’s not so bad,” Nancy defended him. “I don’t believe it, but it’s entirely possible. And Mary might very well have done just that if she thought that Jean was in serious trouble. You amaze me, Jake. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“See,” said Lennox. “I knew he’d been following the delirium tremens of some scenarist’s mind.”

“Well,” Nancy said practically, “have you got any better suggestion? Someone did kill Heyworth, someone shot Kingstone, and Mary is dead.”

He nodded. “All true,” he admitted. “Which reminds me, that wrecked cab is still in your garage. I’d better move it.”

She said: “Why don’t you leave it there? You’re in trouble enough.”

He shook his head. “Jake, I’ll drive it down below Sunset and park. You trail me in your car.”

The girl said: “Be sure to wipe all your fingerprints off everything you may have touched.”

He gave her a twisted smile. “You’ll be an expert criminal if you keep tagging along after me, chicken.”

He didn’t answer, but went out, got the cab, and drove away. He had a bad moment crossing Sunset, for a prowl car was coming east. The two cops in it apparently were too busy arguing to pay any attention to him. He parked the cab without incident in a vacant lot below the railroad right-of-way, using his handkerchief to obliterate fingerprints. A minute later he was pulling away in Jake’s coupe.

“Where now?” Jake asked hopefully.

Lennox told him to drive to the telegraph office on the Boulevard. There was a whole sheaf of yellow messages waiting at the office, and he went through them as the coupe pulled out Cahuenga and onto the pass. Fifteen minutes later they turned into the curving driveway of the house where Leon Heyworth had lived.

Lennox wasn’t sure that there would be anyone there, but the lights were on and the houseboy answered his ring. Bill knew the boy. He nodded and stepped into the entry hall.

“I wasn’t sure I’d find anyone.”

The boy said: “Mr. Heyworth’s lawyer, he say me stay till they find out to do. Me still here.”

Lennox nodded. “All right, Juan. I know the police have asked you a lot of questions, but I’m going to ask some more. Did you hear Mr. Heyworth mention Mary Morris at any time in the week preceding his death?”

The boy’s dark face split to show white teeth as he remembered. “Yes, sir. He was sitting there at that desk”—he indicated a piece of gray modernistic furniture in the corner—“the night before he killed. He was writing and I bring drink. I hear him say: ‘Morris is good gal.’ Yes, please. ‘I think maybe I should

tell her.' Yes, sir."

"Did he say what he should tell her?"

Juan's black eyes did not change. "Boss think awhile. 'There's money in it,' he say. 'Maybe instead of telling, I should cut in.' Then he write a note and I take it to Miss Kingstone."

Lennox walked over to the desk. "This the place where he was sitting, huh?"

"Yes," the boy agreed.

Lennox went through the drawers and found nothing save a used blotter. He held this up to the mirror and made out in the maze of ink stains several words that interested him.

"You have... idea Tina. Think I will cut in. Where is the girl?"

Leon."

He folded the blotter and stuffed it into his pocket. "All right, Juan." He gave the boy five dollars. "Forget we were here." He turned and went back to the car. As they headed down the drive, a man suddenly stepped out into their lights, holding up his hand.

Jake needed no orders. He bent over the wheel and tramped hard on the gas. The coupe leaped toward the man, who jumped wildly for safety. The next minute a gun hammered in the night and a bullet clipped through the coupe side and went into the top between them, just missing the upper edge of the windshield.

"Jeese," said Jake, "shall we stop and take them?"

"Heck, no," Lennox said, peering back through the hole where the rear window had been. "Drive like the devil."

"It's Mary," said Lennox. "That's the way she broke into show business, as a human target. She's come a long way since then, a lot further than Strong. Life does funny things." He stuffed the picture back into his pocket and returned the glass to Marx.

“In the morning we’ll get hold of the probate judge and check up on Austin. I’ll call you when I’m ready. So long.”

Marx walked with him toward the door. “So long. You’ll call me if you’re alive.” He didn’t sound hopeful.

Lennox found Jake shivering under the wheel. Due to the broken rear window it was very cold in the coupe.

“Stop beefing,” said Lennox. “From now on I’ll take you inside with me. Let’s run over to my place first.”

Jake obediently turned the car toward Lennox’ apartment hotel. But Bill broke his promise. He didn’t take Jake inside. He said, “I’ll only be a minute,” hurried in across the lobby, and rode the elevator up to his floor.

He fumbled in his pockets until he found the keys, and unlocked the door. Not until he had it wide did he notice that the light was burning inside. He started to back out, but it was too late. There was a man partly screened by the door—a man holding a gun.

“Come in, Lennox,” the man invited. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

Lennox went in. The man shut the door and walked Lennox into the front room. There was a handkerchief tied over the lower part of the man’s face, and his voice coming through it had a curiously muffled sound.

The room was a mess. Pillows were ripped apart, the rug rolled back, even the seat torn out of his occasional chair. Anger burned up in Lennox as he viewed the wreckage.

A second man came out of the bedroom. His face wasn’t hidden, and as far as Lennox could remember he hadn’t seen him before. The man said: “Where’s that girl, and that paper you took out of Kingstone’s apartment?”

William Lennox watched him bleakly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The man hit him directly in the face. “If you think we’re kidding, think again. You’ve got that girl hidden somewhere. Stop stalling. The passport isn’t so important.”

Lennox didn't answer. He wiped his bruised lips with the back of his hand. There were two streaks of blood across his brown skin, and he stared at them groggily.

The man in the mask said: "Don't make us get too rough. We hate to hurt people, but this time we won't miss you, pal."

"So you put the hole in Jake's coupe?"

"You're lucky it wasn't in your head. Where's that girl?"

William Lennox tried to say, "Now wait..." He was scared. There was no use pretending that he wasn't. But they gave him no chance to speak. They walked him down the long hall toward the rear stairs. He walked all right, but his insides had a funny feeling as if they had turned to jelly.

2.

He went down the stairs slowly, taking all the time he could. If he could only get a break, but he didn't really expect one. These gentlemen were very nasty. They hadn't wasted much time on threats, but he felt they meant exactly what they said.

He reached the next floor and walked around the post to continue his descent. Something happened behind him. For a full instant he did not know what.

He was knocked aside, and his captors dove down the stairs. Before Lennox could more than gasp they were gone, the metal fire door clanging after them. He spun around and found himself staring at Jake's grinning features.

The short man was holding a gun in one hand and sucking the knuckles of the other. "Boy! Look at them go."

Lennox laughed in sudden relief. Automatically he started for the stairs, then stopped. Pursuit was useless. He turned around and looked at Jake.

"Where'd you come from?"

Jake was belligerent. "Where do you think? You leave me in the car without an overcoat. What are you training me for? An Alaskan fifth-columnist?"

Lennox said: "Everything works out for the best."

Jake sneezed. "That's what you think. If this keeps up, they'll have me in the hospital with pneumonia and feeding me that sculpha—sulpha—sulphuric acid."

"You don't need any," Lennox told him. "Thanks for clubbing those birds. It's lucky you chose the back stairs."

"I didn't," said Jake. "It was that high-hat desk clerk. He wouldn't let me in the front door. I'm going back and bop that guy. Remind me when I get the time."

Lennox said: "Fine. How are you at picking locks? You used to be O.K. at it."

"I don't know," the little man said uncertainly. "I haven't had much practice lately. Maybe we'd better hunt up the guy and make him open the lock for us. If we talk to him sweetly, he'll probably listen."

"We'll try the other first," Lennox decided. "I'm not running a publicity campaign for my vices." He turned toward the elevator, and they rode it down. As they crossed the lobby the clerk stared at Lennox' companion with widened eyes.

The building in which Austin, Clemente, South, and Smyth had their offices was brand-new. It still smelled faintly of varnish as they came through the door. According to the indicator the single elevator was on the top floor. They took the stairs, and Jake was panting after the third flight.

"I feel like a mountain goat," he grunted. "Why didn't we take the elevator?"

Lennox said: "Because they make you register in these places after hours. Do you want to advertise to every cop in town that we're turning burglar?"

They climbed up to the fifth floor and went down the darkened hall, around an ell, and paused before an office.

Jake examined the lock with the help of a pencil-flash. He pulled a screwdriver from his coat pocket and took off the plate. "It's a wonder anyone ever bothers to close one of these doors. A child could pick it." He had it open in less than three minutes. Then he put the lock back together.

While he was busy Lennox turned on the light. The suite was big and impressive. There was a reception room with a desk, a small switchboard, and a row of leather-seated chrome chairs for waiting clients. A private hall ran past a law library, a file room and a set of offices.

Austin's was at the end—a big square room with high windows that looked out over the gleaming white buildings of the civic center. The desk was locked, and Lennox called Jake, who opened it readily.

Lennox went through the desk and didn't find anything. From the contents he might have guessed that Austin had no business at all, but he knew better than that. Often the busiest man will have an almost empty desk. He turned his attention to the file room.

One file was labeled, "Catherine Foster"; a second read, "Leon Heyworth." Lennox frowned. He hadn't known Austin was the attorney for either of them. He had known that the man handled business for many show people. There was certainly nothing wrong with the fact that he represented both Kitty Foster and the deceased Heyworth, but Lennox cursed himself for his stupidity in not ascertaining the fact. Heyworth must have persuaded Kitty Foster to let the lawyer handle her affairs. Her agent had handled them as long as Lennox had known her.

He motioned to Jake, and the little man obligingly opened the two files. There was not much of interest—a mass of correspondence, receipted bills, items of various kinds. Lennox was surprised to find that Heyworth had died broke.

The actor had earned plenty in his time, but he had spent it on riotous living. Either that, or he had other assets which did not show in the lawyer's accounts. Or, it was possible, the lawyer had doctored the accounts. After all, Heyworth was dead. Austin would have to account only to his estate, and the chances were that his heirs and relatives did not know too much about the dead man's business.

In that case Austin would definitely profit by his client's murder. Just as he might profit by Mary Morris' death.

Lennox' frown deepened as he turned to the Foster file. Kitty had done all right for herself, much better than if she had stayed behind the notion counter. You didn't earn six-figure incomes selling thread, even if it was all silk.

He had purposely left the file on Mary Morris until last, and he went over it with care. It represented the business of many years, back to the days when vaudeville was still the high light of American entertainment, and Mary had drawn six thousand for one week at the Palace. You learned a lot about people by going over the records of their business dealings.

There were receipts from the school in France where her granddaughter had been educated. From the receipts Lennox learned that the girl had been sent abroad at the age of ten and had not returned until the German drive into the low countries had pushed her home. No wonder she and Mary had been almost strangers.

But what else could the old lady have done? She herself had grown up on the stage. Her daughter had been born in a dressing room and raised in a trunk. Mary Morris hadn't wanted her granddaughter to have that kind of a life. She'd wanted her to be a lady.

Several letters written in a round childish hand were in the file. The kid had been lonesome—there could be no doubt of that. He went over the accounts minutely. Mary had a lot of money and a lot of investments. How much, it was hard to ascertain. He realized that it was a job for an expert. He was just replacing the papers in the file when the noise of the outside office door opening jerked him upright. He swung around.

Jake, who had been amusing himself by opening other files and then re-locking them, straightened also. He looked quickly at Lennox, who was already moving toward the light switch, then without a word Jake stole into the hall.

There was an exclamation, a scuffle, and Jake breathlessly called Lennox' name. Bill ran quickly toward the front office. Jake was sitting on a man's head. He seemed to be very happy about the whole thing. The grin widened on his battered features as he twisted his prisoner's hand up toward the small of his back.

The hand held a revolver. It was a nickel-plated thing, and to Lennox it looked more like a popgun than a weapon of defense. Even as he reached the door the man's fingers relaxed and the gun slipped from his grasp.

Lennox scooped it up and nodded to the grinning Jake. "O.K. Get off and let's have a look at him."

Jake got off the man's head. Bernard Austin came sputtering to his feet. Even with his clothes twisted and his hair awry he managed to keep something of his dignity. He glared from the still grinning Jake to Lennox.

He took one uncertain step toward the phone, then stopped. "What were you looking for, Lennox?"

Bill said: "Proof that you killed Mary Morris."

If Austin was taken aback, he gave no sign. "I suppose you were looking for proof that I killed Heyworth—and that Kingstone woman also."

"That's the general idea," Lennox said. "Once a murderer, always a murderer."

Instead of going to the phone Austin sank into a chair. "You know, you rather amaze me. I can't figure you out at all. You're on bail, and while I'll admit that the police lack enough evidence for a murder charge, they most certainly could send you over the road for moving that body. And yet, you wander around breaking into offices and doing pretty much as you please."

Lennox didn't say anything. He didn't seem to be watching the lawyer, but he was listening carefully to every word the man said.

Austin cleared his throat. "I wish I knew," his voice was almost plaintive, "whether you're trustworthy or not. Mary Morris thought you were. She wouldn't have made you one of her executors if she hadn't."

Lennox said: "For fun, let's assume that I am. Would you tell me anything if I was?"

"The trouble is," Austin complained, "that I don't know what I'm talking about. Leon Heyworth and Tina Kingstone were both clients of mine. For the last few weeks they both have been asking some leading questions about Mary Morris' affairs. Naturally I put them off, but after the happenings of the last few days, I couldn't help but remember."

Lennox said, "What sort of questions?"

The lawyer hesitated. "Well, hints about what Mary was worth and whether her granddaughter would get it all at the old lady's death. I didn't think much about

it at the time. People gossip about other persons' affairs all the time."

"About the granddaughter," said Lennox. "Do you know whether she was unduly friendly with Heyworth?"

The lawyer cleared his throat noisily. "Not that I know of. She was friendly with Tina Kingstone, and of course Heyworth and the Kingstone woman were very friendly until he became interested in Kitty Foster." >

It seemed to Lennox that Austin was grinning a little. The whole town seemed to know that Kitty Foster had thrown him over for Leon Heyworth.

"One thing more," he asked. "Who met Jean Jeffries when she came back from France?"

"Why, I did," said Austin. "Mary was busy on a picture and couldn't go east. I met her in New York and brought her west. What makes you ask?"

Lennox shrugged. "I wonder that you recognized her after all the years she had been away."

"As a matter of fact I didn't," Austin admitted. "I was laid up in my hotel, food poisoning or something. I phoned the shipping office, and the girl came directly from the boat to the hotel."

"Thank you," said Lennox. "Have you made up your mind whether to have me arrested?"

"You'd get out on bail. You're harder to hold than a greased pig." The lawyer smirked a little. "If you want any more information about Heyworth, why not ask Miss Foster?"

Lennox started to get sore, then didn't. "Maybe that is a good idea," he admitted. "Come on, Jake. Let's go."

3.

There were a lot of lights burning in the actress' hillside home, and the circle drive was filled with cars. It was no surprise to Lennox that Kitty Foster was entertaining. She was constantly entertaining.

He told Jake to wait in the car, and as an afterthought he stripped off his light overcoat and handed it to the man. Then he walked up the curving driveway toward the entrance.

He rang the bell and smiled at the white-coated Togo when the houseboy opened the door.

“William!” Kitty Foster’s dark hair was disheveled and her cheeks were red without the need of make-up. Lennox knew she had been dancing. You could tell when she had been dancing. The rhythm of motion fired her blood, livened her, changed her into another person.

“William, darling!” She brushed past the houseboy, threw her arms around Lennox’ neck and drew his face down to hers. The lips were warm and inviting and possessive.

He knew her so thoroughly. It was almost like looking at a person through a fluoroscope—she was that transparent.

“So the candle is burning in the window for me now?”

She smiled and wrapped both hands about his arm, resting her head against his shoulder. “It’s O.K. for me to kick you around,” she told him, “but when the rest of the town starts it I get as sore as the devil.”

Several people had come into the hall and were staring at them. Kitty Foster said sweetly: ‘All your friends. They’re glad to see that the knife is coming out of your back.’”

“Is it?” said Lennox.

She looked at him strangely. “Haven’t you seen the bulldog editions of the morning papers?”

He shook his head and she called Togo. “Find the *Times*.”

The boy disappeared obediently, to return with the paper. Kitty unfolded it and showed Bill an item. General Consolidated Studios had just announced that William Lennox had been rehired by the company. “He might,” the article stated, “be sent to the eastern office, or he might be sent to South America oh a good-

will mission.”

“So that’s why the welcome?” he said, creasing the paper.

She mocked him a little. “Girls have to watch their jobs. But that isn’t the answer, William. I’ve decided to take you back. I might even marry you sometime if I get around to it.”

Lennox was silent, watching her. She was very beautiful, as beautiful as a porcelain vase, but not so fragile. She had the resilience of a rubber ball, always bouncing back into position. You might dent her, but it would come out quickly and neatly, leaving no scar upon the smooth surface.

She said: “Let’s get out of here. Let’s get a long way away from all our friends. I want to talk and talk and talk.”

“I haven’t a car,” he said. “Jake’s out in his coupe, freezing. The rear window is broken.”

“Who cares,” she was gay. “Bring him in. He can have a drink in the kitchen.”

Jake did not object. They left him at the serving table with a glass clutched in one hand, a bottle of Scotch in the other.

Judging by the noise which emanated from the house, the party was going on behind him. In fact the party did not seem to realize that its hostess had departed.

Jake’s coupe needed a valve grind. It was sluggish, and the springs listed a little to starboard, making it hard to steer.

Lennox asked without looking at his passenger: “Where to, Josephine?”

“Remember the place you took me the first night—the place where we could see all over the city?”

“I haven’t been up there for years,” he said. “It’s probably all changed. That’s Lookout Mountain.”

She shrugged, pouting like a child. “If you don’t want to...”

“But of course I want to,” he said, and turned the coupe east on Sunset, driving through Beverly and along the Strip to Laurel Canyon. In front of Schwabs they were blocked by a light, and Hynie Bartlette called them from the sidewalk.

“Going my way?”

Kitty Foster was gay. “This is no bus. Besides we’re eloping. You wouldn’t want to ride clear to Yuma, would you?”

“In that hack?” Bartlette sounded incredulous.

The light changed and Lennox turned left into Laurel. “You shouldn’t have said that.” His voice was reproofing. “That *schnorrer* will have us all over his column in the morning.”

She laughed, a pleased little sound in the darkness at his side. “Why not? I said I might decide to marry you. Hynie’s a good guy. Give him a break.”

“He’s a tank,” said Lennox, “and a rat. I wouldn’t give him the crust off a moldy loaf of bread.” He stopped for a sign at the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and then continued up the canyon to where the road branched for Lookout Mountain.

CHAPTER X

Kitty Foster said angrily, "Someone has built a fence!" She couldn't have sounded angrier if she had suddenly discovered that she was blocked out of heaven by a high wall. Lennox had braked the car at the top of the steep grade opposite where the old turnout had once been. He said mildly: "After all, a man has a right to do what he pleases with his own property."

Below them the city spread out for miles, a lighted checkerboard punctuated here and there by the red and green of the neon signs. They found a little shoulder of ground at the crest of the steep slope and sat down, the girl drawing her lungs full of the crisp night air.

"Gee!" said Kitty Foster, and for a moment she was no longer the actress, but just a little girl. "This gets me, down deep inside. It's so big and clean looking. It's as if the darkness rubbed out all that's dirty in the world and just left the things that are clean and fine and swell.

"Billy," she reached out and took his free hand in both of hers, "I'm a fool. I've been a fool. You and I together could turn this whole industry upside down. Suppose I go to Spurck and tell him I want you as the producer on my next picture?"

He caught his breath. He knew as well as she did that with her pressure behind him he could be a producer. He knew that he would have been one before save for the fact that he was much more useful to Spurck in his present capacity.

It was a subtle bribe, and he considered it with care. Less than twenty-four hours before this same girl had been out to get him in any way she could. And now she was offering him the thing he had spent five years in Hollywood to obtain. Why?

Certainly not out of generosity. It could be to put him under obligation. It could, although he doubted it, be for love. Or it might be an effort to sidetrack him from any investigation of the three deaths.

He'd come out to see this girl for a definite reason. He'd even brought her up to this hilltop vantage point for a reason. He wanted her to talk, to talk about Leon Heyworth. He wanted to know why the actor had been murdered, what the man

had known that had made his death imperative. But he had to move cautiously.

He said: "I was just wondering if you would have thought this up if Heyworth hadn't been killed."

"William, William!" she was railing at him, half-joking, half-serious. "You are jealous, and you needn't be. Heyworth was a good guy to go around with. He was a good actor and I learned a lot from him. I liked him—yes"—she sounded as if she were being painfully honest—"but I was using him."

"Just as you used me and everyone else you've touched."

"Why not?" she said impatiently. "The Lord looks out for those who look out for themselves."

"Sure," he said, "and I'm only trying to look after myself now. I got burned once, glamour girl, and I don't want to get it again. Besides, you're taking a chance. I'm all tied up in this murder thing. Had you forgotten? That isn't the kind of guy you want to be with."

She said confidently: "You'll get that all straightened out."

"I wish I was sure," he told her gloomily. "If I could only figure out why Leon was killed. The whole thing just doesn't make sense. He must have known something about somebody or he wouldn't have been murdered. If he'd just left a note or something to explain."

She said: "People don't do that in real life. They only use that in pictures. He didn't leave any note, and he didn't even tell me what it was all about. He just said that the Kingstone woman had been calling him up for three or four days and that she had something on her mind. He told me that because he didn't want me to get the idea he was paying her rent again. He was all through doing that a year ago."

Lennox nodded. "I know. I wonder why she was bothering him?"

Kitty Foster's voice lacked interest. "I don't know. It was something about that black-haired slut, Mary Morris' granddaughter. She's been around town for months trading on the fact that she was related to Mary. If you ask me she's not any better than a common street-walker, and the trouble she's in..."

“What?”

Kitty Foster was getting a little impatient. “I’m no detective,” she said, “and I don’t care for gossip. I guess she did something pretty terrible—something that would have cooked her chance of inheriting the old lady’s money if Mary found out. Anyhow this Kingstone dame had the answers, and I think she was trying to cash in on what she knew.

“I think she wanted Leon to act as go-between for her in contacting the old lady. That would about explain things, wouldn’t it? Leon was too decent to do that. Instead he faced Jean Jeffries with the truth, she killed him, then she killed Kingstone. Finally she gave her grandmother that sleeping medicine just to make certain there wouldn’t be another slip up and she would inherit the old lady’s dough. If you hadn’t been so busy looking at her legs you might have figured this all out for yourself.”

“Yes,” he said in a strange voice, “I might have at that. I...” He stopped. A car had come up the hill behind them and parked at the rear of the coupe.

“Who’s that?” he whispered.

She said: “Probably someone who came up here to talk of love—not murder. You’re a most unsatisfactory guy, William. I bring you out here to look at the lights, and all you can think of is a couple of filthy murders.”

He kissed her automatically, one eye open, peering past the line of her hair toward the end of the fence. He saw the man’s figure silhouetted against the lighter sky. He had a view of the man’s hand, and then the gun. He didn’t know what to do. The killers had caught up with him again.

There was one certain way to keep her quiet—the only one. He used it. He pressed his lips tightly against hers in a long kiss, then he whispered, relaxing the pressure only a little:

“Don’t make a sound. There’s a man with a gun up beside the fence. I think he’s looking for us.”

She didn’t mind him. She did the exact opposite. She screamed. Lennox heard sound above the scream. The fellow was scrambling forward down the hill. There was no time to wait, not much chance to think.

He did the only thing left to do under the circumstances. He rolled the girl off his knees, and together they half-fell, half-slid down the slope. It was a steep grade and a long way down.

The girl's screams increased, and she wrapped her arms around Lennox, as if he were the only one remaining stable thing in a turning world. They dropped down fast. He couldn't have checked their progress now had he wished, and he did not wish to.

First there was a curse in the darkness above them, then the flash of a gun and the sharp whiplike report. The bullet struck a hidden rock off toward their right and ricocheted with a humming noise out into the night.

Kitty Foster's screams ceased abruptly and she was suddenly limp in his arms. He judged that she had fainted as their downward progress was halted abruptly by a manzanita bush. He untangled himself as best he could from both the bush and the girl and peered upward at the slope from which they had fallen.

A voice called guardedly from the road: "Did they get away?"

The second voice was a hoarse murmur. "Can't see them. I think they landed behind one of these bushes."

"Hurry," said the voice from above. "The people in the house heard your shot and are calling the cops."

His companion swore harshly. "Better take the jalopy and get out of here. I'll sneak out the lower way. I couldn't climb back up there if I tried. I'm going down to the bottom and head Lennox off. If he gets out of this, he'll be good."

Cold chilly fingers groped their way up Lennox' spine. On the slope he had an even chance, but if the man reached the bottom of the hill he could wait for them with his gun. Lennox turned to the girl in the darkness, wondering.

The men did know who he was. Had they followed him there, or had they known he would be here? No one could have told them except Kitty Foster, but she had had ample opportunity when she went to get her coat. She could have called them on the phone in her room and put him on the spot if she chose. Her conversation of the evening might well be part of an act.

2.

Everything was still except for the faint rumble of traffic from the distant Sunset Boulevard. He sat for a couple of minutes, careful not to make any sound. Once or twice he thought he heard noise at the bottom of the hill as the unseen watcher shifted position. But he could not be certain. The man was being unusually cautious. Lennox finally edged over to where the girl lay and bent above her.

She was moaning faintly as if in a troubled sleep, and he guessed that she was coming out of it. Her face was a dim contour in the faint light. It made her look like a little girl peaceful in sleep. He didn't know exactly what to do. He had the true male's helplessness in the face of sickness. She came to before the police got there. When he saw the lights at the crest of the grade she was sitting up weakly, asking him what had happened.

Lennox took a chance, hoping the man at the bottom of the slope would not fire at the sound of his voice, and called to the police.

The flashlight beams turned downward, and he yelled hurriedly: "Turn them off. Do you want to get us killed?"

As if in answer to the words a gun flashed from the base of the hill and a bullet cut viciously through the bush at their backs. Lennox dropped flat against the rough ground, pulling the girl down with him.

She moaned: "They shouldn't shoot... They shouldn't shoot..."

"Who shouldn't?" he demanded harshly.

Her voice was hazy, as if with fear. "Whoever they are."

He wasn't satisfied with the answer, but it was no time to pursue the subject. The police were working their way down the slope after throwing a couple of shots in the direction of the unseen gunman. Lennox had the sensation of being caught in a no-man's land shell hole with two armies sniping at each other across his head. The only trouble was that there was no shell hole. But it lasted only seconds.

Their assailant must have had enough. Somewhere at the foot of the hill a car motor roared away toward Sunset, and he guessed that the man was gone.

They followed the police down the slope, the last part of their journey lighted by the officers' flashlights. They tried to escape, but nothing would do but that they must be taken to the station.

Kitty Foster did not seem to mind. Lennox did—decidedly. He'd answered all the police questions he ever cared to answer in this life, or for that matter in the next.

There were reporters at the station, and he was instantly recognized—in fact, before Kitty Foster was, which did not improve her shaky temper. But she managed to keep it under control and flash her smile, even though her appearance was considerably disheveled.

Before she had a chance to say anything Lennox cut in. If anyone was going to talk to the reporters, he meant it to be himself. He couldn't be certain what the actress would say, so he told them:

“Nothing to it. Just an attempted holdup which went wrong. Miss Foster and I were at a party at her house. We decided that we needed some air so we drove up to Lookout Mountain. Apparently these men saw us go up, took it for a petting party, and decided it was a good chance for a parked-car holdup—only we weren't in the car. We'd climbed down around the edge of the fence so that we could get a view of the city.

“We heard them stop and saw one of the men come around the fence with a gun in his hand. There wasn't anything to do but try to escape down the hill.” He went on to tell of the arrival of the police and their rescue.

One of the reporters—a redhead from the *Herald*—expressed his disbelief. “Come on, Mr. Lennox. You don't expect us to believe all that. We're not children, you know. There have been three unexplained murders this week, and you and Miss Foster have been more or less involved in all of them. Are you certain this little disturbance isn't a part of the other happenings?”

Lennox had been afraid of the question, and laughed easily, but before he could remonstrate the man went on: “From the newspapers I'd judged that you and Miss Foster weren't on exactly the most cordial of terms.”

The girl cut in: “Really, mister reporter, you aren't a very good judge of human nature. You're referring to the fact that I told Captain Spellman Lennox had

Heyworth's body moved."

The man looked at her carefully. "I had that in mind."

She said: "Because Mr. Lennox and I differed on the best way of handling a rather awkward situation and because I chose the only method of bringing him around to my point of view, doesn't affect our personal relations in the least. If you want to know, we were planning to fly to Yuma in the morning to be married."

The gentlemen of the press had been rather listless up until that moment. They snapped suddenly to attention.

"What! Can we print that?"

Lennox' face felt as if it had been carved from wood. He tried to smile, but his lips were so stiff they were almost uncontrollable. "I wouldn't," he managed. "You boys are certainly suckers. Miss Foster bet me on the way to the station that she could pull such an announcement and that you'd go for it hook, line and sinker. Don't worry, she's too smart a girl to marry a bum like me. We're friends, yes—the best of friends—I might say, but as for marriage, we both feel it would interfere with our respective activities too much."

He didn't dare look at Kitty. He hoped she was covering up, that the surprise would not show in her face. He thought it wouldn't. She was a good enough actress for that. But he knew exactly what he had done. This was a declaration of war between them. She had offered an armistice for mutual benefit, and he was publicly refusing it. She could make it nasty if she chose. The next move was distinctly up to her.

3.

In Jake's coupe, which an obliging policeman had rescued from the hilltop, he drove back toward the actress' house. He expected a torrent of recriminations, but he got nothing. All along the curving bridle path which split the Boulevard into two lanes, she was silent, huddled as far away from him as she could get. He brought the car to a sliding halt at the stop sign before the Beverly Hotel, shifted, and pulled ahead before she said:

"Why'd you do that, William?" The tone was restrained. It showed no sign of

anger, no symptom of the hurt pride he had expected.

He took his eyes away from the empty road to glance at her. "Because it won't work, pal. It sounds nice, and I'll admit I'd have come running at one time. But what you need is a meek little guy who will jump through hoops and do tricks for your guests—a guy who won't mind being called Mr. Kitty Foster in public and a lot worse things behind his back. I'm not that kind of a guy. I feel old-fashioned as hell at the moment. If anyone wears the pants around my place, I'm afraid it has to be me."

She was silent so long that he thought she wasn't going to answer. They'd almost reached the turnoff into the twisting side street which led up to her house when she said:

"You're quibbling. The trouble is that you don't love me any more. Or rather, you love someone else. Who is it, William? Little Jean Jeffries?"

"Good heavens, no!" The words came out of him like an explosion. "That brat. Give me credit for a little common sense. Why is it that when one person is put in the embarrassing position of having to admit they're not in love with another the second party always thinks there is someone else?"

Her voice hardened. "Cut it out. I know you, my fine-feathered friend. It's my job to know men, and you're absolutely gone on someone. When I find out who..." She left the sentence unfinished, but the inference was clear.

4.

Jake was groaning in the corner of the seat: "I feel terrible! I feel as if someone had hit me in the middle of the head with an ax and forgotten to pull it out."

Lennox was busy turning into Nancy's drive. "Out," he said, and opened the door on his side.

There was a light burning in the small den, and the girl answered his ring almost at once. He looked at her in surprise.

"You're up late." She stood aside. "I knew that you'd be around. You've got a visitor waiting to see you. Say"—she was staring at Lennox' battered face and torn clothes showing under the open topcoat—"what happened to you?"

“I fall down,” said Lennox, steadying Jake. “Who’s the visitor?”

“You’re both drunk.”

“Only Jake,” Lennox corrected. “There wasn’t enough in the bottle for both of us. Who’s the visitor?”

“Eddie Strong.”

Lennox released his grip on Jake in surprise, and the ex-cabman swayed dangerously. He grabbed the man’s arm again, pushed past the girl, and steered Jake toward the couch. Not until he had dumped him onto it did he turn.

“Where’s Strong? How long has he been here?”

“Only a few minutes.” The girl had caught some of the excitement from his voice. “He’s in my den. He didn’t want to wait, but I assured him that you’d be here.”

Lennox did not trouble to answer. He turned and headed for the den with the girl close on his heels. She heard him say, “I’ve been looking for you, Eddie, ever since last night.”

Strong had a patch of tape across one end of his forehead. He hadn’t shaved that day and his sunken cheeks were covered by a grayish stubble. “I hit my head,” he said in a defensive tone. “When I jumped out of that cab I ran across the sidewalk and into the corner of a building. When I came to, you and the cab were gone.”

Lennox did not know where to begin. There were a thousand questions he wanted to ask. Strong must have read his thoughts. “I’ll tell you about it later,” he said. “I need your help now and there ain’t much time.”

“Hey, wait,” Lennox caught his arm as the man started toward the door. “What happened to that doped girl? We had her here and...”

Strong said: “I know. I took her out the back way while the nurse was downstairs, but they got her away from me tonight. They were watching my place when we tried to go in. I had to run for it. That’s why I need you. We’ve got to get her back.”

Lennox said: “Not until you give me more details.”

The piano-player was getting angry. “What is it you want to know?”

Lennox said, “Who killed Mary Morris, for a starter?”

“Jean Jeffries—oh, you don’t believe me. Well, ask the old lady’s maid. Come on, we’ll ask her, but we’ll have to hurry.”

Lennox started out after him with Nancy at his heels. Halfway to the door he swung around. “Where do you think you’re going?”

She said, “With you.”

“Oh, no, you’re not.”

“Oh, yes, I am. You don’t leave this house without me, Bill Lennox.”

He didn’t answer. Instead he picked her up and carried her, kicking wildly, toward the service closet. “You’ll be safer there,” he said, and, shutting the door, shot the outer bolt. Then he hurried after the departing piano-player.

“Women,” said Strong, “always cause a lot of trouble. You take this maid for instance. Just because she didn’t think that Mary would want the girl in trouble, she never opened her mouth to the cops today.”

Lennox was not entirely convinced. “How do you know all this?”

Strong said: “Because I saw the Jeffries gal leaving Mary’s house, and the maid never told the cops that she had been there at all. Add it up for yourself.”

Lennox was adding it up, and the sum didn’t make much sense as he turned Jake’s coupe toward Beverly Hills.

CHAPTER XI

The house which Mary Morris had built so lovingly was dark and still. There was a sense of emptiness about it as if the house realized that the lady who had built it was forever gone.

Lennox parked the coupe in the driveway and said to Strong, "No use in waking the neighborhood. I'll go around to the maid's window. You wait here. She's more apt to talk if I'm alone."

He left the car and hurried around the drive to the window, pressing close to the copper netting of the screen and calling her name softly so as not to rouse the neighbors.

"Rita, Rita, wake up."

There was motion in the dark bedroom. Lennox thought it was the maid. The scream shocked him, followed as it was by the sound of the quick struck blow.

He tore the copper mesh apart with his hands. Never afterwards could he remember exactly how he had managed to crash his way through, the window, but he went diving head foremost, calling Strong's name as he flung himself forward.

The room was filled with confused sound. A woman was being hysterical in a quiet sort of way. Lennox dragged himself up from the floor where his dive had carried him as a shadowy figure charged through the darkness.

His groping fingers closed on the rough fabric of the man's coat and they went down together, rolling over. Hot breath came in sharp gasps against the side of Lennox' face like the staccato explosions from a steam engine. The man had a gun, which he was trying to press against Lennox' side.

Bill's fingers closed about the other's wrist and twisted it away. The effort took all his strength, and exhaustion turned the darkness into a reddish hue. He knew that he could not last long, that his grip was already slipping, but the assailant gave up first. He dropped the gun from fingers made nerveless by Bill's grasp and released the hold he had on Lennox. The sudden change broke Lennox' grip.

The man wrenched his wrist free, rolled over, and struggled to his feet. Lennox made a grab for him in the darkness and missed. He heard the hard heels pound across the bare floor, heard the bedroom door slam and the running steps as his late opponent charged along the hall.

He struggled painfully up to his knees. His lungs felt as if they were being slowly squeezed by a heavy iron band. His groping hand felt along the floor until his fingertips touched the cool metal of the gun. He picked it up, and suddenly he felt better.

The lights stopped jumping before his eyes, and it was easier to breathe. He came to his feet, felt across the room to the hall door, and opened it. When he did, a motor sounded and a car ground down the block in screaming second. He knew the man had escaped. Then he felt along the wall until his fingers found the toggle switch, and he kicked it up, flooding the room with light.

The maid stared up at him from the tousled bed. Her round eyes were fright-ridden, and a thin stream of blood oozed from a cut on her forehead.

“Rita,” he said. “Rita, don’t you know me? It’s Bill Lennox.” He started toward her and stopped when she cowered away. “It’s Lennox from the studio,” he said softly.

She was so near hysteria that her mind wasn’t functioning properly. She clutched the covers up around her frail shoulders as if they were to serve as a bulwark against the danger that had been threatening her.

“It’s all right.”

“Oh! Mr. Lennox!” she managed to say before the convulsive sobs wracked her small body again.

Her bony fingers closed on his arm and bit deep in his flesh with strength intensified by terror. “I...” she began. “He... he would have killed me.”

“Who?”

She was having difficulty controlling her voice. “I don’t know. I waked and he was bending over the bed. I thought for a moment that I must be dreaming, then when I felt his fingers at my throat... then I knew I wasn’t.” She shuddered.

“And then,” she managed to whisper, “you called my name at the window. I screamed and he struck me. The blow would have killed me, I think, but I managed to twist sideways. It didn’t hit square.”

He gave her time to fill her lungs with two convulsive breaths before he said: “And why, Rita? Why did he attack you? You know, don’t you, Rita? You know something you didn’t tell us this afternoon.”

She nodded unwillingly. “Yes, I know.”

“What do you know?” Impatience had crept into his voice. “Is it that Jean Jeffries gave that sleeping medicine to her grandmother?”

The maid gasped at him: “You know, too!”

He nodded slowly. “I was certain of it, but I had no proof.”

“I saw her,” Rita said, and sounded like a hypnotized parrot. “I came in and saw her beside the bed. It was while the nurse was out. And she knew I saw her, and she also knew I wouldn’t speak.”

“Why didn’t you?”

The maid recovered enough to show surprise. “Because Mary wouldn’t have wanted me to. Mary would rather have died than have anything happen to the girl. Don’t you see? I couldn’t break faith with Mary, even though I knew Jean had murdered her.”

Lennox couldn’t understand, but he realized that Rita was not normal. Her twisted sense of loyalty was such that she would have felt she was betraying the old actress’ trust if she had accused the girl.

“I’m glad you know now,” she told him. “I didn’t tell—I didn’t break faith. And yet, Jean will be punished. You’ll see that she gets punished?”

“Yes,” Lennox told her gravely. “I’ll do that, but I’ll have to hurry, Rita. I can’t stay here, and I hate to leave you by yourself.”

“I’m all right now.” The color had come back to her wrinkled cheeks.

She nodded weakly. He found a gun and gave it to her, more for the confidence it might inspire than because he thought that she might use it effectively. Then he turned and moved toward the door, wondering where Strong was, why he had not charged into the house to help.

The old piano-player was beside the coupe. He said, "That guy sure tore out of the house. His car was around the corner."

Lennox looked at him sharply. "Did you get a good look at him?"

Strong nodded. "Yeah, one of Kreach's men. Is the maid all right?" Lennox said that she was.

"And she told you about the girl?" Strong's voice was eager.

Lennox nodded.

"Then let's hurry." Strong turned and climbed into the coupe. After a moment, Lennox followed him.

2.

Dawn made a gray streak in the east as the coupe turned into the street beside the apartment and Lennox found a place to park.

Strong was on the sidewalk before he could get the car locked, and already moving toward the alley at the rear. Lennox followed, catching up with the man at the corner of the building.

"You're sure that she's here?"

Strong nodded. "I told you, didn't I. Come on, hurry." He led the way down the three steps to the basement entrance and pushed open the heavy fire door.

A single bulb burned faintly in the concrete passage making the place unreal and ghostlike. Strong seemed to know where he was going. He paused before a closed door and knocked. He was forced to knock several times before the door was opened by a sleepy Swede.

"What you want?"

“We want,” said Strong, “the key for the apartment of the girl who never goes out. The one that they brought back this evening.”

The Swede’s unhappy expression increased. “I ain’t supposed to give it to no one. I ain’t supposed to even know that she’s here.”

The Swede was thoroughly cowed. He passed it over without a murmur, and Strong handed it to Lennox. “You go get her,” he said. “If they should see you in the elevator, you can say that you came to see the Jeffries girl, and you’ll be telling the truth at that.” He grinned a little. “And keep your gun ready. I’ll watch Sylvester here. There might just be a signal from upstairs. If we tied him so he wouldn’t answer it, they’d get suspicious.”

Lennox did not answer. He stepped out into the quiet basement passage and used the freight elevator to ride upward. The upper hall was deserted and he moved along it quickly to the door of the apartment. The key fitted and after a moment he was inside.

He paused to listen before he turned on the light. When he did, little things told him that the place was being occupied, and he had a moment’s worry. Maybe the janitor had given them the wrong key. If he walked in on a woman tenant, he’d have some trouble explaining his presence.

But it was the right apartment. The girl in the bed was the one who had vanished from Nancy Hobbs’ house. She stirred as he turned on the bedroom light, protesting a little in her sleep.

Lennox crossed to the bedside and stood for a long moment staring down at her. She was better looking than he remembered. The doped expression was gone and he saw that the resemblance to the girl he knew as Jean Jeffries was noticeable. > If you saw them together you would never have mistaken one for the other, but their coloring was very similar, the contours of the face the same. He bent forward and put a hand on her bare shoulder, shaking her gently.

“Wake up.”

She opened her eyes, and her mouth parted. He was afraid she was going to scream, and he couldn’t have that. They had to be quiet—very, very quiet. He put a hand over her mouth.

She stared up at him over the edge of his fingers, her eyes wide and dark and terrified. He said: "It's all right. I'm Bill Lennox from the studio. You probably don't remember seeing me before."

She didn't remember. He could tell by the expression of her eyes. "Come," he said, "I'm going to take you out of here. It's all right. There's nothing to be afraid of, but we'll have to hurry." With his free hand he pulled back the covers, and then he stopped.

She was completely naked. Her gesture to grab for the protection of the sheet was purely instinctive. Lennox was red-faced with embarrassment for her.

"Get some clothes on," he said brusquely and turned away.

"I can't," she said, sitting up in bed and pulling a blanket over her shoulders. "They took them all."

He came back. "Took them..." Then he understood. That was one effective way of holding her. There were others; the windows were fastened and the door had been locked. He swore under his breath, stripped off the topcoat and pulled it around her.

"This will have to do. We can't wait any longer."

She got to her feet. "You're Mr. Lennox. My grandmother mentioned you in her letters. How is she? Have you seen her? How did you find me?"

He said: "No time now. We've got to get out of here. I'll tell you all about it in a little while." He grabbed her arm and started toward the door.

She was so short that the topcoat almost dragged on the floor. Her bare feet peeped out from beneath the edge, and he noticed subconsciously that the nails were natural, free of paint. He had always objected to colored toenails for no particular reason. He sensed that this kid at his side was nice and sensible, and he had a fleeting feeling of regret that her grandmother had never known her. Then he forgot all about the girl at his side, for they entered the living room, and Jean Jeffries was standing there watching them.

Lennox had a moment of mental confusion. The girl across the room wasn't Jean Jeffries, but he had thought of her by that name for so long that it was hard to

change.

All motion in the room ceased. No one moved. It was the girl in his overcoat who broke the spell. She made a little whimpering sound of fear and tried to crouch behind Lennox like a frightened child.

The other girl's lips twisted into an unpleasant smile. "Hello, Bill. You get around, don't you?"

He didn't say anything. He just kept hold of the topcoat-covered arm and started walking forward.

"You won't get away with it. You can't get out."

He said: "Are you going to murder me the way you did Heyworth?"

She seemed to be considering his words. "Perhaps not." There was no sign of a weapon in her hands. "Perhaps I have a better plan. Perhaps I'll buy you off. How would you like to have a share of Mary Morris' money?"

He shook his head. "You wouldn't dare trust me, honey."

Her words were slow, as if she were trying to consider the problem from all angles and make a careful decision. "I think I would—if you were my husband."

3.

Lennox had never been more surprised in his life. He stared at the girl facing him, knowing that his face had turned brick-red. "You..."

She said: "So I'm a sucker. I probably am, but I went overboard for you. That little act we put on for Captain Spellman wasn't all an act. You get the chance to live, me, and a chunk of Mary's dough."

He didn't answer, and she went on to tell him: "Three people are dead. We've spent a lot of money and a lot of time. As far as the world is concerned, I'm Jean Jeffries—I'm Mary Morris' granddaughter. I'll inherit the four million that she worked so hard to pile up. It's a stake worth playing for, Bill, and we play the game to the limit. You're either a part of it, or you can't be around."

He understood the significance of her threat, and he knew the threat was no idle one. All the time she had been talking he had been moving slowly forward. Now he moved with startling swiftness.

He dropped the real Jean Jeffries' arm and jumped forward, catching the other girl by the shoulders. He spun her around and clamped one hand across her mouth, pulling her right arm up between her shoulders tightly.

"You'll get it broken, honey, if you struggle."

Her answer was to sink her teeth into his center finger. The pain shot up his arm, and it was all he could do to keep his hold. He managed to put the heel of his hand under her chin so she couldn't bite him again and twisted the arm up a little to show her that he meant business.

Her struggles ceased and she was very quiet, but it was the quietness of a coiled spring ready to expand. He swung her around and walked her toward the couch, saying over his shoulder to the other girl:

"Get one of the sheets from the bed and tear it into strips."

She obeyed, and he forced his prisoner face-down upon the divan. The cushion served as a gag, and he withdrew his hand. Blood was dribbling down from his middle finger, and he scowled at the back of the prostrate girl's head.

"You're quite a she-wolf, aren't you? It might be worth the price of being married to you for the privilege of taming you."

Her answer sounded like a string of gulps. He knew it was because of the cushion; her vocabulary was much more lurid than that.

There was the sound of tearing cloth, and he accepted the strips of sheeting thankfully. He looped the first one around his prisoner's wrists, keeping his knee in the center of her back. She tried to kick and only succeeded in exposing a sizable portion of well-rounded leg. He got the wrists fastened and wadded a piece of the cloth into a gag, but he never got it into place.

A voice from the doorway said: "I wouldn't, Lennox. I think you've done enough already."

Bill turned. Boren was standing in the entrance, and there was a small, flat, wicked-looking automatic in his hand.

Slowly Lennox raised his hands until they were shoulder-high. His first reaction had been to reach for his gun, but he remembered that it was still in the side pocket of his topcoat and that the coat was around the naked girl. His gun seemed always to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he concluded that he wasn't very much of a gunman. The chances were that if he had had it he couldn't have hit Boren at the distance.

The apartment-house owner said, "Untie her hands," and Lennox obeyed. When he finished, he helped her off the divan, expecting her to be raging. She wasn't. She straightened her dress with a little unconscious gesture.

"It took you long enough to get here," she told Boren. "If I hadn't heard the freight elevator and come up to see that our little friend was O.K., Lennox would have had her out of here and been long gone."

Boren nodded. "I was undressed when you called. I wonder where Lennox got the key?"

No one said anything, and Boren looked at Bill. "Did you keep the passport or destroy it?"

"Passport?" Lennox was genuinely surprised. "What passport?" Boren stared at him unblinkingly. "Just how much does he know, Delia?"

The girl who had posed as Jean Jeffries shrugged. "He's a good guesser. Do you have the passport, Bill?"

Lennox said: "So help me, I haven't."

Boren was impatient. "Come on, we're wasting time. If Kreach's men had been on their toes they'd have gotten him up on Lookout Mountain and we wouldn't have had to do the job here."

Delia was regretful. "I hate to kill him.... There aren't many guys like him in the world, Hal."

Boren snorted. "Four million dollars, and you have to fall for a mugg. I picked

you because I thought you wouldn't go soft. Don't try it on me now."

"And don't threaten me," she retorted, her voice rising also. "You'd stand a hell of a fine chance collecting any of that four million without me, wouldn't you?"

Boren swore. "You talk so much that I forget things. Turn around, Lennox."

Bill turned around, and the man came up behind him, stabbing the blunt-nosed gun into the center of his back. He pulled out all Lennox' papers and tossed them to the girl.

"No gun," he reported, and stepped back.

"And no passport." She ran through the papers quickly. "Maybe Kingstone hid it some place else. There's no use arguing about it now. Let's finish this." She shuddered a little. "Why didn't you leave me where I was? I'm all dirtied up. I'll be dirty for the rest of my life. I haven't slept since Heyworth was killed."

The knuckles of her small hands showed white as she clenched her fists. "Go ahead, shoot him! What are you waiting for?"

Lennox said: "One moment—just one. I'm not stupid enough to think I can live, but I'd like to say good-by to this kid." He turned around to the girl who was still clutching his topcoat about her. "Do you mind?"

No one said anything. He walked over to her. She looked so tiny and ridiculous in the big coat. "It's all right," he told her. "We all die sometime. There's nothing to be afraid of—nothing in the world."

She was surprised. So was the other girl. He could sense tension in the room behind him. It could explode and bring the play to a close. He had to work fast. He bent down, putting his arms around the girl and pulling her up toward him.

His big body blotted her out as far as the watchers were concerned. Her lips were cold and unresponsive as a little child's, sexless and uninteresting, but his left hand had reached the pocket of his topcoat and found the gun.

He straightened suddenly and pushed her away from him. She went staggering backward across the room, tripping over the tails of the coat, and fell heavily. But she was out of the line of fire.

He pivoted on his heel and shot Boren. The bullet caught the apartment-house manager directly in the stomach. Lennox knew that he couldn't have possibly done it again.

But he did not miss now. The heavy bullet doubled the apartment man up like a folding jackknife, and he sat down with both arms wrapped around his belly. He sat there looking bewildered and very hurt, then his features twisted as pain came into them. The gun slipped, from his fingers and he fell sideways onto the carpet.

Lennox turned as the girl made for the door. She almost reached it. He couldn't bring himself to shoot at her back. Then the door came open, and Lennox had a confused glimpse of Spellman's red face.

The detective captain said: "Wait, Miss Jeffries. I've got to arrest you for the murder of your grandmother. The maid just talked." He seized her arm and got long fingernail marks down across his cheeks. It was all he and Stobert could do to subdue her.

Lennox wasn't paying much attention. He was staring at Nancy Hobbs as if she had been an apparition.

Spellman finally got the girl under control and managed to hold her while Stobert clicked the cuffs into place. Then he shoved her roughly forward to face Lennox. "O. K., pal. Talk your girl friend out of this one. Convince me that Jean Jeffries didn't kill Mary Morris."

Lennox shook his head. Tired as he was, he couldn't help a feeling of elation. "That isn't Jean Jeffries, Floyd. This is." He crossed the room and helped the topcoated girl up from where he had flung her. "Hurt, kid?"

She shook her head uncertainly. "I'm all right."

They were all staring at her, open-mouthed. Lennox said to Stobert. "There's a guy down in the basement, a guy wearing white gloves. If you'll bring him up, he can give you more details than I can. He's the guy who broke this thing."

Stobert disappeared, and while they waited Lennox said to Nancy Hobbs, "So you followed, after all. How'd you get out of that closet?"

She gave him a twisted smile. “Jake heard me yelling. He wasn’t too drunk to open the door. I called the cops and told them to dash out to Mary Morris’. Then I got my car and went out, too. We must have gotten there right after you left. The maid talked, so we guessed you’d come over here. The only light burning in the building was in this apartment so we figured this must be the place.”

“You should have a badge,” he told her, and broke off as Stobert came in, pushing the professor before him. “This the guy?”

Strong looked around, dazed. When he saw Boren’s body, he relaxed a little. “So they got him?”

Lennox nodded. “And her. Who is she, Ed?”

Strong said: “Her name is Delia West. She used to be a muscle dancer on the carnival circuit, I found her picture in an old *Billboard*.”

Lennox said, “Have you still got that passport?”

Strong glanced at him sharply, then drew a leather booklet from his pocket and handed it over. Lennox relayed it to Spellman. “That should prove this girl’s identity.”

The detective captain took it without comment.

Lennox said: “Tell them about it, Ed. Tell them how you found the doped girl in Madam Honia’s, how we bailed her out, and what you did with her.”

Strong cleared his throat. He was very nervous. “There’s not much to tell. I was over at Honia’s the other night and I happened to see this kid. She was doped, which made me look at her close. She’s the spitting image of what Mary Morris was forty years ago.

“I guessed something was wrong then so I went over to see Tina Kingstone. I used to know her in Chicago. I put on the pressure and she talked. She told me that Boren had snatched this kid off the boat when she came back from France and that they had substituted this muscle dancer in her place. The Kingstone dame was wise. Somehow, she’d gotten hold of the passport. I made her give it to me. I was going to show Mary, but first I wanted to get the doped kid away from Honia’s.

“But before I could do a thing, Heyworth got himself killed, and then Kingstone. That scared me. I got drunk, and while I was drunk I went back to Honia’s to have another look at the doped kid. The joint was raided. Lennox bailed us out. He took the doped girl out to Miss Hobbs and I got her from there.

“I started to take her over to Mary’s, but when I got there, I saw this fake Jean Jeffries coming out. It scared me so I drove the girl down to the beach and kept her out in the open until the dope wore off. At night, I started to take her back to my place, but there were a couple of Inky Kreach’s men waiting. They got her, but I managed to slip away in the darkness.

“I saw a paper, saw Mary Morris was dead and that the maid claimed that no one had been there. I knew she was lying for I’d seen this muscle dancer going in myself. So I hunted up Lennox. We went over there and then came here.”

Spellman said, “That’s pretty confused, but it should do for now. What gets me is why Boren kept the doped gal alive. It would have been much easier to kill her.”

Lennox told him: “I think I can explain that. You see, he didn’t trust Delia.” He looked toward the handcuffed girl. “As long as the real Jean was alive, he could always have traded her to the grandmother for dough if Delia got out of line.”

Delia West spat at him. Suddenly she reached out her manacled hands and grabbed Stobert’s gun. She brought it up, pointed directly at Lennox. But the professor was closer. He jumped forward, just in time to receive the bullet in his thin chest.

Stobert had gone into action. His beefy hand caught the side of the girl’s head and knocked her sideways. “Jeeze,” he said as he knelt and retrieved his gun, “imagine me hitting a dame that looks like that.”

CHAPTER XII

It took all of three hours to get everything straightened out downtown. When Lennox finally left the Hall of Justice he found Nancy still waiting for him in her car.

“Get in,” she said. “You can tell me about it while I am driving you home.”

He yawned elaborately. “Home? Bed? But first I have to stop at the studio. I just talked to Spurck on the phone, and there are certain things I have to explain.”

She said: “You’re a fool. You’re a sucker for punishment. After the way they treated you, I’d never go near that studio again. But, Bill, tell me about things. There are a lot of angles that I don’t get. How did Boren manage to substitute the girl?”

“Boren was Mary Morris’ ex-manager,” Lennox explained. “I didn’t recognize him with the beard and the eyeglasses until you made that crack about Mary fighting with her manager. He knew a lot about her affairs and Jean remembered him, so when he met her at the boat she didn’t know that anything was wrong.

“Apparently he’d bribed a waiter at Austin’s hotel to slip something into the food which made the attorney ill so Austin did not meet! the ship. Delia West, posing as Jean, came to the hotel, and Austin had no reason to suspect anything.

“I got suspicious when I recognized Boren finally. It seemed more than a coincidence that the girl was living at an apartment house owned by Mary’s ex-manager, so I wired the theatrical papers and the big bookers all over the country, asking if they knew a dancer who recited Chaucer when she was drunk. The answer came back—Delia West.”

“But Heyworth, and Tina Kingstone. It doesn’t make sense.”

Lennox sighed. “I suppose that I’ve got to tell you,” he admitted. “And I suppose that it doesn’t matter now, but neither Boren nor the West girl killed Heyworth and Kingstone. The professor did; he’s dead, protecting me, and I’d just as soon that the cops never found out.”

“The professor killed Heyworth...” She almost ran into a streetcar. “Bill, you’re nuts. What makes you think so?”

He drew the picture which he had taken from Strong’s trunk out of his pocket. “You can’t see very well without a glass, but those knives he’s holding have peculiar handles. They’re carved in a design. I’ve never seen anything like them save once. The handle of the knife which killed Heyworth was carved in a like manner.

“But that isn’t all. The professor had that passport. He claimed that Tina Kingstone gave it to him. But something was taken from her stocking on the night that she was murdered, and I think it was the passport.”

“Now, Bill, listen...”

He cut her short. “Here’s what happened, I think. I’m only guessing, and we’ll never know exactly what happened, because only Strong could tell us and he’s dead.

“I think that on the night Heyworth was killed, Strong was in the Beverly Derby and saw Jean Jeffries go out with Heyworth. At that time, he thought that the girl was actually Mary Morris’ granddaughter, and he didn’t approve of her playing around with Heyworth.

“He followed them. Now I’m still guessing, but what Delia West just told the police seems to bear me out. It seems that Tina Kingstone had known Delia West in the east, and she recognized her, here in Hollywood. Naturally she wanted to know what was going on, and when she found out she declared herself in on the play. She stole the passport and kept it, just to make certain that Boren and the West girl didn’t forget to pay her off when the clean-up came at the time of Mary’s death.

“That wasn’t so bad, but Kingstone got tight one night when she was out with Heyworth and blabbed the whole works. He wanted a cut. He threatened to tell Mary the whole thing. Kingstone told Boren and the West girl that, if they could get Heyworth to come to the apartment, she would handle him, so West saw him in the Derby and got him the message. He took Kitty Foster home and then went to West’s apartment. She left him alone with Kingstone. In the morning, when she found the body, both she and Boren assumed that Kingstone had killed him and didn’t worry too much until Kingstone was murdered that night. Then they

got scared. Each thought that the other had done the killing.

“They moved the doped girl over to Madam Honia’s in case the police searched the whole apartment house.”

“But...”

Lennox said: “Now, as I said before, I think that the professor followed Delia West, thinking that she was really the granddaughter. He went up to her apartment and found Heyworth struggling with a girl. He threw the knife, killing Leon, then he realized that the girl wasn’t the one he had been following but Tina Kingstone. He’d known her in Chicago. He had enough on her so that he thought that she would keep quiet. Together they hid the body under the bed and he left since he had an early morning call.

He worked on the set all day. In the evening, Mary Morris got a note from Kingstone and collapsed. The professor picked the note up from the floor and must have read it. He thought that Kingstone was going to expose him, hurried over to her apartment, and shot her. As she fell, he saw that there was something in her stocking. He pulled it out, starting the run, and was surprised that it was a passport.

“From the picture, he knew that Delia West was not the real granddaughter. On the following evening he was over at Honia’s and saw Kreach’s men bring the doped girl up the stairs. He recognized her from the passport picture, and he didn’t know what to do.

“While he was trying to decide, he went out and got drunk, trying to build up his courage, I suspect. At any rate, I saw him at Lowry’s, followed him back to Madam Honia’s, and finally sent him home.

“But he came back and went up to try and rescue the girl by himself. I saw him as I was leaving and followed him up the stairs to the doped girl’s room. I guess he told the rest of the story pretty straight.”

Nancy said, “And if he hadn’t butted in, Boren and the West girl would have killed Mary, gotten her money and never been suspected.”

William Lennox yawned. “I don’t think that they meant to kill Mary at first. Mary was old. The chances were that she wouldn’t live very long. They could

afford to wait. But after Ed and I bailed out the doped girl, they had to move fast.

“They sent out Kreach’s men to try and get the girl back, and also to wipe me out before I talked. They killed Mary, and they also put a watch on Ed Strong’s boarding house.”

Nancy sounded very reproachful. “You knew all this, you used me to help, and yet you never once told me what was going on.”

Lennox looked at her. “Look, Nancy...” he was trying to find words for what he wished to say. “I... I didn’t know very much. I couldn’t figure out what Ed’s motive was. I think I understand now. Mary was an old friend. He was trying to save her some grief. He butted in and, once in, he couldn’t get out.

“But none of it was clear enough in my own mind to discuss, even with you.”

She was partly mollified. “Well, let it go. Here’s the studio, but I wish you wouldn’t go in. Talk to Spurck on the phone, or better yet, write him a letter from New York. If you get into his office, he’ll fix it somehow so that you never get away.”

Lennox was looking at her strangely and there was a startled expression about his sleepy eyes. “Nancy,” he said, in a tone of great discovery. “Nancy, come east with me.”

She took her time to answer. “No Bill, not now.” Her voice was level with carefully controlled feeling.

His face fell. He was like a small, disappointed child. It was all that the girl could do to keep her hands from reaching out for him.

“I’m a fool,” he told her. “You’ve been nice, and kind, and swell. Always a man misunderstands.”

She said, “It isn’t that.”

“Then who is it?”

She managed to laugh at him. “It isn’t anyone else either, Bill. It’s you. You have to know your own mind. You have to be sure—oh, I know.” She stopped him as

he would have spoken. "You think that you do. You're with me now, near me, feeling sleepy and sentimental. I want you to be away from me, to think clearly. I love you, you slob, but I won't be another Kitty Foster."

Again he would have spoken, but she stopped him. "Go on in, see Spurck, resign, and then go east. In six months, when the book is done, we'll talk again. We've been friends, Bill. We've had good times. Let's don't spoil it with something else that we aren't sure of yet."

"All right," he told her, and got out of the car. "But if you're worrying about Kitty Foster..."

She shook her head, still smiling. "I'm not worrying about Kitty. She isn't important. She isn't even an incident. It's Hollywood that I'm worried about. You're married to the picture business, Bill. I want to be certain that you can get free. I don't want to share my husband with a studio."

"I'll get free," he told her, grimly. "I've done Sol's dirty work for the last time. I'll tell him that, grab two hours' sleep, and then a plane for New York. I've got two friends in the publishing business. I can get enough of an advance to live on while I write the book."

She watched him cross the street, a tall figure, with shoulders back. A free man, slave no longer, going in to give his declaration of independence.

He was gone a long time, so long that she thought that perhaps he had fallen asleep. When he came out finally, he was still walking straight, and his tired face had a glow, put there by lively interest.

She frowned when she saw the look. "Bill, did you quit? Are you going east?"

He flushed as he got into the car. "Look, Nancy. I want you to understand."

"I understand," she said. "It's Hollywood, my boy. It's like an all-consuming octopus, reaching out its gripping arms to clasp and hold us all. Don't think that I don't understand. I've felt its pull. We're lotus eaters, William."

He said, "You don't see. I haven't changed my mind, it's just a mild delay. I had an idea for salvaging the Foster picture. It's tremendous, and only I can see it through. The book and we can wait that long. What's a couple of weeks in any

life?”

“What’s a couple of weeks, indeed.” Her old smile was back in place, and she bent forward to kiss him lightly on the lips. “Just a couple of weeks, my lad. I, too, believe in Santa Claus.”