



# Whistle Up the Devil

Derek Smith

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For information, contact: [pugmire1@yahoo.com](mailto:pugmire1@yahoo.com)

# WHISTLE UP THE DEVIL

*A Detective Story*

*Derek Howe Smith*

ROGER QUERRIN died alone in a locked and guarded room, beyond the reach of human hands. Algy Lawrence, with sleepy eyes and a lazy grin, refused to believe in ghosts. Yet with all his detailed knowledge of sealed room trickery, he could not explain the mystery of this "miracle" murder. And then, faced with a second crime which could not possibly have been committed, he began to wonder, at last, if somebody had conjured up an invisible demon who could blast out locks and walk through solid walls... *Whistle up the Devil* is an ingenious brain-teaser which plays completely fair with the reader.

"TELEPHONES," Algy told himself drowsily, "are the devil." He stretched out an arm from the blankets towards the black-enamelled receiver, stilled the persistent ringing, and yawned by way of greeting into the mouthpiece.

The tinny voice said briskly:

"Mr. Lawrence?"

"Mmmm." Algy settled himself more comfortably against the pillows.

"Chief Inspector Castle would like to speak to you."

"Steve!" Algy jerked into wakefulness, knuckling the sleep from drowsy blue eyes as he waited to talk to his old friend at Scotland Yard. "Hallo... Steve?"

"Hallo, Algy." The older man's baritone rang pleasantly over the line: cordial, yet with an odd trace of tension. "Where are you?"

Lawrence pushed the tousled blond hair away from his forehead and chuckled.

"In bed, of course. Where else, in the middle of the night?"

Castle laughed. "I thought so, you lazy young hound. Well, it's nine in the morning. And time you were up."

"Don't be tiresome, Steve." Algy yawned audibly. "Anyway," he added, remembering, "what are you doing in London? I thought you were on holiday in the country."

"I was: at Querrin House." Again that odd note of tension. "But you know the Yard, Algy. They recalled me suddenly. I've a job for you."

"I knew it" Lawrence groaned; but it was mainly pretence. Interest quickened his voice immediately. "Who's been murdered?"

"Nobody.... Yet. "

"Oh!" He hesitated. "Look, Steve. I don't think I'd be much good as a bodyguard."

"No, but—." The Inspector seemed to be finding it oddly hard to express himself. "Roger Querrin is a friend of mine. I wouldn't want to see him—that is, things are so indefinite—."

"They certainly are," said Algy kindly. "Look, Steve, you may know what you're talking about, but I don't. What do you want me to do?"

"Ah!" Castle drew in his breath with a vague sense of relief. "Well! Querrin's brother is here with me. Will you speak to him?"

"If you like. Put him on."

"No," said the Inspector, with decision. "I'd rather send him along to you."

Algy sighed. "All right. But don't forget, you damned old slave driver, I'm only an unofficial detective, and if I don't feel like handling this blasted case of yours—."

"You won't. I know." The ghost of amusement in Castle's voice suggested he had heard something very much like this before. "Just listen to young Querrin, that's all I ask." Then, more seriously: "He's worried, Algy. And so am I."

The 'phone clicked and went dead. Lawrence slid the receiver back to its cradle, blinked at it thoughtfully, then pushed back the bed clothes and swung his long legs to the floor.

He was a tall, slim, athletically-built young man in his middle twenties, fair-haired, pleasant faced, and straight shouldered. He was invariably good humoured, and despite the amiable vacancy of his expression there was the unmistakably steady gleam of a high intelligence at the back of his lazy blue eyes. But just now he looked merely sleepy.

He kicked his feet into shabbily comfortable slippers and shrugged an old grey dressing-gown over sky-blue pyjamas. He went into the bathroom, twisted the taps for his morning bath, and shaved abstractedly in front of a steamy mirror. Then lounging in the water and soaping himself absently, he began to ponder over the Inspector's call.

Did it mean another case?

Lawrence shrugged his bare shoulders. It wouldn't be the first time he had taken a hand in such matters. Scotland Yard had a healthy respect for the young man's capabilities as a detective. "Unofficially, of course," as Castle would say, screwing up his eyes and rubbing his jowl; but the regard was real enough for all that.

A short spell of Intelligence work in post-war Europe had sharpened Lawrence's appetite for detection. On leaving the Forces he had discovered

himself, like a good many other idealistic and adventurous young men, a hopeless misfit in a shabby world. He had drifted aimlessly.

Fortunately his parents, besides providing him with good health, a keen brain, and a romantic disposition, had left him an adequate private income.

And he had a good friend in Chief Inspector Stephen Castle. The burly man, shrewdly divining the young man's deep sense of frustration, had directed Algy's talents and interests into suitable channels. Lawrence had quickly proved his worth.

He was an amateur but he was also a specialist. He could never hope to handle routine work with the quiet excellence which is the hallmark of the professional; but he could tackle the bizarre and the fantastic with expert skill.

So for two years he had drifted happily on the outskirts of crime, and if he had a deeper purpose than justifying his existence by assisting the police—.

As the Inspector said:

"The results of his work are good enough."

Lawrence had dressed and had breakfast before a sharp buzz announced the arrival of his would-be client. He grinned briefly at his own reflection in a mirror in the hallway and addressed himself gravely:

"An uncomfortable heat at the pit of your stomach? A nasty thumping at the top of your head? I call that the detective fever."

And with the words of Sergeant Cuff still lingering on his lips, he clattered down the stairs towards one of the weirdest adventures of his life.

Peter Querrin walked slowly along the quiet street in Kensington with a hard line of worry cut deep at the corner of his mouth. He stopped suddenly, fumbled in the pocket of his overcoat for a cigarette, and lit it with faintly trembling fingers. Drawing the soothing smoke deep into his lungs he paced on without enthusiasm.

The tension of the last few weeks had told on him badly, Castle's stay at Querrin House had given him a sense of security, though he knew well enough he would have no real rest till the whole fantastic business was over and done with; but now Castle was gone so unexpectedly... He stopped thinking.

On that chill grey morning, while his footfall rang hard on the pavement and the wind scurried leaves in the gutter, it came to him now that his last hope was an unknown man named Lawrence.

Castle had said as much an hour ago. "Peter, I'd like to help. But I can't now. This isn't a police matter," he hesitated, "yet." The tiny word had a nasty ring in the silent room, high over the Embankment. "But Lawrence is a good man and a friend of mine. If you can persuade him to go—."

"I must," Querrin had replied with finality. But now as he stood at the door of the young man's flat, he was no longer sure of anything. Except that his brother's life depended on Lawrence's answer.

He flicked away the half-smoked cigarette and stabbed a finger at the bell push. After the tiny buzz came the clatter of feet on stairs, and the door came open in the hand of a pleasant young man with a lazy smile.

"Mr. Lawrence? My name's Peter Querrin."

"Come in. Steve—uh, Inspector Castle—said you were coming."

They went up the stairs together. Algy led the way into a room crammed with books. "A drink?"

"Please."

Under cover of some polite foolery with the decanter, Lawrence studied his visitor shrewdly. He saw a well-built young man of medium height, older than himself perhaps, but lacking any definite air of seniority. His face was pleasant without being handsome; definitely worried, and with a trace of weakness.

He took the tumbler from Algy's hand and drank quickly. The liquor flushed against his teeth and went fiercely down his throat. It made him cough, briefly, but he felt better for the warmth of it.

Lawrence flicked an eyebrow. "Another?"

"N-no, thanks." Querrin handled his glass with unnecessary care as he perched on the edge of a chair. Algy sat down opposite, produced a silver cigarette-case, and opened it invitingly. Peter brushed the offer aside almost impatiently, though without rudeness, and said abruptly:

"I need your help." His voice wavered disturbingly. Fear that he might bungle his mission made him stammer slightly. "Did the Inspector tell y-you why?"

"No, he was rather vague. Probably thought anything he said might be taken down and used in evidence. Begin right at the beginning."

"Castle's been staying with us at Querrin House," said Peter hesitantly. "He's a friend of Roger's."

"Your—."

"My elder brother." Querrin swallowed nervously, faltered, then:

"Mr. Lawrence, do you believe in ghosts?"

Algy's surprised grin pointed up the blunder. Peter banged down the empty glass, then shaded his eyes wearily. "I'm bungling this badly." He dropped his hand again and smiled without humour. "I suppose I'm too damned anxious to give the right impression."

Lawrence was soothing.

"Suppose you stop worrying about impressions and give me the facts."

Querrin nodded. "Yes. Well!" He steadied himself with an effort. "I'll have to tell you something about our family history, I'm afraid."

"Go ahead."

Peter said jerkily:

"The Querrins have lived for years in a little village called Bristley, not far outside London. That is, we've always kept up Querrin House, though we've been mostly too poor to live in it, properly speaking. Anyway, Roger re-opened it recently. He's a pretty shrewd business man and he's got the money to do it. My brother has more or less restored the family fortune, you might say. We've had some bad times in the past—still, that's nothing to do with the story."

The words were coming to him more easily now. Lawrence lounged in his chair, discreetly silent.

"Like a good many old families, we have our own particular legend, tradition, or secret—whatever you like to call it. Ours is mild enough, I suppose, but the village gossips have given it a share of—of spurious glamour and mystery." He paused uncertainly, and realized with a vague uneasiness, it had been in just these words that the tale had been told a few weeks before, at the dawn of the terror. He drew in his breath and shook off the phantoms.

"They say the Querrins had a secret handed down from father to son for generations. And it really was a secret, too. Nobody ever knew except the head of the family and his heir."

Lawrence shifted suddenly and made as if to speak, but changed his mind and relaxed again instead.

Peter went on slowly:

"There was something of a ritual to all this, down the years. One month before the Querrin heir was to be married, his father would pass on the secret. Always alone," he hesitated, "always at midnight, and always in the same room. We call it the Room in the Passage."

"Well! This went on for years. Nothing much happened, except we were usually thought of as rather on the gloomy side, with a taste for the morbid and all that, until the story takes a nasty turn round about the middle of the nineteenth century.

"The head of the family then was a violent-tempered old martinet named Thomas Querrin. He had a son named Martin, who was equally wild and unprincipled. He was more than a match for the old man, by all accounts, though they stayed on fairly good terms till the young man decided to get married." Peter's eyes had shadowed. He seemed to be wandering in some misty country of the mind, only half aware of the other young man who was listening so patiently.

"They went through the usual ceremony, but this time something went wrong. Badly wrong.

"The servants were roused by the sounds of a violent quarrel in that old Room in the Passage. Knowing old Thomas as they did, they didn't interfere, until—."

Querrin broke off and shrugged.

"Well, they heard a rather beastly scream, and then there was only silence. When they finally found the courage to go along to the room, they found young Martin lying on the floor with a knife between his shoulder blades, and his father sprawled in the corner in a fit."

There was a tiny silence. Lawrence broke it. "What happened then?"

Querrin started. It had been just that question which another had asked before.

He said softly:

"They never discovered what the quarrel was about. The old man died without recovering consciousness, and the secret died with him.

"The line carried on through a younger son, and with the famous old secret lost for ever, the Querrins were a humdrum crowd now.

"Except for one thing. A rather nasty old story began to grow up round that Room in the Passage. Village talk had the old man's spirit lingering there for all time, waiting for the Querrins to keep their traditional appointment. If they accepted the secret courageously and respectfully, everything was fine. If they didn't—."

He stopped.

"Yes?"

"They died like Martin."

And Peter Querrin, his tale completed, saw himself again with his brother, a girl, and the promise of death.

Audrey Craig, with a shiver, said:

"How horrible!"

Roger Querrin laughed. "You tell the story well, Peter. Almost as if you believed it."

Peter said queerly: "Don't you?"

His brother's eyes, lit with a smiling tenderness, slid back to the girl's.

He replied obliquely:

"I have a weakness for these old traditions."

Audrey reached over and squeezed his hand gently, then turning back to Peter:

"But it is an old wives' tale, surely. I mean, there haven't really been any unexplained deaths here?"

The young man's gaze flickered uneasily round the room. A dim sense of evil, as yet undefined, seemed to be seeping into him like a presentiment. "Not to my knowledge, no. Though Bristley has it otherwise."

Roger stood up. "It's a good story, anyway." He added thoughtfully: "It might be—interesting to put it to the test."

Audrey's grey-green eyes rounded, and Roger smiled at her again. He was very like his brother, but sturdier in build, and with an air of strength and decision rather lacking in the younger man. He was very much in love.

"Well, darling, there it is. The curse of the Querrins. Still want to marry me?"

"More than ever." The curve of her lips was adorable. "Besides, it's not really a curse. And I don't believe a word of it."

"Well, now." Roger smacked his hand on the mantelpiece. "That's the story. This is the room. It could even be," and his gaze went upwards, "that that's the dagger."

Peter sounded angry. "Stop it, Roger!" He finished in half apology: "You're frightening Audrey."

She laughed. "No, he isn't. That is, not really." She looked up to where the knife hung over the mantel. "Though it looks evil enough."

Roger stretched up his hand and slipped the blade free from its sheath. He tested its edge on his finger. "It's sharp enough, too."

Peter said, not loudly:

"Put the damned thing back."

Roger stared at him.

"What's the matter?"

"I d-don't know. I've got the jitters this evening. Put it back, old chap."

The elder man reached up again, and the dagger slid home with a tiny "click!" against its casing.

Peter muttered: "Thanks,"

Audrey smiled at him. "You told that story too well," she murmured. "You nearly scared yourself."

The young man grinned back at her, though briefly. "Perhaps. I don't care for this room, anyway. This is the first time I've been near it since the house was re-opened."

Roger eyed him affectionately. "You're too imaginative." He added, with mock reproach: "And not very loyal. You ought to be proud of our family ghost."

Audrey commented:

"I don't see why. You couldn't call him a very likeable skeleton for the Querrin closet."

"Careful, darling. Do you want the old boy to take a dislike to you?" Roger stood with his back to the fire: a traditional stance, and one he loved.

"There's a thought," said Audrey lightly. "Do you think he'd approve of me?" Roger's eyes shuttered.

He said slowly:

"I've a damned good mind to ask him."

It took a long second for the exact implications of his casually appalling remark to reach the girl's consciousness.

Then she paled and began to whisper:

"Oh, no, dearest, I didn't mean ...."

But the sharper reaction was Peter's, for it was at this moment that the vague sense of evil oppressing him was obscure no longer: and it struck at him with sudden force.

He cried out violently:

"Damned is the word! Have you gone insane?"

It was a mistake, and he knew it immediately. There was a strong streak of obstinacy in his brother's make-up and opposition often hardened his determination.

Roger replied, with a dangerous politeness:

"I don't think so."

Audrey moved nearer, putting a hand on his shoulder. He smiled at her, bent his head and kissed her fingers.

She asked haltingly:

"But you didn't mean what you said. Seriously?"

His eyebrows went up. "Darling. We'll be married soon. I ought to keep my appointment with old Thomas if he intends to be here." He laughed. "Which I doubt."

Her voice had a hint of tears.

"But why must you do this?"

"The old yarn is something of a challenge. I feel I ought to accept it...." He laughed again, while the fire glowed ruddily behind him.

"Besides, it might be amusing— to whistle up the devil."

"Amusing," agreed Algy Lawrence, "but dangerous."

Querrin started. He had been so completely reliving the scene in memory that the quiet voiced comment jarred him oddly. He had, of course, been talking aloud and describing the episode exactly. Now he felt so played out emotionally, he knew he could put no clarity of expression into what came next, and the old deadly sense of failure swept over him again. But he struggled on with the appeal he had to make.

"We—we tried to dissuade him. But Roger's an obstinate man. He'd think it an admission of—of cowardice, or weakness, or something to back down now. ... He just laughs at us—says he can't see what's troubling us, as there's no real danger...."

"Well," said Lawrence mildly. "Is there?"

Peter stared at his polite unmoved face and replied wretchedly:

"I don't know. It's that I have such an oppressive sense of—of fear, and anger...." Even to himself, the words seemed lame and unconvincing. He tried to compensate with more feeling in his voice, then realized disgustedly he was verging on the theatrical.

Lawrence wasn't insensitive to the struggle going on in his would-be client's mind, but not being a psychologist, was finding it difficult to interpret. He was human enough to be slightly irritable about it, too: he didn't like mystery at both ends of his cases.

Querrin ploughed on.

"Inspector Castle is a friend of my brother's, and luckily he arrived for a visit a week or two ago. I had a talk with him right away and he promised to help. I've felt—more secure, since then." He realized with relief that the truth of this at least had managed to spill over into his voice. "But now he's had to leave us and—and...."

Lawrence said: "And you need a new guardian angel. Is that it?" Peter said defeatedly:

"More or less."

Algy nodded, not unsympathetically, but it was fairly obvious his mind was made up.

"Look, Peter, this is quite a story you've told me, but honestly, I don't see how I can help." He stood up and strolled over to the window, looking down into the quiet street.

"I'm only an amateur, you understand. I tell you frankly, I'd be no good as a bodyguard."

He turned round, resting his shoulder against the frame. He said slowly: "If one man's out to kill another—really determined, that is—the chances are he's going to do it. And nothing I could do would stop him." He smiled suddenly to take some of the grimness from his words. "That sounds brutal, but it's true."

"Now you want me to look after your brother. Peter, that's no job for an amateur. I can recommend a dozen good private detective agencies who might take this work in the ordinary way."

"But this—." He shrugged helplessly. "You can't ask them to catch a ghost!"

"That's why," said Querrin helplessly, "I'm asking you."

Lawrence shook his head. He said gently:

"I'm sorry. You'll have to find someone else."

Querrin said hoarsely:

"There's no time to find anyone else. Roger's—appointment is to-night." There was a silence. Then Lawrence said again:

"I'm sorry."

It was a final refusal, and Querrin took it almost with detachment. He had salvaged a queer calm from this, the ultimate collapse of his hopes.

He said:

"My train leaves Victoria Station at noon. If you change your mind," his tongue tripped, "you could meet me there."

Lawrence began to make a tiny gesture of protest, then inclined his head in acknowledgment.

Twenty minutes later, Querrin had gone, but Lawrence was still slouched in the easy chair, staring opposite at where his visitor had been seated.

He said, aloud: "But how could—?"

And: "Why should Steve—?"

Then explosively: "Oh, hell!"

And he grabbed hat and raincoat and clattered impatiently down the stairs.

Algy Lawrence had completely regained his calm by the time he sauntered through the open gates and past the high stone pillars at the entrance of New Scotland Yard.

As he walked inside the building, the attendant policeman gave him something like a smile of welcome. The tall young man in the grey raincoat and crushed green hat was popular with the men of the C.I.D.

Algy murmured a question.

The reply came promptly. "Yes, Mr. Lawrence. The Chief Inspector's here, but I'm not sure if he's free. If you'll wait, I'll ring through and inquire."

Algy nodded his thanks and teetered on his heels while the constable spoke softly into the 'phone.

"He'll see you, sir. You know the way?"

Lawrence nodded again. As he wandered along endless bare corridors and up interminable stairs, he felt grateful that his friendship with Castle spared him the tyranny of form filling which is usually coupled to such requests for interviews.

Beating a cheerful tattoo on the drably familiar door, he pushed it open after the gruff but friendly response from within.

"Hi, Steve."

"Hallo, Algy." Castie swung round in the swivel chair —laboriously acquired, and in itself eloquent acknowledgment of his rank—and waved the young man to a seat.

The Inspector was a large man, urbane and shrewd of eye. He had an explosively good-humoured air that was disconcerting till you knew him, and beneath his frequent air of exasperation an inexhaustible fund of patience.

He was devoted to his wife and family and he was also a ruthlessly unsentimental man-hunter.

Just now, he seemed a trifle tense. Algy remembered the odd note he had caught earlier that morning.

Castle said, without preamble:

"So you turned young Querrin down."

"That's right." Lawrence tossed his hat at a coat-rack in the corner. It landed on the battered old raincoat which was almost the Inspector's badge of office.

Algy settled in a chair and eyed his old friend reproachfully.

"I turned him down," he repeated. "Did you expect me to do anything else?"

The Inspector countered this question with another.

"What's the matter—don't you believe in ghosts?"

"I live," said Lawrence carefully, "in the cold draught of a perpetually open mind. So maybe there are ghosts and maybe there aren't. But that's not the point, and you know it. I'm a detective, not a specialist in psychical research."

"Oh!" Castle began to thumb tobacco into the bowl of a villainous pipe. Then he said quietly:

"I'm asking you as a personal favour, to go down to Bristley this afternoon."

Lawrence looked at him sleepily.

He said:

"I'll go."

Then, as the Inspector bowed his head in an unspoken thank you, "Now tell me why."

Castle drew heavy brows together in a scowl.

"The devil of it is," he answered frankly, "I don't really know."

"Oh fine," said Lawrence sardonically. "Look, Steve, are you being troubled by the supernatural or indigestion?"

Steve chuckled deep in his throat. "Don't try so hard to be unsympathetic, Algy. You're overdoing it." He dropped the charred stump of a spent match into the ashtray, and began to draw comfortably on his pipe.

He went on soberly:

"We deal in facts here, not fantasies. And if the Commissioner could hear me now I'd probably be retired immediately. But I tell you now, and against all reason," and his voice rang loud in the silent room, "there's the smell of death in Querrin House."

Algy grinned lazily.

He said:

"Let's not play bogey-man, Steve. If you've smelt death and evil, you've reacted to a *human* intelligence."

Castle nodded slowly.

Lawrence went on: "If there's one thing that's certain in this business, it's that Peter Querrin is scared sick.

"You may be worried, but he's nearly off his head."

Castle said:

"It's his brother."

The amiable vagueness in his young friend's eyes had deepened to absolute vacancy.

Algy's brain was working hard. He murmured:

"Let's analyse this. Querrin believes his brother is in danger. Why? Does he really believe in this ghost he talks about so much?"

The question wasn't wholly rhetorical. Castle replied thoughtfully:

"I don't know the boy very well. It's hard for me to gauge his feelings exactly. I'm not even sure he knows them himself. I'd say,"—he scratched his jowl—"I'd say he's obsessed with the sense of a relentless evil."

"I'd say," supplied Lawrence with a flickering smile, "that you are obsessed with his premonitions." He stressed the pronouns heavily, and the Inspector nodded a rueful agreement.

Algy drawled:

"That doesn't help us much. If you've reacted so strongly to him"—he stifled a yawn—"it's because he has reacted to someone else."

Castle repeated gently: "Some *one*?"

"Of course." The corner of Lawrence's mouth twitched upwards, showing the teeth in his upper jaw. "Let's leave poor, dead old Thomas Querrin in peace. Doesn't Roger's—urn, appointment, mean a golden opportunity for a flesh and blood killer to strike and vanish—."

He broke off, then finished flippantly: "With a flash of fire and the odour of burning sulphur."

He waved his hand and there was quiet in the room once more. Then the Chief Inspector smiled benignly.

"Of course," he said. "I saw that from the first."

The two men regarded each other with affectionate reproachfulness.

"You couldn't," remarked Lawrence with the hint of a rebuke, "have told me at the start? Instead of letting loose Peter with his brouhaha of family curses and homicidal ghosts?"

Castle put up a warning hand. "Don't let me mislead you, young Algy. If I begin thinking about murder, it's because I'm a soured old policeman and just naturally suspicious. I had nothing to go on. Otherwise I'd have called in the local police like a shot. Though in a sense," he added rather sheepishly, "I've done that already."

"The devil you have," said Algy (and reflected that mention of his Satanic majesty had crept far too often into the affair as it was): "I hope they have a broad-minded Chief Constable."

"My God," said Steve, profanely horrified, "I haven't done it officially. A nice fool I'd look. I've quite enough to put up with as it is. Hardinge has been giving me some very queer looks lately."

"Hardinge?"

"The local police sergeant. I had to take him into my confidence."

"Suppose you tell me exactly what you have done. I'm still groping round in a fog."

"Right." Castle began to puff vigorously at the pipe, and a blue haze eddied round his greying hair. "Well! When I got down to Bristley—and I went there for peace and quiet, the Lord pity me—what do I find but the house in a kind of polite but desperate turmoil; and all because my benighted friend Roger Querrin insists on spending the night in a haunted room."

"Turmoil my foot," said Lawrence disrespectfully. "You mean you were met at the door by young Peter with all his troubles instead of 'Welcome' on the mat."

His flippancy sounded a trifle forced.

Castle said:

"Not only Peter. Miss Craig, Roger's fiancée, is worried too. She's a nice girl, and deuced attractive." He squinted at Algy thoughtfully. "You'll like her."

Laurence felt his pulse skip unaccountably; and was annoyed.

"If she is so worried," he said with a shade of irritation, "Why doesn't she persuade Roger to call the whole thing off? She ought to have the most influence, goodness knows. "

"It's not so easy," returned Castle with a frown. "Querrin's a friend of mine and a decent fellow, but he's bloody obstinate too. An iron will or a pig

head, it's much the same in the end.

"Dammit, I asked him to drop the business myself and got laughed at for my pains."

"I don't think I like your Roger," said Lawrence dryly. "Maybe he thinks of himself as the one sane man in a world of craven half-wits."

Castle shook his head. "That's not very fair, Algy. He thinks Peter is making a fuss about nothing—as he may be, for all we know—that there's no danger and that it would be a sign of weakness to stop now." Steve twisted in his chair, which creaked in protest. "It's all in character, I can tell you that much. Roger has just enough sense of tradition to take an odd kind of pride in a family legend, just too little imagination to be afraid of the supernatural and just enough bravado to challenge it."

"Thank God I'm a coward," interposed Lawrence cheerfully. "Carry on."

"Well, Peter told me the story and asked me to help. Exactly what he expected me to do, I don't think either of us knew.

"Now whether he'd reacted unconsciously to the hidden menace of an atmosphere *or* a person, it was obvious he saw danger or death creeping round his brother like something physical... Blast it, he convinced *me*. Anyway, more to restore Peter's peace of mind than for any other reason, I took over."

"And did what?"

"Well," and the Inspector looked embarrassed, "there wasn't much I could do about the ghost. But I could at least see there wasn't any funny business otherwise."

"I suppose," murmured Algy, "you planned a guard for Roger on the night in question?"

"Which is to-night, incidentally. Yes, I did. Peter and I hammered out a scheme between us. Now," Castle tapped the desk top thoughtfully, "with us in the house were the girl and her uncle, who'd invited himself there on the strength of his niece's engagement. I couldn't use them, obviously. This was no work for a woman, and as for Russell Craig"—Steve gestured descriptively—"I wouldn't trust him to guard a hole in the road. Still, I needed assistance. This job called for a division of forces. Since Peter's too nervous to be left on his own, I decide I wanted a new recruit."

"And that," hazarded Lawrence, "is where you called on the local coppers."

"Yes. Fortunately," mused the Chief Inspector, "the local Sergeant is a decent chap. I gather Peter had already thought of him, too; though he would never have found the nerve to pitch him a tale like this. I hardly managed to do it myself. Still, Hardinge didn't tell me I was off my chump though he probably thought it. Here's what we agreed to do—."

Castle went into details. Lawrence nodded occasionally. And the villainous pipe smouldered and died unnoticed.

The Inspector leaned back at last and sighed.

"There it is." He slapped his hand heavily on the desk top. "Now it's up to you."

"All right, Steve." Lawrence stood up, strolled over to the coat-rack, retrieved his hat and squashed it on the back of his head. "I'll take over."

"Thanks, Algy." The Inspector hesitated. Then as the young man made to leave, Castle put words to a question which had puzzled him for two years.

He said abruptly:

"Just what do you get out of all this?"

Lawrence paused with his hand on the door-knob. He glanced over his shoulder, his face relaxed and impassive. He said politely:

"Maybe I just like to play detective."

Castle shook his head. "That's not the reason. At least, not wholly. You're not like that young scoundrel Vickers." —and the inspector smiled affectionately as he thought of another friend with a taste for detection—"It's all a game to him. But with you, it's different. If I wasn't afraid of being pompous," he hesitated, "I'd say you considered it your legitimate work for society."

"The trouble with you is," said Lawrence, "you're stuffy." Then he showed white teeth in an easy, pleasant smile. "And I'm incurably—romantic. So long, Steve."

The door plopped shut behind him.

Peter Querrin, his face taut, stared along the platform. High overhead, the hands on the clockface pointed up the urgency of his vanishing hopes. There were only five more minutes to go. Meanwhile the noise and the tension rolled round the high vaulted roofs; the station seemed as impatient as he.

A newer clamour clawed up through the din: the crash-slam of doors along the drab length of the train. Peter shrugged helplessly. Lawrence wasn't

coming. It was finished before it began. And Roger—Peter climbed back into his compartment.

He stared without vision out the windows, hardly noticing that his train had left the station.

The compartment door slid open and somebody stepped in from the corridor. Peter didn't look round. He was in no mood for company. A voice said mildly:

"I nearly missed you."

Querrin's head moved slowly, so slowly in fact, that Lawrence thought for a moment that Peter hadn't recognized his voice. Then their eyes met and he knew himself mistaken.

Querrin said inadequately:

"I'm glad you came."

"I thought you might be," grinned Algy. He swung a zippered grip on to the seat beside him, stretched out his long legs, sighed, and relaxed in a corner.

It seemed very likely he thought further comment unnecessary, but the varying shifts of relief and apprehension had driven Peter into an emotional confusion that fumbled for relief in talk.

He asked:

"What changed your mind?"

"Mmmm? Oh, Steve can be very persuasive."

Peter stammered:

"I ought to t—thank you—."

"Wait," said Algy dryly, "till I do something useful. I've never met a ghost before."

Querrin flushed.

"I know it sounds ridiculous. But I'm worried."

Lawrence eyed him shrewdly. Then he leaned forward and tapped him sympathetically on the knee. "I know you are. Believe me, I wouldn't have risked breaking my neck by scrambling on this blasted train at the last minute if you weren't. I'll do all I can to help."

He leaned back again and rested his arm on the bag beside him. Querrin glanced at it. He said politely:

"I hope you had time to pack all you need."

Algy grinned. "I shan't need much more than a tooth brush." He added mildly: "And this."

He had unzipped the bag and was groping inside it. Then something gleamed dully in his hand. Peter Querrin saw with a slight shock of surprise that it was an automatic pistol.

Lawrence slipped out the cartridge clip and examined it. Then he smacked home the magazine with the heel of his hand and looked up with a slight glint of amusement in his lazy blue eyes. He said:

"This wouldn't be awfully effective against a ghost."

The gun snout moved in a gentle arc. "But it does have its uses." Peter Querrin made a tiny sound deep in his throat.

Lawrence said quietly:

"Let's be frank. Are you sure you've told me everything?"

Querrin said:

"Put that thing away."

"Does it bother you?"

Peter said flatly:

"I don't like guns."

"Neither do I." Algy thumbed down the safety catch and slipped the pistol into his pocket. "But then I don't like murderers either. Which is the main reason why I carry it. "

"The point is," said Peter with a trace of humour, "the point is, do you use it?"

Algy chuckled. "Not often. Steve doesn't like me to shoot people." His eyelids drooped. "I asked you a question, Peter."

Querrin made a brief, oddly despairing motion with his hand. "I've told you all I know."

Lawrence shook his head. "No. Never mind the family ghost. I'm a detective, remember. I want to know if your brother has any *human* enemies."

Something stirred at the back of Querrin's eyes and his mouth slackened suddenly. He said: "Oh," very quietly.

Lawrence grinned again. He said:

"You see what I mean. Secrets are hard to keep in a small village. You have servants, I suppose? They might be talking." Algy stopped smiling.

He finished grimly:

"Anybody may hear of your brother's intentions. And Bristley wouldn't be particularly surprised to hear tomorrow that Roger had come to some harm. Old Tom has an evil reputation."

His voice dropped. "Roger will be alone to-night. He'll be an inviting target. It's my business to see nobody takes a shot at him."

Peter seemed upset. "The Inspector thought this, too?"

"Of course. Why else should he call in Sergeant Hardinge?"

Querrin nodded slowly.

Lawrence said:

"Well then. Let's look for a motive. Who would be interested in your brother's—death?"

It was the first time the word had passed between them, and it had an ugly sound. The train's whistle blasted shrilly, and Peter began to speak hurriedly.

"Turner," he said, as though the name hurt his mouth "Simon Turner. He's the only one. The only man you could call Roger's enemy." He paused, then added: "As far as I know." He looked at Lawrence reproachfully, "I didn't want to tell you all this. It sounds so feeble."

"Never mind. Who is Simon Turner?"

"You remember I told you Querrin House had been closed for years. Well, old Simon was the caretaker who looked after it for us. He's a queer, skinnily built old fellow, crusty as the devil—and more than a little touched if you ask me. He'd lived in the house nearly all his life and looked on the place as his own."

Peter shrugged nervously. "I expect you can see what's coming. We re-opened the building and had trouble with him right from the start. Roger had the place entirely re-decorated and repaired, and Turner didn't like it. One way or the other, he made such a nuisance of himself we had to get rid of him. Roger offered him a fair pension, of course, but insisted Simon left the Querrin House at once."

"I can guess the rest," murmured Algy. "The old boy cut up rough?"

"Yes. I told you before he seems more than a trifle mad. He went stumping about raving that Roger had robbed him of his birthright, or some such nonsense. I believe his father was some sort of old family retainer, come to think of it. Not that it makes any difference."

"Except to a mental case," replied Lawrence. "Did he threaten your brother?"

"Yes," said Peter carefully, "and no."

"That's a good answer. What does it mean?"

Querrin smiled faintly. "Sorry. This is going to sound dam' silly." He hesitated. "Simon Turner threatened my brother with—the ghost."

"Did he now." Lawrence seemed to be falling asleep. "How, exactly?"

"He said Roger could do what he wished but he'd never escape the wrath of old Tom Querrin."

"That doesn't have to mean anything," returned Algy quietly. "Turner may believe what he says. But the wish can be father to the thought."

Peter said wearily:

"It's all very silly at second hand. You didn't see the cold malevolence on the old man's face."

Algy Lawrence studied him in silence. Then he laughed, leaned over, and clapped a friendly hand on Ouerrin's shoulder.

"Cheer up, Peter. We'll put such a guard on Roger to-night—no human hand will reach him."

Their train arrived at Bristley in the early afternoon. Lawrence had already decided upon his opening move. He needed a dependable ally, and the obvious man to approach was the local Sergeant.

Peter had been expecting this. He guided his guest towards the village police station.

It conformed to a pleasant tradition by looking exactly like the converted country cottage it was. Only the bars at the frosted windows marred its placid attraction.

The two men came to a halt outside.

Peter asked hesitantly:

"Would you rather see Hardinge alone?"

"Yes, I think so," agreed Lawrence.

A shade of relief appeared on Querrin's face at the young man's answer. Though he had been largely responsible for Castle's decision to call in the Sergeant, he hadn't been looking forward to another three-handed discussion of ways and means. Both Hardinge and Lawrence had much steadier nerves than he, and the coming interview—which might prove rather difficult—would be better left to them alone.

Algy was thinking much the same thing, though for a different reason. He was shrinking from the almost impossible task of convincing a hard headed policeman that a man might need to be protected from a ghost. "Still," he reflected cheerfully, "I can always put this blame on Steve."

Peter said:

"I'll take your bag and put it in your room." He paused. "Shall I wait here, or—."

Lawrence cut him short. "Don't bother, I'll find somebody to direct me to the house."

He grinned. "See you later."

Querrin nodded. He went down the street with a lighter step, swinging the zippered grip.

Lawrence turned his back on the post office across the way and went into the station.

He stepped into the porch, pushed open the inner door marked Inquiries, and found himself in the Charge Room.

The uniformed man behind the desk looked up politely. "Yes?"

"Sergeant Hardinge?"

"That's right."

"My name's Lawrence," Algy began, a trifle diffidently. A bright self confidence in his intellectual capabilities still hadn't yet endowed him with the traditional brashness of the amateur detective.

Hardinge smiled, stood up and came round the desk to shake hands. "Why yes, sir. Chief Inspector Castle 'phoned me you were coming."

Relieved to find that his friend had prepared the way, Algy regarded his new ally with amiable interest. Hardinge was a short thick-set man of around forty. Grizzled grey hair cropped close to his skull, a dapper moustache, and an upright bearing intensified his noticeably military air. He had keen blue eyes (paler than the young man's own) and a pleasantly strident voice: Lawrence respected him immediately.

Their handshake was friendly and vigorous. Hardinge led the way into his living quarters. Since they adjoined the station proper, he had only to leave open the communicating door to keep an eye on his official desk and the street entrance.

"Cosy," remarked Algy, "and compact."

Possibly suspecting a shade of patronage in his London visitor's comment, the Sergeant said dryly: "This isn't the Yard. But the cells are strong enough." Then relenting, he asked: "Would you like a cup of tea, sir?"

"Don't trouble, please."

"No trouble at all, sir," said Hardinge cheerfully. "The kettle's boiling."

A persistent whistle from the tiny kitchen emphasized the truth of this, and the Sergeant disappeared.

When he returned a little while later, he discovered Algy Lawrence at his ease in a comfortable chair. Putting down the tray, Hardinge said quietly:

"A council of war, sir?"

Lawrence said frankly:

"Yes. But I'll admit I'm at a disadvantage. You know these people, Sergeant, and I don't. Peter Querrin, now. What do you make of him?"

Hardinge shrugged. "Young Mr. Querrin? A likeable man. But impressionable and nervy. And when young gentlemen are nervy," pronouncing the word with a kind of good-humoured contempt, "they imagine things."

Lawrence laughed briefly, deep in his throat. Taking the teacup offered him, he said: "Then you don't believe in the Querrin ghost?"

"Scepticism," said the Sergeant politely, "is a policeman's stock in trade."

They sat in silence for a moment, drinking a tea brewed almost black. Then Hardinge said abruptly:

"Chief Inspector Castle made certain arrangements for to-night, sir. Are you satisfied with them?"

Lawrence said slowly: "I think so. Steve's a good organizer. I haven't explored the ground yet, though."

"The layout's simple enough," supplied the Sergeant. "There are only two approaches to that room, as you'll see. You and young Querrin can take the one and I'll guard the other." He glanced out the window at a lowering rain-filled sky. "My post outside the house isn't going to be any too comfortable, I'll warrant."

"I'll take it, if you'd rather."

"No thanks." Hardinge shook his head. A slight smile played round his lips under the dapper moustache. "You keep an eye on young Mr. Peter. Else he'll see phantoms in every shadow."

Lawrence chuckled. "This business is going to look dam' funny when it goes into a report."

"No need for that, sir. To-night I'm off duty: on my own time. A private citizen, as you might say."

"That's very good of you."

"Not at all. I'm glad to help."

This polite interchange was followed by a slightly embarrassed pause. Then Lawrence said doubtfully: "You've realized—that is, I mean," he floundered, "a ghost isn't all we're worried about."

Then he looked into the Sergeant's shrewd blue eyes and stopped fumbling. Hardinge said softly:

"I understand, of course, sir."

Algy relaxed with a grin. "You don't miss much, do you?"

"We're trained to use our heads, sir." A twinkle of amusement showed in the Sergeant's voice. "And our eyes. That pistol, now—."

"Eh?"

"That pistol, Mr. Lawrence, which is ruining the hang of your coat. You do have a licence for it, I hope?"

Algy laughed. "You win, Sergeant. Yes, I do. And I'm sorry I tried to teach you your job." He sat up straight in his chair. "All right then. The question is, has Roger Querrin any human enemies?" He added slowly: "Peter suggested a man named Simon Turner."

"Old Simon Turner?" Hardinge seemed surprised.

"You sound doubtful, Sergeant."

"I am, rather. They've had words, I know. But Simon's a harmless old windbag. I doubt if he has either the brains or the courage—to stand in for a ghost."

Lawrence nodded thoughtfully. "Uh huh. I might speak to him though."

"You might," agreed Hardinge, "but you won't. The old man's disappeared."

"What?" Lawrence was mildly startled.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be melodramatic." The Sergeant stood up and began to load his tray again. Then he went back to the kitchen, saying as he went: "Turner has left the village. There's been no sign of him since yesterday."

Lawrence wondered what, if anything, the ex-caretaker's absence meant. He fished in his pocket for the silver cigarette-case, then let it slip out of his fingers again... Tobacco helped him to think but he liked his thinking to be constructive: and he needed more facts.

Hardinge came back. The young man asked a question.

The Sergeant said:

"No, I don't think it means anything—anything sinister, that is. Did I mention he left all his things at his lodgings? Well, he did." He sank back in his chair. "He's done this before, you know. He's probably gone on the booze somewhere."

Lawrence found his ally's calmness refreshing.

"That's all?"

"That's all. We don't have to worry. Believe me," said Hardinge firmly. "*Nothing* happens in Bristley."

Algy grinned. "You say that as if you were sorry."

"I am," said the Sergeant. For a fleeting moment the shadow of a deep rooted *malaise* peeped round the placidity in his eyes. "Believe me, sir, this

is no place for an ambitious man."

He said no more, but Lawrence knew what was in his mind. No chance here for the bright piece of work that means quick promotion... Then Hardinge smiled. "Still," he admitted, "the quiet life has its advantages." He changed the subject. "I'll come over to Querrin House this evening, then. Just as soon as I come off duty and have a meal."

Algy nodded gratefully. "Thanks." He stood up. "With any luck," he added, half to himself; "I'll be home to-morrow." He turned to the door, then a sudden recollection made him swing round again. "Steve will want news before I get back to London, though. Can I 'phone him from Querrin House?"

"Oh, yes." Hardinge chuckled. "Only if you've any notions of privacy, be careful what you say."

Lawrence flicked an eyebrow.

Interpreting this as a question, the Sergeant went on equably: "Our village post mistress handles all the calls. Now Miss Watson is a nice old girl, one of the best, but she does have the habit—."

"Of forgetting to hang up?"

"Exactly."

"Maybe I'd better talk in shorthand."

"It won't make much difference," said the Sergeant blandly. "I'll wager all Bristley knows why you're here by nightfall."

Algy blinked.

"Miss Watson's post office," Hardinge reminded him gently, "is opposite the police station."

"Oh." The young man grinned. "And I came here with Peter."

"Did you? Then the secret is certainly out. She must have seen you. And there's only one reason why the Querrins should be entertaining strangers to-day."

"She knows about Roger's appointment?"

"The whole village knows about it."

"I gather," commented Lawrence, "that the lady can put two and two together?"

"And make forty-four."

Algy Lawrence strolled up the drive towards Querrin House, his grey raincoat open, and his hands plunged comfortably if inelegantly in the depths of his trouser pockets. The soft green hat, crushed as usual on the back of his

blond haired head, had a certain air of jauntiness. Even his automatic pistol, thwacking as he walked, against his thigh with a troubled urgency, did little to disturb his new-found peace of mind.

Sergeant Hardinge's air of calm efficiency had impressed him greatly. He had, Algy told himself, at least one dependable ally. As for Peter... Lawrence thought rather smugly that the younger Querrin's fears were distinctly neurotic. A level headed Londoner would never have succumbed to them....

Algy continued cheerfully on his way.

He hadn't bearded the inappropriately named Miss Watson in her lair, but he had caught a glimpse of her as he left the police station. The flash of glasses behind a hurriedly adjusted curtain in the post office opposite had convinced him that the lady's official duties didn't prevent her from keeping the station under fairly constant observation.

He didn't mind. If the village knew he was there to guard Roger Querrin, idle mischief makers might be scared off. So much the better, thought Algy. I don't want trouble.

Following a bend in the path, Lawrence rounded a tall cluster of bushes, took his hands out of his pockets, and stopped in mild surprise.

A very attractive young lady appeared to be walking backwards down the drive towards him.

This, as he realized immediately, was just an illusion. The young lady was in fact staring back at the house.

Algy Lawrence had just enough time to note approvingly that her hair was a delectable shade of red-brown, sleek, and kissable, when she took another absent-minded step to the rear and stumbled into his arms.

"Oh!"

She twisted and nearly fell, but he held her securely. Then he looked into rounded, grey-green eyes; and felt his heart bump alarmingly.

He smiled down at her. "Hallo, there."

The alarm faded from her face as she smiled in return. "Hallo, yourself." The curve of her lips was intriguing. She added:

"You can let me up now."

"Oh, yes." She thought there was a distinct tinge of regret in the stranger's voice; and was flattered. He set her on her feet again and they smiled at each other once more.

Lawrence, who was an impressionable young man, decided she was lovely.

Her hair was long and curled mistily about her shoulders. Her grey-green eyes, piquant and mischievous, sloped slightly upwards; and thick lashes curved gaily at the corners. The moulding of her face wasn't classically beautiful, but it was clean and frank and free. Her hair swept softly behind her ears, leaving them bare.

She was engagingly Puckish; and wholly adorable.

Plunging slim hands in the pockets of her swagger coat, she inquired gravely:

"Mr. Lawrence, I believe?"

He returned with equal solemnity:

"Miss Craig, I presume."

Then they both laughed.

Audrey stepped forward, laid one hand on his arm, then pointed with the other towards the house.

"You're a detective," she said. "Make something of that."

Algy looked, but saw nothing unusual.

She stood no higher than his shoulder; he glanced down at her upturned face inquiringly.

"Those bushes," she said. "There by the house. They were moving."

There was no wind.

Algy Lawrence, who till that moment had felt nothing but pleasure at her touch, was conscious of a sudden chill.

Annoyed with himself, he said quietly:

"They're still, now."

His tone implied a question. She shook her head; and a wisp of hair strayed charmingly over her forehead.

"No, I didn't imagine it. Those bushes were moving. As if someone—." She broke off.

Lawrence said:

"A poacher, perhaps."

"So close to the house?"

Algy had to admit it wasn't very likely. "Does it matter though? If it was a prowler, he's gone now."

She nodded, and colour touched her cheeks. "I'm edgy and nervous, I suppose."

"Of course. You're worried about Roger."

"Yes." She shivered. "He's determined to go through with this silly business." She tried to laugh. "Imagine! A tryst with a ghost. Ridiculous, isn't it? Yet I'd do anything—to make him change his mind."

Lawrence looked into her troubled eyes and decided Roger Querrin was a stubborn idiot who didn't appreciate his luck.

"Never mind," he said quietly. "We'll look after him for you."

She slipped her arm round his, and her face was sunny again.

"You're nice," she said. "I like you."

"Thanks," said Algy; and meant it.

"Come along," said Audrey. "I'll introduce you to the rest of the family."

"Weren't you going out?"

"I was only going down to the village. Don't worry about that."

They fell into step. Lawrence thought that she moved with a superb and cat-like grace, and he liked the engaging pressure of her arm against his.

He murmured: "You mentioned—the family," and inflected the words as a question.

She looked a trifle startled, then blushed. "Oh! I meant Roger, principally." She laughed. "Imagine. Already I'm making noises like a wife."

Algy said sincerely:

"Roger's a lucky man."

"Thank you." She looked into his pleasant, lazy face; and liked what she saw. She went on:

"Then there's Uncle Russ."

Algy recalled that Chief Inspector Castle's references to Russell Craig had been anything but complimentary. He detected too an odd trace of uncertainty in the girl's tone as she mentioned the name.

It was a mixture, almost, of affection and embarrassment. Then Audrey said with amusement:

"I hope you won't disapprove of him."

"Should I?"

"Most people do, I'm afraid."

"Why?"

The twinkle of humour in her voice grew more pronounced. "He's an unhealthy influence."

Lawrence said he liked unhealthy influences.

By this time they had reached the house. Audrey drew free of Algy's arm and started up the steps, then turned back to the young man thoughtfully.

"We needn't," she murmured, "make a formal entrance."

"No?"

"No."

She hesitated. Lawrence said obligingly:

"I'm a furtive character. Sneak me in through the back."

She laughed. "I wasn't being rude. I thought you'd want to explore the ground."

Algy understood. He said:

"Hardinge mentioned there were two approaches to the Room."

(The capital letter was implicit and accepted in the minds of both: they had no need of definition.)

"That's right. From the passage; and from outside the house. That's the way"—she paused—"I'd like to show you now."

"Let's go then."

Lawrence stepped back, and the girl skipped gracefully down the steps to rejoin him.

She led the way along a flagged path that skirted the house and ran roughly parallel to its somewhat irregular contours. Between the path and the building proper lay wide, as yet unplanted, flower beds: the whole an expanse of soft brown earth broken only by a right-angled extension of the footway running up to a side door.

Audrey said:

"All this looks pretty barren now. But then, old Simon Turner was no gardener."

Algy glanced at her. She had spoken the name without any particular emphasis. He followed his thought out in words.

"Evidently you don't share Peter's suspicions."

She looked puzzled, then her face cleared again. Algy Lawrence decided approvingly that she was intelligent as well as beautiful.

"About Turner, you mean? Peter mentioned the talk he had with you." She paused. "No, I don't think old Simon's threats meant anything."

She added: "He's rather stupid."

"You don't have to be intelligent," said Algy mildly, "to be evil."

A silence fell between them.

They turned another corner. The flagged path stretched on before them under the partial shelter of leafy trees. To their left it was bordered by thickly clustered bushes; but to their right, sloping up to the house, was the usual expanse of bare brown earth.

Audrey's face had altered subtly. A pulse pounded in her throat.

She said queerly:

"That's—the room."

He let his gaze follow hers.

Large french windows, closed now, gave access to the house. Behind them a man moved dimly. Lawrence had the swift and disturbing impression of an animal in a trap.

He glanced at the girl, then stared in wonder: for her face had changed again and her eyes were bright with love.

She said softly:

"That's Roger."

Lawrence nodded and smiled, though an unreasoning envy had tugged briefly at his heart.

They stepped off the path and Algy felt his shoes sinking into the softness of the soil.

Audrey said, by way of apology:

"We've planned an extension of the path."

"Leading up to the house?"

"Yes. But these things take time."

She spoke absently. All her attention had slipped away to the sturdy man pushing open the french windows to greet them.

Algy Lawrence, with an inward sigh, allowed himself to be introduced to Miss Craig's fiancé.

Roger Querrin was a strongly built man some ten years Peter's senior. He had steady brown eyes in a pleasant unhandsome face. His jaw-line was etched with determination; strength and decision seemed apparent in the set of his shoulders.

Lawrence, regarding him with a prejudiced eye, reflected that Roger could also be a pig-headed ass.

The two men shook hands. Querrin's clasp was firm and friendly.

"Hallo, Lawrence. It's good of you to come. Though I don't mind telling you," Roger added with a smile, "you're wasting your time."

Algy grinned. He said:

"I hope so—for your sake."

Querrin stared. Then he put back his head and laughed.

"Good for you. Come in."

Lawrence walked through the open windows.

Then he stopped on the threshold, his mouth taut and unsmiling.

Perhaps it was the pinched look of fear on the girl's face as she went before him; perhaps it was the sight of Peter Querrin, standing uneasily in the shadows. Perhaps it was only the tyranny of his own imagination.

But he seemed to pass from the freedom and sanity of an outside world into the shade of a monstrous evil.

Lawrence saw with a slight start of surprise that Roger Querrin alone was quite unaffected by any premonition of danger. His laughter had sounded hollow enough, but it was entirely genuine.

His brother, however, seemed more nervous than ever. A nervous tic jumped intermittently at the corner of his mouth.

"Hallo. You found your way, then?"

"That's right," returned Algy gently. He could see that the other young man was trying to cover a deep anxiety with the tatters of banality.

Peter went on:

"I put your bag in your room." He paused. "You fixed things up—with Hardinge?"

"Thanks... Yes, I did. He'll arrive this evening."

"Eh, what's that?" Roger Querrin had caught their words, and turned away from his fiancée with a grin. "You're not dragging the good Sergeant up here too?"

Lawrence inclined his head. "That's the plan," he agreed.

"The devil take it, then," said Roger with a kind of bluff contempt. "Peter, you are a young ass. You've thrown everyone into a panic."

"Everyone," remarked Algy dryly, "except you."

Querrin might have had little imagination but he was not lacking in perception. He looked at Lawrence closely, then said quietly:

"You think I'm being unreasonable."

"Perhaps."

Audrey moved closer and put her hand on Roger's shoulder: he patted it absently, but kept his gaze on Lawrence.

"It hasn't occurred to you," he said without rancour, "that I've made no fuss about this—that I'm the only one in fact who seems to have kept his head?"

"I'd rather," said Lawrence coolly, "you kept your life."

Querrin felt the girl's fingers clutch hard on the cloth of his coat; and in the tiny silence, heard something rattle in Peter's throat.

Roger turned on his brother with something like relief.

"Peter." His voice was almost brutal. "You've gone white. Pull yourself together." He finished flatly: "You young fool."

Peter Querrin flushed, opened his lips as if to speak, then went in silence from the room.

Roger had the grace to feel slightly ashamed. When he turned back to Lawrence, the anger had died from his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But Peter's been getting on everybody's nerves, including mine."

"He's worried about you."

"I know it," said Querrin, with a good-humoured growl. "But, dammit, I didn't *ask* him to act like this." He eyed Algy shrewdly. "Be honest, Lawrence. If it wasn't for young Peter's hysteria, would you give this plan of mine a second's thought?"

Lawrence said honestly:

"Probably not. But the way things are, we'd all prefer you didn't keep this, um, appointment. What do you hope to gain by it?"

"Blast it, man," returned Querrin irritably, "I don't hope to *gain* anything. Where's your sense of tradition?"

Lawrence knew he had struck the hard vein of obstinacy in the older man's make-up, but made one final attempt to dissuade him.

"You won't change your mind?"

Roger felt the swift pressure of Audrey's fingers on his shoulder again, and he hesitated.

Then he said slowly:

"No."

The hope which had flared suddenly in the girl's eyes flickered and went out.

Lawrence said equably:

"All right, then. It's your funeral."

Querrin's mouth twisted wryly in humorous protest.

He said:

"You might have phrased that more tactfully. Come now," and he waved his hand vaguely round the room, "you don't really believe there's danger here?"

Lawrence, by this time, had thrown off the phantoms. He had surrendered his imagination to his intelligence; and now was concerned only with the threat of physical violence. Which, as he both admitted and hoped, might be entirely non-existent.

He glanced round the room with deceptive casualness. Avoiding Roger's question, he murmured:

"You haven't modernized this room much."

"No." Querrin shrugged away a slight discomfiture. "I had the whole house done over, yet somehow—."

He broke off and smiled at his fiancée. "Audrey doesn't approve. But I couldn't bear to tamper with this part of the building. That's why there's no electric light, either in here or the passage outside."

Lawrence eyed an old-fashioned oil lamp on the table and reflected on the price that is paid by lovers of the past.

Roger guessed what he was thinking.

"Don't you approve either?"

Algy said he liked his creature comforts.

"So," murmured Audrey gently, "do I."

Querrin smiled down at her. "You hate this room, don't you? You'd like to destroy it."

She nodded.

She said:

"It's so—oppressive."

It was all that, and more. Lawrence stared at the old grim-looking furniture, the long musty drapes by the french windows which were the room's only source of daylight, and the knife which hung over the mantel.

He crossed over to the fireplace and stretched up his hands to the dagger.

As the blade slipped out of its sheath, it glinted dully. He felt an indefinable sense of repulsion.

"A dangerous toy," he muttered softly.

Behind him, Audrey gave a little gasp.

Querrin said quietly:

"Put it back, Lawrence."

Algy slid the knife home again. The faint click of the blade against its casing seemed somehow very loud.

Audrey Craig said with muted urgency:

"Darling Roger. Won't you get rid of that horrible thing?"

Querrin soothed her.

"Perhaps, when our ghost is laid to-night. Till then," he finished with a smile, "I wouldn't feel justified in tampering with old Tom's property."

Lawrence asked:

"Is this really the knife that killed young Martin all those years ago?"

"It could be. Though," Roger admitted with a shrug, "we don't really know. The dagger is old enough anyway."

Audrey interrupted, with a shiver.

"Let's not talk about it."

Lawrence moved away from the fireplace. His face wore its usual expression of amiable laziness, but Audrey for one was not deceived. She knew he was inspecting the room with an eye to Roger's defence.

The fair-haired young man walked over to the french windows and examined them carefully. They could be secured top and bottom by two stout bolts. Not much danger there, he thought approvingly.

He peered through the glass panels at the double line of footprints he and the girl had left behind them. There was no way then of reaching the room from outside the house without leaving tell-tale traces... Better and better. He began to feel more cheerful.

There were no other windows, and the only remaining exit was the door in the opposite corner.

Lawrence crossed over to examine it.

The door had no bolt, but the lock was stout and new.

Algy straightened up, then looked a question.

"You see," said Roger Querrin by way of reply, "I haven't been entirely unco-operative. Steve Castle suggested a fresh lock, so I had a man down from London to-day. There's only one key. And this is it."

He pulled a key chain from his trousers pocket and showed Lawrence the bright new metal.

Algy murmured his approval. "Good. Hang on to that and we shan't have to worry about anybody making a duplicate."

Roger's eyebrows went up.

"There's no fear of that, surely?"

Lawrence was studiously banal. "You never know."

"No," said Querrin heavily. "I don't." His tone betrayed a certain impatience.

Algy said sleepily:

"Let's have a look at the passage."

He swung open the door and glanced outside.

A long corridor stretched before him between blank panelled walls towards closed double doors at the end of it. A solitary window, set half way along in the outside wall, did little to dispel the murky gloom.

Leaving Roger Querrin alone with his fiancée, Lawrence strolled out of the room and along the passage.

His footfalls were entirely muffled by a thick new carpet: the silence seemed brooding and oppressive.

Reaching the window, he examined it thoughtfully. Then he pushed up the frame and leaned out.

Immediately below, and stretching on either side, were the wide unplanted flower-beds. Straight ahead and parallel with the house, was the flagged path he had followed with Audrey Craig.

Once again, there was no method of reaching this part of the building without leaving clear traces in the soil.

He re-closed the window and pushed over the catch. All that remained now was to test its security from outside.

A voice broke in on his thoughts. He turned to find Peter Querrin at his elbow.

"C-can I help you?"

"If you like." Lawrence explained that he wanted to make sure that the window, once fastened, could not be opened from outside the house.

Peter nodded eagerly, then set off through the double doorway again.

A minute or two later, he appeared on the path outside. Walking rather gingerly over the bare brown earth, he picked up an old wooden box which was lying nearby and upturned it directly beneath the window. Using this as an improvised step, he brought himself up to a convenient level and began to rattle enthusiastically at the frame.

"All right," said Lawrence, through the glass.

Peter, however, was by no means finished. Clambering up on the wide sill, he redoubled his onslaught.

Algy, struggling with an impolite urge to laugh, waved him down. Young Querrin's unintentional comedy had at least convinced Lawrence that the

window was secure against any attack short of actual destruction.

Peter climbed down. Algy made his way along the corridor to meet him as he re-entered the house.

Pulling open the double doors, Lawrence twitched aside the curtains that barred his way and found himself in the main hall.

A broad staircase swept up to the bedrooms above. To his right a short passage led up to the side door he had noticed on his walk with Audrey.

As he watched, the door pushed open and Querrin came in from the gardens.

Peter asked nervously:

"Are you satisfied?"

"Well enough," returned Algy.

"It wouldn't matter—about the window, I mean," continued Querrin jerkily, "only Roger won't let us stand guard in the passage itself. He says he has to be alone."

Algy grinned. "You weren't proposing to squat on the mat all night, were you?"

"There isn't," said Peter anxiously, "any mat."

"I was speaking," replied Lawrence patiently, "figuratively." He hoped Querrin's jitters wouldn't get the better of him. "We can stand guard here. Hardinge will watch from the garden. There's no need to worry."

Peter nodded, and fumbled a cigarette from a crumpled packet to gently quivering lips.

Lawrence pulled out his lighter and flicked up a flame. Querrin drew deeply and felt the soothing smoke seep down to his lungs. His nerves were still bad, yet the approach of zero hour was bringing its own queer calm, and he knew he could do what was required of him.

He said:

You can rely on me, Lawrence. I'll do whatever you say."

Algy clapped him encouragingly on the shoulder. "That's the spirit." Another cliché, he thought. Yet the bromides were soothing enough.

The curtains swayed behind them, and Roger and Audrey stepped in from the passage.

The girl saw that Lawrence had at last stripped off his raincoat and was twirling his crushed green hat absently round his hand. Steve Castle would have assumed he was looking for a suitable target at which to aim it...

Lawrence had the unmistakable air of a man who delights in using the head-piece of a classical bust as a hat-rack.

Audrey said:

"I'll take you upstairs, Mr. Lawrence. You'll want to unpack."

"Eh?" Roger Querrin was recalled to his duties as host. "Oh, of course. Don't bother, Audrey. I'll show you to your room, Lawrence."

Algy followed him up the stairs.

The room to which he was shown was airy and comfortable. He prodded the bed approvingly. It was soft and well sprung. Not, as he reflected ruefully, that he would be spending much time in it.

Roger said:

"I expect you're rather hungry. Would you like some sandwiches?"

"Please."

"I'll have them sent up to you." Roger paused with his hand on the door. He hesitated. He said:

"I haven't been very gracious. I think you're wasting your time, and I've said so. Just the same," he finished awkwardly, "I'd like you to know I'm grateful."

Lawrence nodded pleasantly.

Querrin went out.

Algy dropped his hat and coat carelessly on a chair, transferred the gun to his jacket, then stretched out lazily on the bed.

It was all, he decided complacently, going to be very easy.

His eyes closed.

Somebody tapped on the door. Lawrence called out lazily. "Come in."

A tray chinked invitingly, and the appetizing aroma of coffee drifted past his nostrils.

Algy opened one eye, saw slim hands, and swung his feet hurriedly to the floor.

"Oh, it's you. Sorry," he ended vaguely.

Audrey Craig smiled at him delightfully.

"This is," she commented, "a very personal service. I hope," she added with a twinkle, "you're duly appreciative."

"I am," said Algy Lawrence, and regarded her with admiration.

She was indeed good to look upon. No longer hidden by the gay but unrevealing swagger coat, the moulding of her figure was exquisite. The

gently-swelling breasts and the curves of her beautiful thighs and legs were innocent, frank, and completely seductive.

Lawrence said sincerely:

"You're very beautiful."

"Thank you." Audrey tried to be severe, but only succeeded in sounding pleased. "Shall I pour?"

"Mmm?"

"The coffee. Shall I pour?"

"Yes please."

Audrey balanced the tray on the bed and sat down cautiously beside it. She handed the young man a steaming cup, then leaned over and put the coffee pot, for safety, on the bedside table.

Pleasantly disturbed by her nearness, he noticed a rebellious tendril had once more shaken free from her sleek red-brown hair. He put out his hand and smoothed it gently away from her forehead.

The fleeting touch, brief as it was, startled them both.

Audrey, an unwilling surprise in her grey-green eyes, said faintly: "Don't spill your coffee."

"I won't." He put the cup carefully on the table beside him.

Then he dropped his hand over hers on the coverlet.

Oddly embarrassed, the girl said quickly:

"I wanted to thank you—for looking after Roger... "

"Don't thank me."

She struggled on inconsequentially:

"And wanted to ask you—why you became a detective...."

"Don't ask me," he murmured; then moved by an impulse he couldn't explain, leaned across and kissed her deliberately, full on the mouth.

Her lips were wholly unresponsive.

He broke away and stood up with sourness on his tongue.

The girl stayed where she was, her eyes rounded and a faint tinge of scarlet on her cheeks.

Lawrence said angrily:

"You ought to slap my face."

Audrey's voice was small.

"Wouldn't that be rather—Victorian?"

"I behaved like a cad." He smiled without humour. "That's Victorian, too."

The girl said shakily:

"It was only a kiss."

He replied obscurely:

"That's just the trouble."

Audrey stood up. "I'd better go."

The door closed behind her. Algy wandered over towards the window and stood staring out with an angry frown.

A blunder, he thought savagely. Of the worst kind.

At length the old placidity returned to his face and the lazy kindness to his eyes.

"At least," he murmured aloud, "I answered her question."

For Audrey Craig, no less than Stephen Castle, had wondered why Algy Lawrence should be content to spend his life exploring the labyrinthine ways of crime.

He followed a path that was sometimes dangerous, frequently weary, and always lonely. Yet he lived by a code and he lived for a quest.

For Lawrence was seeking his lady

All thoughts of romantic adventure, however, were far from Lawrence's mind as he descended the staircase in the early evening.

He knew that Audrey Craig was a good-humoured and well-adjusted young lady, unlikely to bother herself with a grudge. The incident in his bedroom could be politely ignored with profit to them both.

Nevertheless, the mild species of madness which had led him to the blunder had emphasized his distaste for the adventure as a whole. He reflected uncharitably on the imperfections of the Querrins: the neurotic fears of one brother, and the stubbornness of the other.

The devil take them both, he thought unkindly; then laughed at his own inconsistency. Their safety was, for the moment at least, his special charge.

He didn't believe there was any real danger, but just the same he intended his precautions to be detailed and his defences impregnable.

He had already examined the servants and dismissed them as negligible, either as a force for evil or for good.

There was, however, one member of the household whom he had not yet interviewed, and he intended now to remedy the omission.

Following his nose, he pushed open the door of the drawing-room and was immediately lucky.

An elderly gentleman with a large nose and silver-grey hair was sitting by the fire beneath the discreet glow of a standard lamp. He was smoking, with evident enjoyment, one of Roger's best cigars, and he was peering through enormous horn-rimmed spectacles at a book balanced on one elegantly crossed knee.

At the young man's approach, he looked up, nodded amiably, laid his book face downwards on the arm of his chair, and levered himself to his feet.

"Ah, Mr. Lawrence, isn't it? My name is Russell Craig."

They shook hands. Algy gazed at Audrey's uncle with considerable interest.

He was already aware that Mr. Craig had invited himself to Querrin House on the strength of the engagement, nominally as his niece's chaperon, but actually to indulge in the fleshpots.

Algy, despite Castle's implied disfavour and Audrey's half-serious misgivings, liked the old rogue's looks.

He was wearing, and in this manner showing an easy blend of comfort and formality, a soft shirt with his black tie and dinner jacket. In the matter of age, he seemed poised indeterminately between the middle fifties and the early sixties. There was a lusty glow of humour in his slate-grey eyes, and his manner was both courteous and distinguished. If he had a tendency to plumpness, it was largely obscured by the expert cut of his clothes. He had moreover the bland air of a man who forgot to pay his tailor.

"Well, my boy," said Russell Craig, "how would you like a drink before dinner, hey?"

Lawrence hesitated. He was the mildest of drinkers.

"You're not," said Craig, with sudden suspicion, "a teetotaller?"

Algy smiled.

"No. Not exactly."

"Good." Uncle Russ seemed relieved. "Horrid people, teetotallers. Addicted to all kinds of strange vices I believe."

He strolled across to a decanter on the sideboard.

Algy glanced at the book he had left balanced on the armchair. He saw with pleased surprise that it was a first edition of *The Man of the Forty Faces*.

Russell Craig turned back with a glass in each hand. Handing one tumbler to Algy Lawrence, he said:

"Fine stuff this, my boy. I don't mind admitting it's the prop of my declining years. When I was young"—he drew up his mouth in a horrible leer—"I had—other diversions. But now," and he sighed, "I find consolation in the pleasures of good whisky and bad detective stories."

Algy said with a grin:

"*Bad* detective stories?"

"Yes," said the old rogue earnestly. "And I mean that as a compliment. I have no patience with the modern conception of a detective as an ordinary young man with a polite manner and a weakness for quotations. I like my sleuths from the old school—wayward, arrogant, eccentric, and infallible."

Warming to his theme, Uncle Russ picked up his novel and waved it under Lawrence's nose.

"*You've* never heard of Hamilton Cleek," he thundered. "Or the Hanshews either. Tell me," he went on, with commendable fervour, but muddled logic, "that their writing was bad, their sentimentality embarrassing, and their drama wildly funny. Tell me all that and I'll agree with you. But, by God, they used ideas!

"A man walked into a room and vanished without a trace. Or died alone, from an explosion out of nowhere. Ingenuity, my boy! Not half-baked Freudian theory.

"Meet the Vanishing Cracksman and you might find also a nine-fingered skeleton, a monster footprint, an icicle shot from a crossbow, or a camera that takes the picture of a murderer from the retina of a dead man's eye.

"The Hanshews, Thomas and Mary," and he pronounced the names with affection, "knew the true detective story was only as good as its plot."

He paused for breath.

Algy Lawrence, a twinkle in his lazy blue eye, said thoughtfully:

"Mmmm... Of course, I'm no expert. But I see that's the first edition you have there, published by Cassell in 1910. Did you know it was reissued in 1913 as *Cleek, The Man of the Forty Faces*, with three of the original stories left out, and a new one included? In the U.S.A., oddly enough, the amended text was published five years *before* the original finally appeared as *Cleek, the Master Detective*."

"My boy," said Russell Craig with a new respect, "I see I've misjudged you. Have another drink."

"I haven't," replied Lawrence hastily, "finished this one yet."

"A trifling objection," said Russell Craig. He retrieved his cigar from the ash-tray and puffed at it sternly.

Algy Lawrence was about to answer when his eye was caught by a movement in the bushes outside. Uncle Russ, with commendable British fortitude, had left one half of the french windows standing slightly ajar, and in the dying light of the day Lawrence could see clearly a peculiarly localized disturbance of the foliage.

Exactly why this struck him as remarkable, the young man was unable to tell. Perhaps it was the memory of Audrey's earlier alarm.

Algy swallowed the remainder of his drink and strolled, as if casually, towards the windows.

Yes, there it was again: in the bushes beyond the path, an ominous rustling. Moved for the second time that day by an impulse he could hardly explain, Lawrence dropped the empty tumbler with a soft thud on the carpet, flung both the windows wide, and hurled himself out into the garden.

Moving without conscious thought, his long legs thudded over the ground. He reached the shrubbery with the blood singing in his ears and a soft curtain of rain striking mistily at his face.

The shaking of the bushes became violent and unconcealed. Algy charged into them without a second's hesitation, the wet leaves slapping at him in waspish protest.

There was a man there right enough, turned now in flight. Lawrence threw himself forward. His fingers scrabbled at the hem of the prowler's coat, and they went down together, rolling dizzily in the mud.

The fugitive came off best. Agile as a cat, he was already on one knee before Lawrence had time to do more than raise himself dazedly on his elbow.

Algy caught one glimpse of the prowler's face, scared and set with a desperate fury, before a skinny arm swept up, then down, and hurled him into blackness.

After a while the throbbing stabs of pain stopped driving through his head, and left only a villainous ache in his temples.

Lawrence opened his eyes and found Audrey's face very close to his.

He tried to speak, then closed his eyes again with a groan. The girl's fingers felt very cool against his brow.

She said anxiously:

"Mr. Lawrence! Are you all right?"

"I—I think so."

His voice seemed new and untried, and sounded strange even to himself.

He sat up wearily. A fresh wave of pain nearly swamped him once more, but he rode the storm doggedly.

"Ahhh..." He shook his head groggily. A thin trickle of blood stood out redly on his white face. Above him and around him, the bush leaves rustled wetly.

Audrey said again:

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," he returned weakly.

She put her hand on his shoulder. "What happened?"

"I caught a prowler. Then he hit me—with a stone, I think... Did you see him?"

She shook her head. "No. I came into the drawing-room just after you left. Uncle Russ and I followed you, and found you like this."

Somebody shifted awkwardly behind her. A lighted cigar glowed in the gathering darkness.

Russell Craig cleared his throat. "I don't wish to seem unsympathetic, my dear, but it's deuced uncomfortable here in the rain. If Mr. Lawrence can walk, I suggest we assist him back to the house."

The girl and her uncle helped him to his feet. He swayed unsteadily for a moment, then with an arm round Russell Craig's shoulders, made a halting journey back to the drawing-room.

The rain was falling more heavily now and he reached the lights and warmth with an excusable relief.

Audrey guided him to the sofa, then stood back with worry on her pretty face.

"You look terrible," she said frankly. "Shall I call a doctor?"

"I'd rather—you didn't."

"But—."

"My dear," interrupted her uncle, "there's nothing wrong with our young friend which a good stiff drink can't cure."

Audrey gestured helplessly, but he was already handling the decanter.

"Here, my boy. Take this."

"Uncle Russ!" The girl tut-tutted impatiently. "That's much too strong."

"Then," said Russell Craig with dignity, "I shall drink it myself."

And did so.

She scolded him briefly, then hurried through the door.

Lawrence closed his eyes. These cushions are very comfortable, he thought. If only my head didn't ache so much....

Something cool sponged over his face. Audrey Craig was bathing his forehead.

"Keep still," she murmured.

Lawrence relaxed.

Audrey smoothed the tousled blond hair away from his brow and examined the wound with a frown.

The skin was torn and a bruise was already discolouring his temples, but now the clotted blood was washed away she could see that the damage wasn't as extensive as she had thought.

Algy opened one eye.

"How is it?"

She smiled. "You'll live. With a Grade A headache."

The door opened again. Roger Querrin hurried in, his face concerned.

"Lawrence, old fellow. What happened?"

Audrey explained briefly.

Her fiancé announced:

"I'll phone for the police at once."

"No." Algy roused himself to protest. "Hardinge will be here soon enough. I don't want to raise the alarm. I came here to look after you, don't forget. It won't help me to set the place in a turmoil."

"But we ought to get after the man who attacked you—."

"He's had time enough to get away. Leave it alone."

"Shouldn't we look for—for clues, or something?" Roger waved his hand uncertainly.

Lawrence grinned faintly. The first few words of his reply were drowned out by a long roll of thunder.

Querrin glanced round, startled. He seemed for once to be in danger of losing his air of bluff equanimity.

Lawrence said:

"There's your answer. That heavy rain will wash out every trace." Russell Craig turned away from the windows.

"That's true enough," he observed. "Look here, Roger, my boy." He pointed through the glass. "Our own footmarks are disappearing fast."

Querrin did not reply directly.

"Very well, then." He was looking towards Lawrence inquiringly. "What do you advise?"

"All I can suggest," said Algy, sitting upright, "is a policy—ouch!—of masterly inactivity." He put up his hand to his head. "In other words, there's damn all we can do. For the moment, at least."

"You," said Audrey Craig severely, "are going up to bed. At once."

He smiled at her. "That's not a bad idea. I need to be fit for to-night." Roger cleared his throat. He said gruffly:

"You're in no shape for a late night sitting. Couldn't you call off all this nonsense about a guard?"

"That's sound sense, my boy," said Uncle Russ from across the room. He added eagerly: "Let me take your place to-night."

Lawrence saw alarm spring into the girl's eyes, and grinned at her reassuringly.

Querrin said dryly, over his shoulder:

"I'd rather you didn't, thanks."

It was almost a snub. It seemed that Roger and Audrey both shared Steve Castle's opinion of Russell Craig's reliability.

"Nobody," said Lawrence firmly, "is taking my place to-night. I came here to look after you, Querrin, and by glory, I'm going to do it."

He stood up. "But now," he added ruefully, "I need a rest."

He went back to his room on Roger's arm, and was relieved they did not meet Peter on the way. He hadn't the smallest doubt that the younger Querrin would be thrown into a minor panic when he heard the news, and felt in no state to cope with him.

Oddly enough, his own spirits had lightened somewhat. That blow on the head had been painful but at least it proved his adversary was no ghost. The prowler had been both human and scared.

He should also prove easy to deal with....

That was before the nightmare closed round them all.

Algy Lawrence glanced at his wrist watch: thin black hands in a gold face right-angled at nine o'clock..

The young man sighed, swept long fingers over his smooth blond hair, and sat up gloomily.

A couple of aspirins and a brief sleep had done much to relieve the persistent throbbing in his temples, and his physical weakness had entirely disappeared; but mentally he was far from his best.

Not that it mattered. His arrangements were complete, and should work with precision. Besides, he had a least one reliable ally.

John Hardinge. Lawrence swung his feet to the floor. The Sergeant had probably arrived by now. He had better go downstairs and have a chat with him: there was still that wretched business in the garden to report.

That bump on the head had deprived Algy of his dinner, though sandwiches had once more been brought to his bedroom, this time by a pertly attractive

young housemaid wearing her black dress stretched tight across shapely hips.

He had thanked her politely, and she had rewarded him with a bouncing exit which displayed her pretty legs to the best advantage.

Another twinge of pain stabbed through his temples: he groaned and stopped thinking about frivolous matters...He was conscious once more of a vague unrest.

Downstairs in the drawing-room, Sergeant Hardinge was also ill at ease. Audrey Craig had for the moment taken refuge with her uncle in the library, and left alone with the Querrins, the Sergeant was finding it hard to make conversation. Roger's air of faintly patronizing condescension did not help him at all.

They were practically strangers and in view of the peculiar circumstances of this, their first informal meeting, it was not surprising they were both reacting to the strain of the situation.

Roger, of course, considered Hardinge's presence, like the guard itself, completely unnecessary. He hardly bothered to hide his opinion.

Querrin, a forceful man, would have been surprised to learn that in the Sergeant's mind he figured only as a cipher. As human personalities, Hardinge was much more aware of Algy Lawrence and Peter Querrin: the one with an unmistakable intelligence behind a lazy facade, and the other with his air of patent unrest.

Peter was prowling uneasily round the room, contributing nothing to the small talk. Hardinge glanced at him and wondered. The young man seemed nervous in the extreme: would he lose his nerve?

(Lawrence in another part of the house was thinking much the same thing. And he reflected, if Peter goes to pieces, I shall have to cope with his hysteria. Oh, hell!)

Hardinge decided Peter's exact reactions would be unpredictable, and hoped for the best while preparing fatalistically for the worst. It would mostly depend upon Lawrence, anyway... He began to think about that young man's scuffle in the shrubbery.

The Sergeant had so far heard only the vaguest details of the affair, and was entirely unable to account for it. It fitted nowhere in the pattern... Who was the man, and (this was more important) would he return?

Hardinge's jaw set grimly. He was a capable man and a determined one. No prowler could hope to get near the house while he stood guard outside.

He was rather relieved when Lawrence strolled into the drawing-room. He had taken a liking to this tall young amateur and had a healthy respect for his capabilities, which he knew well by reputation.

"Hallo, Sergeant."

They shook hands.

Hardinge glanced at the strip of plaster on Algy's forehead.

He said with a faint grin:

"I hear you've been having adventures."

Algy laughed. "None that I've enjoyed."

"Suppose you give me the details."

Lawrence did his best, but his description of the prowler was sketchy and confused.

Hardinge said, with a frown:

"It's all too vague. Of course, it might be—." He broke off "You'd know this man again?"

"I think so. Yes. If I see him again, I'll recognize him."

"Good." The Sergeant pondered.

Algy prompted him gently. "You said—it might be—??"

Hardinge smiled and shook his head. "That description could fit a hundred men. I have only the vaguest of suspicions." He smiled again grimly. "I can promise! you this, sir. If it's the man I think, there's no more danger from him to-night."

Lawrence nodded. He shared the policeman's dislike of a hasty and possibly ill-founded accusation.

He said:

"All right. I think I can rely on you."

"You can, sir," agreed the Sergeant. He lowered his voice. "Can you rely upon Mr. Peter?"

Algy glanced across the room. The two brothers were; talking quietly. There was still a definite trace of impatience on the elder man's face: Lawrence wondered if Peter had again attempted to change Roger's mind.

Algy said softly:

"I think so. He won't crack."

"I hope not," responded Hardinge, grimly and sincerely. He added: "You've had enough, already."

Another long roll of thunder all but blotted out his words. Lawrence remarked:

"You'll get your feet wet."

The Sergeant replied indifferently:

"I've brought my rubbers."

The exchange was largely automatic. Neither man's thoughts were concerned with trivialities.

The door opened, and Audrey came in. The men rose: Algy prepared to be studiously formal.

The girl's pretty face was slightly worried. She said:

"I can't find Uncle Russ."

Roger smothered an exclamation. He said rather testily:

"I thought he was with you, in the library."

"No. He left me some time ago."

At that moment, a snatch of what was probably a highly improper song drifted to them through the panels. Then the door opened once more to disclose Russell Craig Wavering uncertainly on the threshold.

His gaze fell on Audrey. He inclined his head graciously.

"Hallo, m'dear." And he hiccupped.

Lawrence realized, with an inward grin, that the old rogue was stewed to the gills.

Audrey said with horror:

"Uncle Russ! You've been drinking."

Craig blinked at her owlishly.

"My dear," he conceded, "you're right. I have," he admitted handsomely, "been drinking."

He turned to Roger and elaborated further. "I have been drinking," he said, "with your butler."

Querrin's face set hard. He said:

"With my butler?"

"With," agreed Craig, "your butler." He steadied himself, then added belligerently: "Whass wrong with that? A fine man, your butler... He buttes —hic!— most efficiently."

He dropped in an armchair and beamed round stupidly.

"Oh, Uncle," said Audrey despairingly.

Roger seemed angry. He said:

"You're too familiar with the servants. I've told you before."

Craig's only reply was a giggle.

Roger's face darkened. He strode forward and dropped his hands on the older man's shoulders.

His voice was sombre.

"You'd better go up to your room."

"Shan't," said Craig peevishly. Once more on his feet, he pulled free of Querrin's grasp and lurched over to Lawrence.

"My boy," he said courteously, "you look pale. Possibly the blow on your head has dis—dis—upset you. Have no fear. I shall myself"—Uncle Russ thumped his shirt front—"mount guard to-night."

Behind him, someone gasped.

Till then, Algy had felt only amusement. Now he began to worry about the effects of Craig's antics on Peter's already overstrung nerves.

The colour had wavered on the younger Querrin's cheeks. His voice seemed choked.

"You'll—what?"

Peter at that moment was incapable of logical thought. He was obsessed with the vision of Audrey's uncle crashing drunkenly through the careful construction of Roger's defence, which they had been at such pains to contrive.

Algy Lawrence, however, had no more intention than Peter of allowing Russell Craig to intrude that night.

He said soothingly:

"There's no need for that. I'd rather you went to bed."

Uncle Russ frowned.

"Is it possible," he inquired, with dignity, "that you are rejecting my offer of—of ..."

He tailed off muzzily.

"Yes," replied Lawrence simply.

"Then," said Russell Craig, "I shall withdraw. I shall withdraw," he continued, "immediately."

He hiccupped gravely, and went out.

Audrey gestured helplessly with the same curious mixture of embarrassment and affection that Algy had noticed before.

"I'd better go after him," she said. An unwilling hint of laughter had struggled up behind her eyes.

Roger watched her exit with a frown, muttered something, then followed her out. Peter said softly:

"That damned old fool."

"Easy, there," said Algy. He clapped a hand on Peter's shoulder.

Querrin gave him a shamefaced smile.

"Sorry, Lawrence. I panicked unnecessarily. It's just," and his voice shook slightly, "I'm so concerned about Roger, and—and—."

"I understand."

Hardinge moved up to Peter suddenly. He said, quietly:

"Look, sir. You don't have to go through with this. You can go up to bed now, and leave it all to us."

The two men stared at each other.

Then Peter smiled. He said softly:

"Thank you, Sergeant. But it's all right now. I can do everything I have to."

"Of course you can," said Lawrence cheerfully.

His eyes and the Sergeant's met.

Peter had turned away; and Algy nodded quickly.

Hardinge was satisfied. He said:

"That's settled, then."

Roger Querrin hurried back to join them. He announced to nobody in particular:

"Craig's in his room at last. I've had more than enough... Oh, well." He broke off, then glanced at his watch. "Half-past nine," he murmured. "And my appointment is at twelve."

He gazed into three unsmiling faces. "We've plenty of time—to kill."

At eleven o'clock the four men stood up and made their way out of the drawing-room and along to the main hall of the house.

They did not talk among themselves.

Lawrence glanced up the broad staircase that led to the bedrooms and thought that the girl and her uncle would be asleep by now. Craig had been taken to his room an hour and a half before, and though Audrey had wished to remain with them, they had persuaded her gently she would be better off the scene.

The servants had also retired, on Roger Querrin's strict instructions. Testy already at the thought of his private affairs being common knowledge in the village, he intended no further details to reach the gossips.

In the hall, Hardinge picked up his cape and slung it round his shoulders. Outside in the gardens, the rain lashed down unceasingly.

Querrin lighted candles in a triple branched stand.

He asked quietly:

"Are we ready?"

They nodded soberly.

Roger turned to the doors that gave access to the passage. Peter stepped forward and held aside the curtains from the flame of the candlestick in his brother's hand.

The light flickered and danced in the gloom of the corridor.

Lawrence shifted uneasily. He was oppressed, once more, by the brooding silence.

Hardinge was the last to leave the brightly lit hall, and the curtains fell to behind him. The suddenly changing focus robbed his eyes momentarily of sight.

He murmured:

"Just a moment, sir. I've a better light than that."

He fumbled at his belt. A beam from his lamp cut through the darkness.

Roger nodded approvingly and made a motion to blow out the candles, before Lawrence dropped a restraining hand on his wrist.

He said quietly:

"I'll need those myself. I have no torch."

Querrin nodded again.

They set off down the corridor, passed its solitary window (shrouded now by musty curtains) and came to a stop outside the door of the old room.

A curious constraint had gripped them all. Lawrence fancied Querrin's hand was trembling as he twisted round the handle.

Inside the room, a dying fire glowed ruddily. Roger put down the candlestick carefully on the mantel above.

The tiny flames licked cautious light round the shape of the hanging dagger.

Querrin stepped across to the table, struck a match, and began to fumble with the old-fashioned oil lamp. As it flared into lambent life, the shadows retreated and lay in stealthy wait.

Roger said more cheerfully:

"That's better."

Then they were silent again. Hardinge put out his flashlight and stood by the door, relaxed yet attentive. Peter squeezed his hands, uneasily, into his pockets; and glanced towards Lawrence expectantly.

This is it, thought Algy. Here's where I take charge. And wondered at the hard knot of fear tied tight inside his stomach.

Roger said restively:

"I don't want to hurry you, but—."

"All right, Querrin." Lawrence scanned the room carefully. "This won't take along."

There was no place an intruder could hide. Assured of this, he beckoned the Sergeant forward.

Then, pulling back the drapes from the french windows, he glanced out at the darkness and murmured:

"You won't find it very pleasant."

"No matter, sir."

"That prowler might come back."

Hardinge said grimly:

"I can deal with him." He patted his truncheon meaningly.

Lawrence smiled. "Right, then. I leave it to you."

He tugged at the bolts securing the windows. They were stiff as well as sturdy. He had to exert his strength.

As the glass panelled doors pushed open, a thin spray of rain splashed over him. The moon was almost entirely obscured by thick clouds, and the night was forbidding enough. The Sergeant looked out without enthusiasm.

Lawrence murmured apologetically:

"Ready, Sergeant?"

Hardinge gave him a nod. Then he adjusted his cape; switched on his flashlight, and set off down the two steps that led from the room to the gardens.

Algy watched him as the uniformed man made his way across the unplanted flowerbeds towards the comparative shelter of the trees beyond the flagged path.

Hardinge turned and signalled.

Lawrence waved a hand in reply. Noticing absently that the heavy rain was already washing out the track of the Sergeant's footprints, he stepped back, closed the windows, and fastened them securely.

Roger said irritably:

"This is all very silly. He'll be soaked to the skin, by midnight."

Lawrence shrugged. "He'll make sure no intruder gets anywhere near the house."

His fingers strayed unconsciously up to the bruise on his forehead.

"Oh, very well." Roger poured himself a drink. He added dryly: "I don't anticipate a siege."

Lawrence drew the curtains across the windows.

He said quietly:

"You're safe here. You've only to cry out."

Peter put in, eagerly:

"We should hear you."

Roger looked at his brother with both exasperation and affection. However, he made no direct reply.

Lawrence let his gaze go round the room once more. Feeling slightly ridiculous, he stooped and peered under the table.

Ignoring Roger's scoffing laugh, he said amiably:

"You're entirely alone." Then, to Peter:

"We'll go now."

Peter's mouth trembled. He turned to his brother, as if to make a last appeal, then let his hand drop to his side helplessly.

Roger smiled at him.

He said jovially:

"Don't be an ass. Here, I'll give you a toast."

Snatching up his glass, he lifted it in salute.

"To the shade of old Tom Querrin! The devil take and keep him."

Peter drew in his breath sharply.

Lawrence spoke soberly. "Good luck to you."

He thought there was more than a tinge of fear beneath the other man's bravado.

Roger drained the glass and laughed again, though breathlessly.

Algy Lawrence asked:

"You still have the key?"

"Naturally." Roger pulled the chain from his pocket and showed them the bright new metal. Lawrence nodded.

"Good." He signed to Peter, who went quietly through the doorway.

Lawrence went across to the mantel and picked up the candlestick. His eyes rested for a moment on the dagger hanging above. Then he followed Peter out.

Roger closed the door behind them, and they heard the faint rattle of the key as it twisted in the lock.

Repressing his own uneasiness, the blond-haired young man smiled at his companion reassuringly.

"Come on, Peter," he said cheerily, and they set off down the passage.

They paused by the curtained window.

Handing the triple branched stand to Querrin, Lawrence held aside the drapes and inspected the catch. It was in position and the window was securely locked.

Algy let the curtains drop back, and the two men continued along the deserted corridor.

They regained the brightly-lit hall with something like relief.

Lawrence murmured:

"We may as well make ourselves comfortable."

Easy chairs had been provided for them, and Algy pushed one over near the entrance to the passage. Peter, however, seemed more concerned with his duty as a guard. He set open one of the double doors, and pulled aside the heavy curtain. Then shoving another chair by the dark oblong of the entrance, he seated himself at once.

Lawrence said with a chuckle:

"You won't see much from there. It's as black as a hat in the corridor."

Peter said tremulously:

"I can hear, at least—if anything goes wrong."

Lawrence said with a smile:

"Nothing will, I promise you."

And they settled down to wait.

At twenty minutes to twelve, the rain stopped, much to Sergeant Hardinge's satisfaction. As he said to Lawrence later: "It was no joke, waiting around in that downpour. Besides, when the clouds drifted away from the moon I had a much better view of the house."

Inside the building, Algy Lawrence glanced at his wrist-watch, shifted his cramped legs, and stifled a yawn.

Behind him lay the short passage that led from the main hall to the side door which, like every other entrance to the house, was securely locked from the inside. To his right was the broad staircase, to his left the entrance to the corridor, so near he could reach out his fingers and touch the half-drawn curtains.

And facing him was Peter Querrin, slumped in his chair, white-faced and uneasy.

Lawrence eyed him thoughtfully. He hoped that zero hour would bring no sudden attack of hysteria... It was a relief when Peter began to talk, nervously.

Recognizing the anxious chatter was a useful safety-valve, he listened sympathetically and interposed an odd word here and there.

As the hands of his watch crept round towards midnight, Peter's talk swelled up loudly, then suddenly stopped.

He said wretchedly:

"It's no good, Lawrence. I—I can't stand this any more."

Algy murmured a warning and peeped quickly at his wrist-watch. It was four minutes to twelve.

He said quietly:

"It will all be over soon."

Peter said, with a desperate calm:

"It's nearly midnight. We can't stay here... *I must be near to Roger.*"

Algy thought quickly. It would do no harm, at least... With sudden decision, he said:

"All right, then. Light the candles."

Querrin grabbed up the triple branched stand and touched flame to the wicks. Then he flicked away the spent and blackened matchstick, and looked expectantly towards Lawrence.

"Lead the way," said Algy.

He followed Peter into the gloom of the passage and blinked for a second. Then his eyes, like Querrin's, became more accustomed to the blackness, and they moved on cautiously.

The tiny flames licked aside the darkness, but did nothing to dispel the old deadly sense of oppression. Lawrence stared at the blank, panelled walls and shivered.

He glanced around, and upwards. The corridor was deserted.

"Come on," he murmured.

As they came abreast of the shrouded window, his footsteps slackened and stopped.

"We may as well check," he said quietly.

Peter, who was the nearer to the frame, nodded quickly, and placing the candlestick in Algy's grasp, turned his back and put his hands on the curtains.

Stepping aside, he held the drapes back for Lawrence's inspection, and the fair haired young man could see that the catch was still in position and the window securely locked.

Algy noticed that the moon was once more riding free in the skies, then was diverted by the nearer vision of his own reflection staring grotesquely from the panes. He turned away hurriedly.

Peter let the curtains fall back into position, then followed Lawrence along the corridor.

Algy turned his head as his companion caught up with him. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"It's twelve o'clock," said Querrin; and his mouth trembled.

Lawrence looked at him thoughtfully. Perhaps it had been a tactless question, but he had wished to break the silence.

They were very near to the room now, and there was no more sound. A few seconds yet—.

Then they heard the scream.

It was high, and formless, and muffled.

There was something very wrong about that evil strangled sound. It came from the darkness like a ghost.

Its echoes rang in their ears.

Then Peter cried, in a high cracked voice:

"Roger...."

He hurled himself forward in a run, smacked wildly against the heavy panels of the door, and reeled back clasping his shoulder.

Lawrence brushed past and twisted hard on the door handle. The lock held firm.

Peter turned a whitely imploring face towards his companion.

"For God's sake, man," he whispered. "Do something... Quickly."

Lawrence jerked the candlestick towards him. As Peter's shaking fingers fumbled for a hold round the stand, the flames danced and flickered wildly.

"Don't let it go out," said Algy, between his teeth. He] pulled out his automatic and hammered with the gun butt on the wooden panels.

"Querrin!"

There was no reply.

"Querrin!" Lawrence cried again. "If you can hear me, man—stand away from the door!"

He thumbed over the safety catch, then levelled his' pistol at the door.

He fired once, twice, three times. As the sound rolled thunderously round the echoing passage, the bullets blasted through the lock and the cartridge cases spattered dully against the carpet.

Then Lawrence crashed his weight against the door and it flew open as he staggered into the room.

There was no light, save that from the dying fire.

Yet as Peter stepped up to the doorway and held the candles high, they saw the horror clearly.

Something was dragging itself, painfully, across the floor. Then it lurched upright, resting on its knees.

Peter gave a strangled cry of recognition.

"Roger...."

Roger Querrin's eyes blinked glassily, reflecting the tiny flame.

Then he choked, rolled over on his face, and lay still.

The haft of the dagger protruded like an evil growth from between his shoulders.

There was nobody else in the room. Lawrence saw that at once.

He said, with deadly quietness:

"Peter. Stay where you are." He added, half to himself: "We need more light."

He crossed to the table, still grasping his automatic, and keeping his eyes on the motionless form near his feet.

He scratched a match—the tiny sound seemed unnaturally loud in the silent room—and turned up the wick of the oil lamp.

As it flared once more into life, every detail of the strange scene stood out with pitiless clarity.

Lawrence glanced quickly under the table and behind the door.

Then he dropped on one knee beside the fallen man, touched his cheek gently, and felt without hope for the beating of his heart.

He stood up.

He said dully:

"I'm sorry, Peter. Your brother is dead."

Querrin's lips parted, and he cried out shrilly.

Lawrence stepped up to him and smacked heavily at his face.

Peter's head jerked wildly. Then his eyes cleared, and he nodded sanely. The marks of Algy's fingers stood out redly on his cheek.

"I'm all right now."

Lawrence nodded. His gaze travelled quickly round the room. Nothing had been disturbed, everything was in its place. "Except," he murmured softly, "the knife. Of course." The sheath over the mantel was empty.

He stepped across to the windows, and pulled aside the musty drapes.

The bolts were still shot, and the windows locked.

He stared at them hopelessly. The thin blade of fear stabbed through his heart and mind.

He mumbled:

"It's incredible...."

Struck by a sudden thought, he turned back to Roger's lifeless body. Kneeling beside him, he pulled gently at the chain that came out from under the dead man's coat and into his trouser pocket.

The door was locked, he thought. But if the key is missing—

Bright new metal still glinted at the end of the chain.

Lawrence stared at the key with something like despair. He stood up once more and turned to Peter.

Querrin had not moved from the doorway. When he spoke, his voice shook badly.

"Shouldn't we—call a doctor?"

Lawrence said, as kindly as he could:

"Roger's beyond all help. But—yes someone should see him. You can telephone, if you wish."

Then he realized, with a shock, that the whole affair was now the business of the police.

Taking the oil lamp from the table, he strode across to the french windows and pulled back the drapes as far as they would go. Then, holding the light close to his face, he signalled urgently with his free hand.

From under the trees came the answering flare of; Hardinge's hand lamp. Then the Sergeant himself stepped out from the shadows and into the moonlight.

Lawrence pantomimed an instruction, then glanced towards Peter Querrin.

"Hardinge's going round to the side door."

Peter said tonelessly:

"It's locked and bolted. I'll go and let him in."

He hurried down the passage.

Lawrence was left alone.

John Hardinge stood under the trees, his keen gaze fixed upon the house. His breath soured gustily, and his body was tense. The sound of the shots seemed to echo in his ears....

What was happening now, in that locked and guarded room?

He plunged one hand nervously into the pocket of his tunic. The other rested on the lamp at his belt.

He kept his eyes on the house, staring across the unmarked stretch of bare brown earth.

Suddenly the curtains, which had already been partially drawn, were swept fully aside and the figure of Algy Lawrence appeared behind the glass panes of the french windows.

He waved urgently and blindly. The Sergeant signalled an answer with his flashlight, then stepped out from the cover of the trees and on to the flagged path.

Lawrence pantomimed. His meaning was clear enough: the Sergeant was to follow the path to the side door.

Hardinge lifted his hand in salute, then strode briskly along, brushing heedlessly against the wet glistening leaves of the bushes that encroached across the way.

When he reached the side door, he found it standing open. This surprised him for a moment, then he heard Peter's voice from the hall and understood.

Querrin was hunched over the telephone, his voice strained and shaking. "D-doctor? Doctor Tyssen? Please come quickly...."

Doctor Tyssen also acted as police surgeon, so the call was grimly appropriate.

Somebody stumbled on the stairs.

Hardinge jerked his head upwards.

Audrey Craig, a dressing-gown over her pyjamas, gazed down with frightened eyes. She whispered:

"W-what's happened?"

John Hardinge was a man who prided himself on a calm efficiency and lack of emotion. Yet as he saw the distress on the girl's pretty face, he warmed to her with instinctive sympathy.

He said:

"I don't know, miss, exactly." He hesitated. "But I'm afraid—it's something nasty."

He looked towards Peter Querrin.

Audrey's lips trembled. Then her gaze followed his. They stood listening together.

Peter, unaware or heedless of his audience, went on spilling his urgency into the 'phone.

"My brother is dead...."

The four words seemed to swell and grow and distort like shadows across the brightness of the hall.

The girl's eyes darkened and the colour sponged suddenly out of her cheeks.

Hardinge thought, with alarm, she was going to faint.

Then she clutched hard on the balustrade, steadied herself, and ran lightly down the stairs.

She swept past him with desperate haste and vanished into the darkness of the passage.

"My God!" cried the Sergeant, genuinely shocked. "She mustn't see—."

He hurried after her into the corridor.

The darkness blinded him for a moment before he switched on his lamp and picked out the girl with its powerful beam.

"Miss Craig! Stop, please!"

He stumbled and the light jumped wildly.

Before Audrey could reach the room Lawrence appeared in the doorway and caught her in his arms.

She gasped and struggled. "Let me go... Roger! Roger!"

Her voice spiralled up dangerously. Lawrence was torn with an angry pity. He could feel her body shudder with panic.

He cried, brutally:

"*Audrey*... Be quiet!"

The harshness he had forced into the words quietened her like a slap in the face.

She whispered:

"Let me see him."

Algy shook his head. He said quietly:

"I'd rather—you didn't."

She searched his grave face fearfully. Then as he released her arms she stepped to one side and her gaze went past him through the open door.

He tried, too late, to blot out the sight with his body.

Then her eyes became strangely unfocussed and she swayed forward dizzily. Lawrence caught her once more and found she was crying, softly.

He patted her shoulders helplessly.

Somebody coughed. Hardinge was standing in front of him, formless behind the hard glare of the policeman's lamp.

Lawrence blinked. He said:

"Put that out, please."

The Sergeant obeyed. Lawrence and the girl became black silhouettes against the soft glow of light from the room at their backs.

Algy said gently:

"Audrey, my dear. There's nothing you can do. Please go up to your room."

She replied with a sob.

The Sergeant stirred restively. The girl deserved pity, but he couldn't forget he was a policeman. He had his duties, and must risk no accusation of slackness from his superior officers.

Lawrence was still soothing the crying girl when another form loomed up out of the blackness. It was Peter.

Algy turned to him with relief.

"Peter. Take Audrey away, there's a good chap."

Something that might have been assent rasped in Querrin's throat.

He said, tonelessly:

"The doctor's coming soon. I—I—."

He broke off, then led the girl down the corridor. Lawrence thought, with relief, that Peter at least had regained his self-control.

Hardinge said with a frown:

"That girl needs someone to help her. A relative, perhaps... Where's her uncle?"

"Still wrapped in his drunken slumbers," replied Lawrence with an uneasy flippancy, "I expect." He shrugged away Russell Craig's existence indifferently. He turned: back to the room.

Hardinge followed him through the doorway.

He looked at the body with blank, professional, policeman's eyes.

He said, with unintentional callousness:

"He's dead, of course?"

"I'm afraid so."

The Sergeant said:

"I heard a scream, and then shots—."

Lawrence pointed towards the door.

"The room was sealed. I had to force an entrance."

Hardinge peered at the shattered lock. The bullets had torn through the door obliquely and embedded themselves in the wall.

The Sergeant's eyes went from the lock to the key chain spilled on the carpet, then up to Lawrence, standing by; the drawn curtains of the french windows.

Hardinge said severely:

"You shouldn't have touched anything, sir. This is a police matter now."

Lawrence was conscious once more of his status as an amateur. He apologized.

"But," he added in defence, "I've hardly tampered with the evidence."

The Sergeant smiled. "No matter, sir. Anyway," he admitted, "you had to draw the curtains to signal me."

He crossed to the windows and inspected the bolts.

"No tampering here," he murmured. "That's evident... What happened, sir? How did the killer get past you?"

Algy laughed without humour.

He said dryly:

"He didn't."

The Sergeant stared.

"You mean—you have him?"

"I mean," said Lawrence quietly, "he seems not to have existed."

Hardinge said patiently:

"You know that's nonsense, don't you?"

"Oh, yes." The young man laughed again. "I know it. Yet there are only two exits to this room, and no man passed through either."

The Sergeant said:

"Nobody came through these windows, anyway. I had 'em under constant observation. Besides, there's not a mark on the ground outside."

"I believe you, Sergeant." Algy Lawrence grinned bitterly. "Will you believe me, when I tell you Peter and I stood unbroken guard inside, and no one came past us into the house?"

There was a silence, then Hardinge said flatly:

"That's impossible."

Lawrence said again:

"Oh, yes... It's impossible. But it happened."

The Sergeant said abruptly:

"I'll have to inform my Inspector."

"I'd say," returned Lawrence, "it was a matter for the Chief Constable."

"Perhaps. But it's not for me to say."

"Before you go," cried Algy suddenly. "May I borrow your lamp?"

"If you like." Hardinge detached the flashlight from his belt, then watched curiously as the young man took it from his hand and walked over to the fire, which had burned itself through to redly glowing embers.

Lawrence squatted on his heels. He said, over his shoulder: "A last chance," and directed the rays of the lamp upward, into the chimney.

Then he stood up, and said grimly:

"A cat couldn't climb up there."

Hardinge stared round the room. "There must be another way out." He added, protestingly: "There has to be."

"A secret panel, perhaps?" Lawrence shook his head. "No, Sergeant. It isn't going to be so easy."

"Then—." Hardinge racked his brains for a feasible suggestion. "A booby trap—."

"No." Lawrence was positive. "I've already looked. Though with your permission, I'll continue the search."

The Sergeant nodded. He left to 'phone.

Alone once more, Lawrence prowled restlessly round the room.

He touched nothing more. The fingerprint men would be here soon....

He was obsessed with a sense of angry inadequacy. Try as he might, he could detect no flaw in his defences. Unless—.

The fear closed round him.

Unless the crime was not a man's.

He straightened, then grabbed up his gun from the table, where he had dropped it while lighting the oil lamp. The hard butt gave no comfort to his hand.

He whispered aloud:

"I don't believe in you, Tom Querrin...."

The silence was its own reply.

Doctor Tyssen straightened up.

He said gruffly:

"That's that." He glanced towards Sergeant Hardinge. "D'ye want the technicalities?"

"Not now, Doctor. Thank you."

"No." The plump little man growled good-humouredly. "Doubt if ye'd understand 'em, anyway... Well, he's dead. Till I've done the post-mortem, there's not much else I can tell you... He's been dead for half an hour."

Lawrence said politely:

"We knew that, too. I was with him when he died."

"Were ye now?" Tyssen eyed him thoughtfully. "You didn't kill him, by any chance?"

Lawrence said: "No," soberly. He realized that, as an explanation, it would be hardly less fantastic than the truth. "Whatever," he told himself, "that might be." He closed his mind resolutely to the supernatural.

"Ah, well." Tyssen looked down, without compassion, at the thing that had once been a man. "There's a story about this room, isn't there? But," he finished disgustedly, "I don't believe in miracles. Even dark ones... Where can I wash my hands?"

Lawrence went to the doorway and called down the passage:

"Peter!"

Querrin came into the room.

Lawrence said apologetically:

"Would you show the doctor a bathroom?"

They went out. Peter, carefully, did not look at his brother.

Hardinge and Lawrence glanced at each other in silence. There seemed nothing to say.

The Sergeant cleared his throat.

He said:

"Inspector Hazlitt will be here soon. I'd like you to admit him, sir, if you would." He added an obvious comment. "I'd better stay here."

Lawrence nodded without resentment. The case was the Sergeant's till his superiors arrived.

"All right. I'll wait in the hall."

Hardly had he stepped out of the passage, however, before he heard the sound of tyres scrunching over the drive.

He went to the door, fumbled with its chain, then threw it open.

Three men climbed out of the police car, and made their way up the steps towards him. The leader was a uniformed Inspector, lean and caustic eyed.

Lawrence introduced himself. If the Inspector knew the fair-haired young man by reputation, he betrayed nothing in his manner.

"Hazlitt, County Police," he muttered sourly, by way of acknowledgment. He jerked a thumb towards his companions. "Sudlow, easy with that camera! Draycott, you'll look after the fingerprints." He turned back to Algy.

"Now, Mr. er—um—."

"Lawrence."

"Mr. Lawrence. Lead on, please."

Doctor Tyssen appeared on the landing above. He called down the stairs:

"Hi, Hazlitt! Get that body to the mortuary when you can, will you? I'm off now."

"Just a minute, Doctor. I shall want to ask you some questions."

"The devil you will." Tyssen towelled his hands vigorously. "Leave your blasted questions till morning... And don't tell me it's after midnight. I'm in no mood to split hairs."

He headed back to the bathroom.

The Inspector har-rumphed irritably and followed Lawrence into the passage.

Hardinge stiffened and saluted as his superior came into the room.

Hazlitt nodded a reply, then looked at the Sergeant without favour.

He said dryly:

"Why are you wearing your cape?"

Hardinge looked surprised.

"It was raining, sir. And I was on guard outside."

"Were you? Well, you're dry enough now, man. Go and take it off."

Hardinge went out, his face impassive.

Lawrence felt a thin flush of anger. He decided that he did not like the Inspector, and waited with perverse satisfaction... It wouldn't be long before Hazlitt found himself faced with the worst problem of his officious career.

The Inspector gave his men their orders, then drew Algy to one side while Sudlow and Draycott busied themselves round the body with chalk and camera. Plain clothes men, they worked with a smooth efficiency.

Hazlitt said importantly:

"Now, Mr. Lawrence. What can you tell me about this?"

Algy sketched a quick but thorough outline of the events leading up to the crime. He noticed with a faintly malicious glow of humour at the back of his lazy blue eyes, that the Inspector grew increasingly incredulous as the minutes slid by.

"So you see," finished Algy, "the way things are."

Hazlitt said, directly:

"Mr. Lawrence. Are you a fool?"

"No," replied the young man coolly. "Are you?"

The Inspector ignored his question. He commented dryly:

"Then you must be a liar."

Lawrence grinned at him lazily. He said:

"Go ahead and arrest me. Though I ought to warn you. Everything I've told you will be confirmed by Peter Querrin. We were together every second since we left his brother in this room."

Hazlitt stared at him bleakly. Then he turned to his men.

"Sudlow, examine every inch of these walls for a secret, entrance. And don't forget the floor and the ceiling... We'll settle this damned nonsense once and for all."

Hardinge had returned and was standing quietly by the door. The Inspector said: "I'll question *you* in a minute."

A flash bulb glared as Sudlow manoeuvred his camera for a final shot of the victim. Hazlitt growled:

"Didn't I tell you... Oh, well. Finish your pictures first. And photograph the bolts on those french windows. He looked at the shattered door. "And that." He asked Lawrence:

"Did you have to make such a mess of the lock?"

"I hadn't a picklock with me."

The Inspector's eyes were not friendly. He turned his head. "Draycott, go over this whole room for fingerprints. And examine that key chain, too. It

looks as if it spilled out in a struggle."

Lawrence shook his head. "No, Inspector." He explained briefly.

Hazlitt was annoyed, but made no direct reply. Instead, he jerked towards Hardinge and said coldly:

"Nobody should meddle with evidence. You ought to have stopped him, Sergeant."

Algy broke in:

"The Sergeant was still outside in the gardens."

The Inspector ignored him.

He went on:

"You don't appear to advantage, Hardinge. You had no business here at all. And then"—he raised his voice slightly—"a man is killed and you let his murderer escape without lifting a hand to stop him."

Hardinge's eyes grew frosty, but he showed no other sign of resentment.

Lawrence admired his self control. He sprang to his ally's defence.

He said mildly:

"What does it matter? Since the evidence proves this killer can walk straight through solid walls of brick and plaster, where would you find a cell to hold him?"

Hazlitt reddened.

"Your story's fantastic—."

"Though it happens to be true. You know," continued Lawrence, who was beginning to enjoy himself, "I'm looking forward to the inquest. I can hear the jury now. They'll bring in a verdict of murder by a person or ghosts unknown."

With an angry exclamation, the Inspector turned aside.

He snapped over his shoulder:

"Spirits don't leave fingerprints. But I'll wager we'll find plenty here. Draycott!"

Draycott, who had already set to work with an insufflator, squatted back on his heels and listened patiently.

"Go over every surface in this room. Somehow or other, we're going to account for every print... There should be valuable traces—if Mr. Lawrence hasn't destroyed them all," added Hazlitt, with a faint sneer.

"I left you a few to play with," said the young man, equably.

The Inspector flew off at a tangent.

"Who reported this crime to the police?"

Hardinge replied. "Peter Querrin, sir." He added: "I thought I had better stay beside the body."

"Did you?" said Hazlitt. He managed to make the remark offensive. "I think I'd better interview that young man. We'll hear what he has to say."

"Handle him gently, Inspector," said Algy, cheerily. "He's my alibi." Hazlitt went on heedlessly:

'Sergeant, I shall want to interview everybody in the house. Round 'em all up together—yes, put 'em in the drawing-room, that will do—and I'll question them later." He looked towards Algy and smiled. "Oh, yes," He added softly, "and see that Mr. Lawrence has no chance to compare notes—with Mr. Peter Querrin."

Algy smiled, though wryly. It was a novelty to find himself considered as a suspect.

Hazlitt made as if to dismiss the Sergeant, then recalled him for questioning.

Lawrence listened incuriously to the Inspector's barking voice and Hardinge's low-toned replies. As he expected, the Sergeant's report was entirely negative: he had neither seen nor heard anything suspicious until the scream and the shots had sounded from the guarded;; room. Nobody had approached the house or left it.

Later, as the two men paced down the corridor, Algy murmured:

"You may have trouble with your Inspector. He acted as if he didn't believe your story either."

Hardinge chuckled grimly.

He replied:

"You can hardly blame him. This whole affair's incredible. Fortunately"—and he gave once more the ghost of a laugh—"my evidence is already confirmed. Or it will be, when the Inspector looks outside."

"How's that?"

The Sergeant responded with another question.

"Did you notice when the rain stopped to-night?"

"Some time before twelve."

"At twenty minutes to," said Hardinge. "Much to my relief. It was no joke, waiting around in that downpour. Besides, when the clouds drifted away from the moon I had a much better view of the house... However, that's not the point."

He began to speak more slowly, emphasizing the words. "The ground outside is like freshly dampened sand. You can't put a foot anywhere without leaving clear traces."

"Of course," said Lawrence. "And the only approach to the room is over bare, uncultivated soil."

"And," finished his ally triumphantly, "there isn't a mark of any kind in the earth outside the windows."

"Well, that's proof enough," agreed Algy thoughtfully. "Our murderer didn't leave that way. Though," he added with a wicked grin, "since we've already granted him the power of passing through brick walls, we might just as well believe him to be both invisible and lighter than air."

The Sergeant did not laugh.

He said gravely:

"There's trickery somewhere." He paused. "There has to be."

"Yes," said Lawrence. "But I'll lay you odds the Inspector, for one, can't find it."

They had paused in the lighted hall. Hardinge eyed his young friend shrewdly. He said:

"You'll stay on the case, of course."

It was not a question.

Lawrence responded with a nod. "Yes. Though I won't be welcome." He hesitated, then said slowly: "You know, Sergeant, I don't think I shall solve this case myself."

A query flickered in Hardinge's keen blue eyes.

He murmured:

"That's defeatist talk."

"No, not exactly," returned Algy. His face was relaxed and lazy. He said softly:

"I have a feeling the credit for clearing up this mystery is going to belong to one man only."

He grinned.

"To a certain Sergeant Hardinge."

John Hardinge was not a stupid man. He took Lawrence's meaning at once.

He murmured:

"Thank you, sir. But"—he hesitated—"I'm a member of the police. I couldn't step on the Inspector's corns."

"The Inspector's corns be damned!" exclaimed Algy, rudely. "I've no official standing. I have to pass on my theories to somebody. And I certainly don't intend to co-operate with Hazlitt. . . . Don't you see, man," he continued, coaxingly, "what a feather in your cap it would be—."

"If I explained the killing," finished Hardinge. "Of course." His eyes glimmered. "It would lead to promotion."

"It might," said Lawrence, "mean a transfer. To the Yard, perhaps."

"Pipe dreams," said the Sergeant wryly. "Oh, well. We'll see."

His face was impassive. Yet there was a keen pleasure behind the placidity in his eyes.

Audrey Craig's eyes were tired with too much weeping.

She said dully:

"There's nothing I can tell you, Inspector. Nothing at all."

Hazlitt, with difficulty, repressed his irritation.

He said:

"Come now, Miss Craig. You want to help us, surely?" He fiddled with the notes he had been making. "You went up to your room at half-past ten?"

"Yes. I wanted to stay, but Roger and—and the others, felt I'd be better out of the way—."

"Yes, yes. You didn't leave your room, then?"

"No. I went to bed, and tried to sleep." Her mouth trembled. "I dozed a little, I believe."

"And then?"

"I heard—sounds, like shots."

"My pistol, of course," said Algy from across the room.

"Mr. Lawrence!" The Inspector was testy. "Please don't interrupt... Now, Miss Craig."

Audrey's voice was only a whisper. "For a minute or; so I was too scared to move. Then I got up and put on my dressing-gown." She shivered, and not wholly with cold. "My bedroom is the farthest from the stairway. By the time I reached the hall, Peter was calling the doctor, and the Sergeant had come in from the gardens. Then—."

Hazlitt wasn't entirely without sympathy.

He said quietly:

"We know the rest." He sighed. "Very well, then. Is that all you can tell me?"

She nodded speechlessly.

Hazlitt said:

"It's not very much."

"I'm sorry."

The Inspector dropped his pencil. It made a tiny and irritable clatter on the shiny table.

They were sitting in the library. Hazlitt and his men, having completed their examination of the room and the grounds immediately surrounding, had begun the weary routine of taking statements from every person in the house. So far their questions had only served to deepen the mystery.

The Inspector said: "Very well," again. "Sergeant, take Miss Craig back to the drawing-room." He looked at the girl. "Or would you prefer to go up to your room?"

"Please."

Algy, who had been leaning against the book shelves, straightened up and stepped forward.

He said gently:

"You'll be all right?"

A smile touched her eyes, briefly.

"Yes."

He came over and squeezed her hand encouragingly.

She smiled once more, then he released her fingers.

The door closed behind her.

Hazlitt leaned back with a scowl.

"No help at all," he muttered. He rustled the papers on the table in front of him, and stared at his notes of Peter Querrin's evidence.

"Young Querrin, now," he said, disagreeably. "He did nothing but tell us of a lot of vague suspicions— though," he admitted, "some of them were justified. More's the pity. Hmmm... This part about Simon Turner, though." He turned his head. "Hardinge, you know the man, I believe. Think there's anything in it?"

"Frankly, sir," answered the Sergeant, "no. And I doubt if Mr. Peter really believes it himself."

"Agreed," said Lawrence. "He's just clutching at straws. He's trying to help us—but he's trying too hard."

"The Lord preserve me," said Hazlitt, "from over-enthusiastic witnesses." His eyes, resting on Algy's lazy face, added clearly: and from meddling amateurs.

Lawrence grinned. He turned back to the shelves and ran a hand over the backs of the closely packed volumes.

The Inspector looked at Sudlow, who had been taking down the statements in shorthand. He said:

"Let me have your transcripts of the evidence as soon as possible. I shall want to study them."

"Yes, Inspector." Sudlow resigned himself to a sleepless night.

Hazlitt scowled once more at his notes. Possibly he was annoyed because Querrin's story confirmed Lawrence's so completely.

He said:

"This crime's fantastic. It—it just couldn't have happened."

Lawrence took a book from the shelves, and glanced up with a smile.

"Easy," he warned. "You're playing the murderer's game. This killing was planned by a clever man. He's led us, as he intended, into a blind alley. So now we're facing the blank walls of an impossibility... Just the same, there's an answer somewhere. And I'm going to find it."

It took the Inspector a long second to realize that this last remark was a challenge. Then he reddened, and snapped:

"You don't think I'll allow you to interfere and—and play detective again, do you?"

"Off hand," returned Algy gently, "I don't see how you're going to stop me."

The ghost of a smile flitted across the Sergeant's face. Possibly the Inspector saw it, for he immediately despatched his subordinate to the drawing-room to fetch Russell Craig for questioning.

Lawrence flipped over the pages of the book in his hand, concealing a grin. He fancied that Hazlitt had betrayed his knowledge of the young man's reputation.

The Inspector said, with an effort:

"There's no need for us to quarrel. Perhaps you can help me."

Lawrence never refused a friendly overture. He said:

"I have a fair grounding in locked room theory. Though frankly, I don't see how it will serve for the moment."

Hazlitt said disgustedly: "A sealed room murder!"

He made the four words sound like an obscenity.

"Say what you like," murmured Algy, "these crimes are fascinating problems." He turned the spine of the volume in his hands towards the Inspector. "And this is the book that began them all."

"What?"

It was an exclamation more than a question.

Lawrence grinned. "You can't arrest the author. He died in 1926." A pleasant fervour had crept into his voice. "This is *The Big Bow Mystery*, by Israel Zangwill. Published," he added, "in London, by Henry in 1892."

"Oh," said Hazlitt scornfully. "A detective story."

"Don't sneer," said Algy seriously. "A principle is a principle, whether in fiction or in fact. A sealed room may be fantastic, but it's a perfect protection. You can't possibly send the killer to trial without explaining how he escaped."

"Well," said the Inspector restively, "does that book help us?"

"No," said Lawrence. Not, he told himself, unless you believe I'm the killer. Wisely he kept that to himself. "But it's a very rare item. Hallo, this is the 1895 edition. There ought to be a special Introduction... Yes, here it is."

He began to read.

"*'For long before the book was written, I said to myself one night that no mystery-monger had ever murdered a man in a room to which there was no possible access. The puzzle was scarcely propounded ere the solution flew up and the idea lay stored in my mind till, years later (mm, ah, um...) the editor of a popular London evening paper,'*" Lawrence mumbled again — "*'asked me to provide him with a more original piece of fiction.'*"

"Well," said Hazlitt inadequately. "He ought to have been ashamed. Putting ideas into criminals' heads like that."

Lawrence slipped the book back into place, not without a trace of envy. He had been searching for a copy for years.

He looked up as the door opened and Russell Craig appeared.

Uncle Russ looked crumpled and irritated. He was apparently feeling the effects of his earlier carousal.

Lawrence doubted the usefulness of the old rogue's evidence. Hardinge and he had had the devil's own job to rouse him from his slumbers. He had locked his bedroom door, and they had been forced to hammer on the panels.

Craig was sober enough now, at all events.

The Sergeant crossed the threshold behind him and stood with his back to the door.

Hazlitt said:

"Sit down, Mr. Craig. You won't object if we take your fingerprints? Purely as a matter of routine."

"Purely as a matter of routine," said Uncle Russ, "why in hell's name should you?"

After a glance at the Inspector's face, Lawrence interposed hurriedly.

"You see, sir," he murmured, soothing the old boy's ruffled feathers, "we've found many fingerprints, and; we'd like to account for them all. If there are any we can't identify—well.... "

He trailed the sentence vaguely.

Craig squinted at him through horn rimmed spectacles. The old rogue's silver-grey hair was disordered and his velvet collared dressing-gown had obviously been bundled on hastily, yet he still contrived an air of tremendous dignity.

He said:

"Very well, my boy. Though," he added shrewdly, "I'll wager you find none of mine in that particular room. I didn't venture into it any more often than I could help."

Hazlitt signed to Draycott, who took up Craig's hand with a muttered apology. Uncle Russ watched with interest as his fingers were smeared with ink.

The Inspector asked:

"You didn't believe that absurd ghost story, surely?"

"Not exactly. But I don't think it wise to take chances with—with the supernatural."

"Roger Querrin didn't agree with you there."

"Roger Querrin," said Uncle Russ incautiously, "was a pig-headed ass." The Inspector pounced.

"Weren't you on good terms with him, then?"

"Eh?" Craig blinked. "Oh, but I was. Of course. We were," he pursued unconvincingly, "like father and son." He looked anxious. "You haven't been listening to gossip have you?"

Draycott released his hands. Uncle Russ flexed his fingers nervously.

Hazlitt said softly:

"Whose gossip, Mr. Craig?"

"Eh? Oh, nobody's." Audrey's uncle did not look happy. "You know how things are in a small village. And the servants, too. They're never reliable."

"The servants," repeated Hazlitt. "Wait a minute. Didn't somebody tell me you were drinking with the butler yesterday evening?"

"That's right," said Craig unhappily. "I was."

Lawrence watched his discomfort with a sympathetic grin.

"And then," continued Hazlitt ruthlessly, "you were helped to your room."

"My offer to act as a guard," said Craig with dignity, "was rejected. So I withdrew."

The Inspector, whose handling of the subject had been reminiscent of a dog toying with a tasty bone, dropped it reluctantly.

His questions established little or nothing of value. Russell Craig said that, left alone in his room, he had gone straight to sleep and knew nothing more until repeated knocking on the door had roused him.

The Inspector, at last, dismissed him with a sigh.

He said, as the door closed:

"The devil take this case. All the witnesses have been the same." He tapped his thumbnail with the tip of his pencil. "Either they know nothing at all, or they swear to an impossibility." His expression was half angry, half humorous.

He sighed again.

"Ah, well. Let's see the butler."

Jexen was a slightly built man with a grave face.

He said:

"No, sir. I heard nothing. Neither, I am sure, did anyone else."

The Inspector's face said plainly: I knew it.

He said:

"Yes, yes. I know the servants' quarters are more or less sealed off from the rest of the house. But surely you heard *something*."

Jexen said:

"No, sir." He paused. "Mr. Querrin—Mr. *Roger* Querrin," he emphasized in parenthesis, "gave us; strict instructions to retire early. He mentioned particularly that no one was to pry"—he spoke the word with distaste—"into the room at the end of the passage."

Hazlitt muttered something. "All right, then. You were all in your beds. With your heads under the covers, probably."

Lawrence reflected that Roger's staff of servants had displayed even less initiative than old Tom Querrin's: unlike the Inspector however, he felt he

could hardly blame them. Roger had been so anxious to keep them out of the way. Algy wondered if Hazlitt would pursue his inquiry into Russell Craig's peccadilloes.

Almost as if he had taken the thought from the young man's mind, the Inspector said:

"We've been told that you and Russell Craig were drinking together yesterday evening. Is that right?"

A faint smile flitted across the butler's lips.

"Yes, sir."

"Was that usual?"

"Hardly, sir. Though Mr. Craig and myself—." He hesitated. "Mr. Craig is a friendly gentleman, sir. The occasion was in the nature of a celebration."

"Oh? What kind of a celebration?"

Jexen looked slightly uncomfortable.

He said:

"This is rather difficult, sir. I suppose you could call it a farewell party."

"What?"

The Inspector leaned forward. Jexen moistened his lips. He seemed ill at ease.

Hazlitt said irritably:

"Come on, man. We've heard nothing of this before. A farewell party, you said. Who was leaving? Were you?"

"I? Oh no, sir. Mr. Craig intended to depart from Bristley very shortly."

"He told us nothing—." The Inspector broke off. "He's here with his niece. And Querrin and she weren't to be married for a month yet. Why was the old man going so soon?"

Jexen looked unhappy.

Hazlitt gave him no quarter. "Out with it, man. I asked you a question."

Jexen said slowly:

"Mr. Craig confided, sir, that—that Mr. Querrin had asked him to leave."

"Told him to get out, you mean?" This time the Inspector was really startled. "Why?"

"It's a delicate matter, sir."

"I've no doubt. Unfortunately I've no time for delicacy. Why was Craig told to go?"

Jexen was a loyal man, and he liked Audrey's uncle—but he had to answer.

He said, with an effort:

"Mr. Craig—assaulted one of the maids, sir."

"Assaulted one of the maids?" repeated Hazlitt, not without surprise. "Why—and how?"

"Really, sir." The butler shifted uneasily. "I'd rather you learned the details from the young person herself."

"Oh, very well. Sergeant!"

Hardinge was sent in search of Susan York.

When she finally appeared and took the butler's place in the chair before the table, Lawrence recognized the shapely hipped young housemaid who had brought sandwiches to his bedroom. Her flimsy negligee displayed her pretty figure to pleasant advantage, and a wide blue ribbon lent a provocative touch to her loosened hair.

She turned wide brown eyes on the Inspector.

Hazlitt coughed. "You are Susan York?"

"That's right, sir." Her voice was soft and pleasing, with an overlay of movie-brand sophistication.

Algy looked at her with interest. The curve of her mouth was pertly attractive: he wondered if Uncle Russ had thought so, too.

Hazlitt continued:

"About Russell Craig... " He paused. "You know him, of course."

"Yes, yes, sir." Susan added impulsively: "He's an old dear. If you'll pardon my mentioning it."

She subsided guiltily.

The Inspector's eyebrows went up.

"We've been told he assaulted you."

Susan jumped to her feet.

"Nothing of the sort," she cried indignantly. "He's the perfect gentleman, I hope. Though he did—."

She broke off and giggled.

The Inspector did not look pleased. "Now, my girl. Be careful. We have definite information that Mr. Querrin had told him to go."

Susan looked remorseful.

"I know, sir. Mr. Roger was very strict. I didn't think the story would get to his ears, else I shouldn't have spoken. I didn't—don't want to get Mr. Craig into trouble. He's very nice, really."

"Yet he ill-treated you."

"No, sir. It was what any gentleman might do."

"What, then?" Hazlitt was getting impatient. "Did he kiss you?"

"Oh, no." Susan's reply was a trifle regretful.

"For heaven's sake." Exasperation sounded in the Inspector's voice.

Answer me, girl. What did he do?"

A twinkle of amusement danced in Susan's eyes. She said demurely:

"He smacked me. Hard. On the bottom."

And she rubbed her chubby buttocks reminiscently.

Russell Craig said defensively:

"It was only a playful slap."

He gestured descriptively, then dropped his hand hurriedly.

Lawrence strangled a laugh.

Uncle Russ passed a handkerchief over his forehead.

He said feebly:

"You know how these things happen. She was bending over, dusting, and —."

"Yes, yes," said the Inspector hastily. "You don't have to go into the details. We want Roger Querrin's reaction, that's all."

"Roger," replied Craig, glumly, "was most unpleasant."

"He told you to clear out?"

"You put it crudely, Inspector. But—yes, he did."

"May I ask why you kept this a secret?"

Craig protested. "Hardly a secret. I mentioned it to Jexen."

"In a moment," commented Hazlitt unkindly, "of alcoholic carelessness."

Craig blinked.

He said:

"Inspector, your interrogation is playing havoc with my nerves. I was indulging last night... And, frankly I'm in urgent need of a hair of the dog."

"You'll have to wait, Mr. Craig. There's no liquor here."

"Oh," returned the old reprobate courteously, "but there is." He turned to Lawrence. "My boy, if you would be so kind as to move those two volumes of Havelock Ellis—."

Algy grinned. Behind the psychologist's monumental and kindly work, he found the irreverent presence of a bottle and a glass.

"My refuge," murmured Uncle Russ, "in emergencies."

Lawrence poured out a drink. Craig seized the tumbler with relief.

Hazlitt tapped impatiently.

"Mr. Craig—."

"Hmmm? Oh, yes." The old rogue pulled himself together. "Well, Inspector, I told no one else of Roger's rather surly action because, frankly, I expected him to think better of it."

"You mean you expected to get round him somehow?"

"After all," replied Craig, with dignity, "he was engaged to my niece. And I confess that I considered a successful conclusion of tonight's—last night's venture might put him into a better humour."

The speech had a hollow ring.

Hazlitt threw down his pencil. "All right. You can go back to bed. But remember," he warned, "this inquiry is only just beginning. Nobody leaves without my permission."

"I can assure you, Inspector," responded Russell Craig, "I shall be only too happy to extend my stay at Querrin House indefinitely."

"I bet he will," commented Hazlitt, when Uncle Russ had left. "This is a soft berth for that old rogue. Peter Querrin won't be rid of him in a hurry."

"You're forgetting the girl," said Lawrence. "She'll stay no longer than she's forced to."

The Inspector nodded. He seemed tired.

"I suppose not. Ah, well. Now we shall have to interview the rest of the servants."

"Forgive me," interrupted Lawrence, "if I don't stay to listen."

Hazlitt nodded again.

He said wearily:

"I don't imagine we shall learn anything useful."

Once outside the door, Lawrence leaned for a second with his back against the panels.

Fatigue and something like despair held him for the moment, then he straightened up and walked slowly towards the drawing-room.

Peter Querrin was still there, hunched in a chair and staring into the ashes of a burnt-out fire.

Lawrence went up to him slowly.

He said quietly:

"I'm sorry, Peter."

The travesty of a smile crossed Querrin's mouth.

"It had to happen, I suppose." He pinched the skin between his eyebrows. "That moment when we broke into the room... It was just such a horror as

I've seen in dreams. Only now the nightmare is reality."

"Steady, old chap."

Querrin looked up suddenly.

"Lawrence, I have to know. How did my brother die?"

Algy dropped a hand on Peter's shoulder.

"He was killed by a man like ourselves. Not by a ghost."

Querrin clenched his fist, then rubbed it into the palm of his other hand. He said:

"We weren't able to save Roger. But at least we can avenge him."

"That's right," said Algy Lawrence.

His eyes were strangely dull.

John Hardinge walked wearily along the drive, away from Querrin House. Hazlitt and his two assistants had already left. The Sergeant had stayed behind to hand over the care of the house and its occupants to a fresh-faced young constable from the village.

Now at last, Hardinge could return to the station. The dawn was already streaking light through the sky: he would have time for only a brief rest before returning to duty.

Every witness had been interviewed, and no new fact had been discovered. Hazlitt had gone to make his report at headquarters, and now—

Hardinge shook his head. He wondered how the case would end.

He stopped suddenly.

A sound, beyond that of his own footfalls, had reached his ears.

He called sharply:

"Who's there?"

Something rustled among the bushes.

Hardinge ran forward, swept aside the foliage with one hand, and flashed on his lamp with the other.

The light picked out the figure of a hatless, crouching man. The Sergeant drew in his breath.

"Good Lord! It's—."

The prowler threw up a hand across his white face, shielding his eyes from the blinding glare.

"I want you," said Hardinge grimly. "I—."

He got no further. The shabby man, caught between fear and fury, hurled himself forward.

The move took Hardinge by surprise.

The prowler's shoulder crashed into his chest, driving him backwards. He staggered and fell.

He grabbed desperately as he went, and catching the cloth of the shabby man's coat, dragged him down.

Sprawling across the Sergeant's body, the prowler flailed down his fist in a desperate bid for escape.

Hardinge twisted aside. The blow caught him high on the temple.

Dazed but determined, the Sergeant brought up his knee in the other man's stomach.

His attacker gasped and rolled over.

Hardinge struggled up. He fumbled for his policeman's whistle.

Jamming it between his lips he sent blast after blast shrilling through the gloom.

Lawrence had not yet gone up to his room. Fie had stayed downstairs with Peter Querrin. Both men felt extremely tired, yet neither felt like sleep.

Querrin said, not for the first time: "It's all so completely— incredible."

They were standing in the hall and talking quietly. Hardinge had let himself out shortly before, and the young constable was sitting patiently beside the entrance to the long corridor.

Lawrence murmured:

"I know, Peter. There's nothing we can do for the moment. I—what's that?"

He broke off as the blasts of Hardinge's whistle sounded from the grounds outside. Police Constable Shaw jumped to his feet.

He cried:

"The Sergeant!"

With a sudden exclamation, Lawrence ran to the door and pulled it open.

Half falling down the steps, the three men raced along the drive.

Still in the lead, Lawrence rounded a bend, then skidded to a stop.

Hardinge was kneeling beside the prostrate figure of a man stretched out on the ground.

The Sergeant stood up shakily, brushing the dirt and gravel from his knees. He said:

"I'm glad you came."

Querrin pushed forward.

"What happened?"

Hardinge gestured. "I found this fellow prowling in the bushes that border the drive. The damn' fool attacked me when I challenged him. I fought free long enough to reach my whistle, then the struggle was on again. I'm afraid I had to stun him finally."

He rubbed his knuckles gently.

Lawrence said:

"I don't blame you." He added grimly:

"I wonder if I know the gentleman."

Hardinge glanced at the strip of plaster on the young man's forehead, and smiled.

"We'll soon settle that, sir. Constable!"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Let me have your flashlight. Mine was damaged when we fell."

He took the lamp from Shaw's hand and stepped back to the fallen man.

As the beam drove the shadows from the unconscious face, Peter Querrin cried out in surprise.

"Good God! It's—."

The Sergeant interrupted. "Just a minute, sir. Now, Mr. Lawrence. Do you recognize this man?"

"I do," said Algy, with feeling. His fingers went up to the bruise on his temple.

"Ah! I thought so, from your description. Vague though it was." His suspicions confirmed, the Sergeant drew in a satisfied breath. "This is the man who attacked you?"

Lawrence agreed.

"We've certainly met before. His calling card was a stone."

"Yes." The Sergeant was grimly humorous. "Let's make that introduction formal."

He shut off the light.

"This man is Simon Turner."

Colonel Johnson was a ruddy-faced man with a hearty voice which was, for the moment, a trifle less friendly than usual.

He said:

"Frankly, Inspector, I don't appreciate your interest in this matter."

Stephen Castle stood—or rather, sat—his ground.

"In a sense, sir," he returned, "I am already implicated in the case. I was a personal friend of the victim's and I was also responsible for the presence in Querrin House of your chief witness."

The Colonel growled thoughtfully. The two men were seated in his study.

"Myes. This fellow Lawrence." He flipped through the papers on his desk. "Hazlitt seemed rather dubious of that young man's evidence."

The Chief Inspector replied firmly:

"Lawrence is completely reliable."

"Perhaps." The Colonel was not convinced. "Anyway, that's not the point." He slapped down his hand on the reports. "As Chief Constable of this county, I'm bound to support my men. Till they request assistance or I'm satisfied that they're not competent to deal with the matter, I see no reason to call in the Yard."

And when you do, thought the Chief Inspector, the trail will be cold.

But he could hardly put such a sentiment into words; and besides, he liked loyalty. So, repressing his feelings, Castle said respectfully:

"When I requested this interview, sir, it wasn't with any intention of over-riding your men's authority. I merely wanted to draw your attention to Mr. Lawrence's possible value."

"Possible value?" repeated Colonel Johnson. "Wait a minute. I *have* heard something of that young man's reputation. Wasn't he the fellow who—."

He mentioned details.

Castle nodded. "That's correct, sir. It occurred to me that he might be very useful to the County Police. He's no good with routine affairs. But he's an expert at resolving fantasies."

"Myes." The Colonel looked thoughtful. "Perhaps you're right. I'll speak to Hazlitt."

"Thank you, sir."

The Colonel said shrewdly:

"Now you've wangled the Yard its unofficial representative, maybe you'll tell me what else you want."

The Inspector chuckled.

"I was hoping, sir," he responded smoothly, "you would allow me to examine the reports of the case to date. Then before returning to London, I might have a brief discussion with Mr. Lawrence. A talk may clear up certain difficulties in the evidence."

"Very well. Though it seems to me," said the Colonel, "you are remarkably well acquainted with the affair already."

"Yes, sir," admitted the Chief Inspector. "Mr. Lawrence telephoned me in the early hours of the morning."

"Did he, by Jove?" The Colonel laughed. "So you fixed this up between you."

Castle made to protest, but the Chief Constable held up his hand. "Never mind. I wish your young friend luck."

He added sardonically:

"He'll need it."

Algy Lawrence strolled along the flagged path under the trees. He was thinking hard.

He believed, in the manner of the greatest of detectives, that the more bizarre a problem, the easier its solution. Yet he could not even begin to explain the mystery of Roger Querrin's death.

He grinned wryly. It was no consolation to reflect that Inspector Hazlitt was just as puzzled and even less confident of success.

He quoted aloud:

"The facility with which I shall arrive, or have arrived, at the solution of this mystery, is in the direct ratio of its apparent insolubility in the eyes of the police."

He took considerable pleasure from the sonorous roll of Dupin's words, and wondered if he dared apply them to himself.

Then he remembered Russell Craig's distaste for young men who liked quotations and grinned again.

His face sobered as he glanced towards the french windows of the room in which Querrin had died. Behind the glass panes, men were working busily.

Lawrence knew that Hazlitt, despite his own exhaustive search, still suspected the existence of a secret entrance. So now a team of experts had set to work examining every inch of the walls, the floor, and the ceiling.

So far they had found nothing. Lawrence had expected little else. Someone spoke his name.

He turned to see Audrey Craig. Touched by the distress on the girl's pretty face, he greeted her gently.

"Hallo, there."

Those were the words he had used at their first meeting. It seemed so long ago....

She said anxiously:

"I'd like to talk with you."

"Go ahead."

They fell into step.

"Algy." It was the first time she had used his Christian name. He felt a tiny shock of pleasure. "Algy, is it true that Simon Turner has been arrested?"

"Yes, it is."

She queried painfully:

"On what charge?"

"Assault, I imagine." He glanced down at her. "He attacked both Hardinge and myself, remember."

"Yes, I heard about that. But I thought, perhaps—."

She did not finish.

Lawrence took her arm.

He said:

"Audrey, my dear. I don't believe that Turner had anything to do with the— with what happened to Roger."

"But he must have been prowling round the house all the time. You remember, I saw somebody moving among the bushes yesterday afternoon —."

"Yes. But Audrey, you've forgotten one thing. The Sergeant was on guard last night. If Turner had ventured near Roger between eleven and twelve o'clock, Hardinge would have nabbed him like a shot."

"If the old man had approached him by way of the gardens, yes." Audrey was eager. "But supposing old Simon managed to smuggle his way into the

house earlier in the evening?"

"After I was knocked out," Lawrence reminded her gently, "all the doors and windows were locked from the inside. On the ground floor, at least. And anyway," he finished, "I was on guard myself at the entrance to the passage."

"Just the same," returned Audrey mutinously, "somebody reached—and killed—him."

"That's right," said Algy Lawrence. His voice sounded tired and bitter.

Audrey glanced up quickly, then dropped her hand over his.

She said softly:

"I didn't mean to reproach you. You did your best."

"Yes, I did my best. But it wasn't—enough."

They went on a few paces in silence. Then Audrey made a brave attempt to change the subject.

"Uncle Russ has been disgracing himself again."

Algy grinned. He murmured:

"He merely responded to Susan's charms in his own inimitable style."

To his pleasure, Audrey laughed briefly.

"I suppose we can hardly blame him."

"No. She's a comely wench."

"She's a minx," returned Audrey with feminine ruthlessness. Then she smiled. "But I like her."

"So does Uncle Russ."

Affection and laughter struggled round the sorrow in her grey-green eyes.

"He's an old rogue." Her voice faltered. "But he's all I have, now."

There it was again: the grief that stood between them.

The girl exclaimed suddenly:

"You didn't like Roger, did you?"

Lawrence replied awkwardly:

"I hardly knew him."

Audrey said quietly:

"That answer is only an evasion. No, you found him overbearing and obstinate. But, Algy, I have to say this, because somehow it seems important."

She paused, feeling for words that sounded to her only embarrassed and stilted.

"To me, Roger was all that is kind, and wonderful, and —and lovely in life. He was somehow the meaning of all existence...."

She finished with a hint of tears.

"You'll never understand."

Lawrence squeezed her arm tenderly.

He said:

"I understand, believe me." He added softly:

"We all need somebody to love us."

Something in his tone struck through the turmoil of her own emotions. She looked beyond the mask of his amiable laziness into the shyly romantic places of his soul.

She whispered quickly:

"I hope you find her soon...."

"Steve!"

Lawrence called the name with a mixture of surprise and pleasure. Though he had telephoned his old friend early that morning, he had hardly expected the Chief Inspector to appear so promptly.

Castle stumped along the drive towards him, a bowler hat rammed down hard on his grizzled head, and one hand half in the pocket of his battered old raincoat.

After the girl had left him, Lawrence had continued his stroll in the grounds. He had just been thinking of his friend the Inspector when Steve had appeared at the open gates.

As the young man hailed him, Castle lifted his free hand and waved it in salute.

Lawrence hurried up and gave him a friendly clump on the shoulder.

"I'm glad to see you."

"So you should be," returned Castle gruffly. "I had the devil's own job to get here. And," he warned, "I can't stay for long. I fiddled leave of absence from the Yard— and lost about five good years of my life doing it—but I have to be back there this afternoon."

"Hardly," murmured Algy, "an extensive furlough."

"I put the time to good use, anyway. I had an interview with Colonel Johnson."

"Colonel—?"

"The Chief Constable." The two men walked on a few more paces in silence. Then the Inspector said, less belligerently:

"Well! You don't have to worry. I've wangled you semi-official status. Hazlitt won't bother you."

"Thanks."

Castle glanced at his young friend's impassive face and was not deceived.

He said quietly:

"Listen, Algy. Querrin's dead. So find his murderer. That's all that concerns you now... Don't blame yourself for anything that's happened."

"That's easy to say."

Steve pushed out a profanity with good humoured exasperation. Then he added, more calmly:

"I'll tell you this once, and then the matter's closed." He paused. He said slowly:

"No man's infallible. He can only do his best."

Lawrence shrugged.

"Cold comfort, Steve. I still let Querrin die."

Castle replied quietly:

"If you couldn't save him, no one could."

There was a pause. Then Lawrence said: "Thanks," again, as impassively as before. But this time his tone had subtly lightened.

As they came nearer the house, the Chief Inspector asked:

"How's young Peter?"

"He's all right." Algy reviewed the moment of crisis when the raw edge of hysteria had shown in Querrin's cry. Yet after that ugly moment, Roger's brother had quietened rapidly.

Lawrence murmured:

"I misjudged him. He seems to have kept his head."

Castle nodded. He said abruptly:

"I don't want to see him."

He added:

"This isn't a formal call."

Lawrence said, not as a question:

"You came here to work."

Steve inclined his head. There was no need to elaborate. It wouldn't be the first time they had found a conference useful.

Inside the house, the Inspector removed his hat and peered round. "Where can we talk?"

"Let's go into the library."

Castle eyed his friend suspiciously. He said:

"I don't trust you among so many books."

Algy laughed. "I'll behave."

Once in the room, Steve glared round at the packed shelves and smacked down his hat on the table. He made no attempt to take off his battered raincoat. Lawrence often swore he had never been known to remove it while working.

Algy drew up a couple of easy chairs.

He said:

"We may as well make ourselves comfortable."

The Inspector cleared his throat. He growled:

"Before we start, young Algy, kindly remember this. Aside from the nervous strain involved in edging myself into this thing against official opposition, I've spent the last couple of hours studying nearly every report on the case to date. All this, mark you, since you dragged me down to the 'phone in the small hours of the morning. So for heaven's sake, don't lecture! I can't stand it."

Lawrence put on his usual lazy grin.

The Chief Inspector sighed. He fished out a notebook from one capacious pocket.

"I jotted down the main features of the affair. Though I don't see how it will help us, I admit."

Lawrence settled himself more comfortably.

He said:

"There's only one way to tackle this problem. You and I both know there are only a few basic methods of committing murders in sealed rooms. So if we examine every known principle—."

The Inspector groaned.

"We are bound," pursued Algy inexorably, "to arrive at the particular variation we need to explain the mystery."

Castle mumbled a not very hopeful protest. "At least," he murmured, "try to keep to the point."

Algy chuckled. He asked:

"Do you remember the case of the Dead Magicians?"

A spark of interest showed on the Inspector's rugged face. "You mean that odd affair in America, round about 1938? Yes, I remember. Homer Gavigan handled that for the New York Police Department. Though I believe most of

the credit went to a man calling himself"—the Inspector's voice held a high pitch of unbelief—"the Great Merlini."

"That's it. Merlini solved the mystery, then wrote up the case as a novel, calling it *Death From a Top Hat*. He collaborated with Ross Harte—they used 'Clayton Rawson' as a pseudonym." Lawrence digressed slightly. "There have been four Rawson books to date, though only three have been published in England. More's the pity. Every one is first rate."

Castle stirred restively.

Lawrence said quickly:

"Here's the point. Merlini devoted the bulk of Chapter Thirteen to a lecture"—Castle groaned—"on the general mechanics of the sealed room murder. He indicated that every such crime falls within one of three classes, namely—."

The Chief Inspector held up his hand.

"I've read the book," he growled. "And before you go any further, I'm also well acquainted with Doctor Gideon Fell's famous Locked Room Lecture in *The Hollow Man*."

"Published in the U.S.A.," threw in Algy irrepressibly, "as *The Three Coffins*... I'm glad you know it. Fell and John Dickson Carr are experts."

Castle said:

"I have a feeling I'm not going to enjoy this discussion. I can't remember one of those crimes which was solved by an official representative of the police."

"Oh, come now," chided Lawrence. "You've forgotten Edward Beale and Joseph French. They were both Inspectors."

Slightly cheered, Steve Castle nipped through the leaves of his notebook. He said:

"This case is a topsy turvy affair, so let's start with Class Three."

"Which," supplied Lawrence dreamily, "includes those murders committed in a room which is genuinely sealed from the inside, and from which the killer does not escape, but stays there hidden until after the room is forced open from the outside. He leaves, of course, before the room is searched."

"Well," said the Inspector, "how about that?"

"Not a chance," returned Algy decisively, "I don't get caught with whiskery old gags like that. I was first in the room where Querrin died. There was nobody behind the door, under the table, or anywhere else, in or out of sight."

"That checks," admitted Castle, "with young Peter's evidence. He didn't move from the doorway till you sent him to let Hardinge into the house."

"Yes. Even if Peter hadn't been there, I'd still be certain. Once inside the room, I was much too alert to let any one escape."

"I like," commented the Inspector sardonically, "your modesty. But I believe you." He sucked at the stub of his pencil, then doodled absently in his notebook. "Let's slip back to Class One."

"Ah." Lawrence rasped a thumb along the angle of his jaw. "Death in a room which really is sealed because no murderer was actually inside."

"In other words," added Castle, "the killer contrives his victim's decease from outside the"—he finished with distaste—"hermetically sealed chamber."

"Mmmm. And this classification also includes accident or suicide which looks like murder, and the killing of the victim by the first person who enters the room—the dead man, of course, is lying on the floor apparently lifeless but in reality only drugged or unconscious."

"That's not much help," said Steve. "Unless you want me to arrest you."

Algy smiled. "Let's dispose of the other alternatives."

Castle scowled thoughtfully. "It certainly wasn't suicide, and a man doesn't take a knife out of its sheath and stab himself in the back by accident. I suppose you're sure he was unharmed when you left him?"

"If," replied Lawrence with restraint, "you're suggesting that Querrin was stabbed before he went into the room and locked it—" He broke off and laughed. "I think we would all have noticed a dagger between his shoulder blades. No, Steve. Roger was alive and unhurt when he secured the door behind us."

"Well," murmured Castle, "I'd be tempted to suggest another method—the one where the killer does his dirty work from outside, though it appears to have occurred inside—."

"Daggers fired from air guns, and bullets that melt in the wounds," interposed Lawrence helpfully.

"Yes. Except," finished the Inspector, "there was no opening at all in that room. No secret panels, whether the size of a man or a sixpence. And that knife certainly wasn't shot through the keyhole or a Judas window."

"And it didn't," grinned Algy, "fly down the chimney."

"You know," said Castle, "all this talk about daggers is nonsense. The knife was in its place on the wall when Roger sealed the room, so the murderer

must have got in to take it down."

"You mean we should eliminate Class One entirely?"

"I don't know what I mean," confessed the Chief Inspector. "The whole point of every crime in Class One is that the doors and windows are locked by the victim himself. And we know that's what happened here. Roger sealed the room. So logically, the killer must have struck from outside."

"So logically," said Lawrence rudely, "nuts. That knife couldn't leave the sheath without somebody's hand on it. And I refuse to believe Querrin was so obliging as to co-operate with his murderer by helping him to rig a booby trap with it."

"Never mind who fixed it," said Castle eagerly. "Was there any sort of mechanical device in that room?"

Algy shook his head. "No. I searched it, remember. There was nothing capable of firing a spitball, let alone a dagger."

"Yes, that's true." The Inspector sounded depressed. "The County Police even examined the furniture."

"They're still at it," agreed Lawrence, with a grin.

"They're wasting their time," commented Steve, with a snort. "Hazlitt still thinks, against all reason, there's a secret passage somewhere. It's the sort of damn' fool notion he would get in his noggin."

"Anyway," smiled Algy, "it's probably the only way he can preserve his sanity."

"I sympathize there... What's left, then?"

"Not very much. We've exhausted nearly every possibility in Class One. Roger definitely wasn't the victim of any elaborate trickery such as Rupert Penny described in his brilliant *Sealed Room Murder*. And he wasn't driven to knife himself by poison, gas, or the sight of a horrible insect."

"So?"

"So," said Lawrence, "that's all, pal. We've eliminated Classes One and Three. Therefore the killer's method must be somewhere in Category Two."

The Inspector nodded agreement, though he still looked worried.

"You mean that the room only seemed to be sealed, because the murderer tampered with the door or the windows."

"Yes. But," warned Algy, "be careful. There's a big headache in store. This room wasn't just locked. It was also guarded."

Castle swore.

He said:

"Don't confuse me, curse you. Our conclusion is this: the killer was in the room with Querrin. When he knifed Roger, he somehow contrived an escape."

"Mmmm. But how?"

"Don't ask me, for God's sake. But I'll tell you this. The medical evidence appears to confirm the theory. Roger's wound could not possibly have been self inflicted. Moreover, the doctor found a bruise on the back of his head under the hair. Suggesting he was stunned from behind, then stabbed while unconscious."

Lawrence was aware of the faintest of tremors. He had the sudden, appalling vision of a killer oozing like smoke through the solid walls.

He said abruptly:

"This is a devilish problem. How in blazes did the murderer break into the room in the first place?"

"He wasn't," inquired the Inspector, "hiding there when Roger locked the door?"

Lawrence emphasized the negative. "No. I made sure of that before we left him." He paused. "Wait a minute. I didn't look up the chimney. The fire was still burning."

Even as he spoke, he realized the quibble was ridiculous.

Castle said grimly:

"You can forget the chimney. It was examined thoroughly. It hasn't been swept for years. Nothing could pass up or down it without dislodging half a ton of soot."

"I judged it impassable," murmured Algy. "I'm glad you agree." Castle said unhappily:

"We're back to the door and the windows."

"Yes," agreed Lawrence unhelpfully. "Aren't we?"

"Oh, Lord," exploded Steve. "I'm foxed."

"Take some aspirin," advised Algy. "While I run through the known methods of hocussing locks and bolts. There aren't many, so it shouldn't take long."

Steve passed a hand across his forehead. Lawrence went on:

"The french windows were closed and bolted. Now, funny business with string, usually involving the keyhole of—or the gap under—a door, has often been employed to shoot bolts from outside. But in the first place, we're not

considering a door, and in the second place, both bolts on the windows are so stiff they could never respond to any pressure from without."

Castle grunted irritably. He said:

"Granted. The only other way of fiddling the windows would be to remove a pane of glass, reach through and shoot the bolts, and then replace the glass from outside. And we know that didn't happen, because none of the putty was new."

"There is," mused Algy, "one other possibility. Somebody could have tampered with the hinges."

Castle dissented. "No. You can't do that without leaving traces. The screws hadn't been touched."

"Then," said Lawrence quietly, "I'll stake my life on this. Those french windows could only have been secured from inside the room."

The Chief Inspector scowled.

"You don't need to convince me, blast it. Let's consider the door."

Lawrence looked puzzled.

He said:

"This ought to be easy, on the face of it. Yet—." He broke off. "At least, since the key wasn't left in the lock, we don't have to concern ourselves with that hardy annual, the stem which was gripped and turned with pliers from outside."

"No," said Castle. He added incautiously:

"I wonder who thought of *that* first."

"Fitz-James O'Brien," said Lawrence promptly. "He wrote a yarn called *The Diamond Lens*, which appeared in 1858." He added: "It wasn't a detective story."

"Thank God for that, anyway," cried the Chief Inspector. "I should have known better than to ask."

Algy grinned. He asked:

"The lock on the door was new. Have you checked with the manufacturers?"

"Yes." Castle flicked through his notebook once more. "Though they sell a good many locks of that type, they never duplicate the wards. And they swear there was only one key made to fit, and that, we know, was kept by Querrin on a chain attached to his braces."

"Which rules out the possibility of anybody stealing it to take a wax impression." Lawrence rubbed his cheek. "Anyway, there would hardly have

been time to cut a duplicate. The lock itself wasn't put in till yesterday morning." He grinned. "I'm beaten, Steve. I know how to lock a door from outside and then return the key to the mantelpiece by means of string and staples. But I've no idea how to get the key back to a dead man's pocket."

He snapped his fingers. "Did the killer use a picklock?" Castle shook his head.

"When you fired through the lock you made a mess of it. But there was enough of the inner mechanism left for the police to discount that particular possibility. They made a thorough examination... As you're aware, the exploring motions of a picklock or a skeleton key leave traces in the coating of grease inside a lock. The same applies to a paraffin-coated blank inserted and twisted till it touches the mechanism. The idea," he explained unnecessarily, "is to use the marks resulting as a guide to filing the key to fit. But that always leaves traces." He shook his head again. "No, Algy. There was no skeleton, and no duplicate. The only key corresponding to the wards of that lock was the one in Querrin's pocket."

Lawrence smiled again, entirely without humour.

"Then there was no way whatever of escaping from the room." Steve asked desperately:

"I suppose the door really was locked?"

Lawrence stared at him.

"If," he said politely, "you're implying that Peter and I were mugs enough to be fooled into believing a door could be secured when it wasn't, then all I can say is—."

"Yes, yes," roared Castle hurriedly.

Lawrence grinned. He said:

"I don't blame you for doubting my evidence. I'd be sceptical myself in your shoes. But the fact remains, there is simply no possibility of trickery of that sort— bolts being shot and keys replaced, etcetera, etcetera— after the door was forced, because I was the only person to enter and search the room until the police took over. Even Peter stayed in the doorway. He didn't venture across the threshold."

The Inspector gestured helplessly. He said:

"Perhaps we're mistaken in concentrating on the sealed chamber aspects of the thing. Let's consider the—the *accessibility* of the room."

Lawrence raised a quizzical eyebrow.

He said:

"That's a good principle. If you can't solve a problem, ignore it."

He pressed his finger tips together, and sank lower in his chair.

"Still, let's do things your way. First, the windows. By-passing the bogey of the bolts, and supposing our friend the Sergeant to be totally blind, we put our killer on the steps beyond the sill. All right, then. How on earth does he manage to get to the path without leaving tracks in the soft wet soil of the flower-beds? The rain stopped twenty minutes before Roger died."

The Inspector scratched his nose. "It's impossible. It's much too far to jump, and a pole vault is out of the question."

Algy strangled a laugh. "And don't talk to me about ladders. Those beds are so wide, you'd need something like a thirty or forty foot ladder to get the right sort of incline against the house. And how could you possibly remove it without stepping off the path?"

Steve smacked his knee.

"All right, then. Nobody left through the windows. You proved that before."

"That leaves the door and the passage outside. I was guarding the corridor myself.

The only other exit from the passage was the window half-way along. That was locked—."

"Yes," interrupted his friend, "and we examined the catch. It couldn't conceivably have been secured from outside the house. And again, there were no footprints or marks of any kind on the earth between the house wall and the path."

"Besides," added Lawrence, "Hardinge tells me that from where he was stationed under the trees, he could see down that side of the house—Roger's room was on the corner, remember—and nobody came near it."

"Oh, Lord."

Algy continued:

"And the only other exit from the passage, the double doorway in the main hall, was under my own continuous guard."

"I wonder," said the Inspector, not very hopefully, "if anybody could have slipped past you as you went up the corridor."

"Stop wondering. I'm not blind. Neither is Peter. The candlelight wasn't strong, but it was adequate. That passage was entirely deserted. Besides, you're evading the most puzzling point of all."

"I know," said Steve, unhappily. "You heard Roger scream while you were standing in front of the door. I—. Wait a minute!" He thumped his leg with sudden excitement.

"What's the matter?"

Castle spaced his words carefully.

"Didn't I tell you just now that Querrin was stunned before he was stabbed? So how could he—."

"Scream when he was knifed?" Lawrence took the question away. "Hold your horses, Steve. You don't know Roger was unconscious. He might have been momentarily blacked out, and have come round as the dagger went in. Or he might only have been dazed and helpless. In either case he could have cried out."

"Oh." The Inspector slumped back. He said, with a brief show of spirit:

"Just the same, that scream might have been a fake."

Lawrence said slowly:

"I wondered if you'd suggest that." He shook his head thoughtfully. "I don't see it, Steve. You're forgetting I searched that room. There wasn't any sort of recording device there. No gramophone, no radio, no telephone, no dictaphone—not even a speaking tube. And even if it was a fake, you still haven't explained how the killer got out of the room and past the guards—either then or earlier."

"Oh, well. It was just an idea."

The Inspector was glum and rather angry.

He roared:

"God damn it, do you realize what we've done? We've eliminated every possibility, and—and proved this crime could never have been committed!"

Lawrence began to laugh. Then he stopped, suddenly.

Steve Castle asked curiously:

"What is it?"

"I was thinking," replied Lawrence in a small, queer voice. "We've made out a perfect case, and pinned the guilt square on the only possible culprit. But you'll never arrest him."

He laughed again.

He said softly:

"You can't put handcuffs—on a ghost."

Algy Lawrence stood at the top of the steps, watching Steve Castle as he stumped down the drive towards the gates.

He waved a lazy farewell, then re-entered the house. He stopped for a moment by the telephone and his hand strayed towards the receiver.

A voice from above called:

"Pssst!"

Lawrence glanced upwards. The large-nosed face of Russell Craig was peering down over the banisters.

"My boy," said that gentleman courteously, "I would like a word with you."

"Right."

Lawrence made his way up the broad staircase. He was rather surprised to find the landing deserted.

Then Craig's head appeared once more, disembodied and smiling, like Alice's Cheshire Cat. The old rogue was leaning out from behind the door of a room near the head of the stairs.

"This way, my boy."

Lawrence followed Uncle Russ through the open door and looked round with interest. This was apparently Craig's cubby hole, and it was very comfortably furnished.

Audrey's uncle indicated an easy chair, then seated himself on the bed.

"You called here last night," he murmured. "But I'm afraid I was too sleepy to invite you in."

"We had," agreed Algy, "the devil's own job to rouse you."

"Yes." Craig stroked the side of his nose. "I had slipped from the clutch of Bacchus to the softer arms of Morpheus."

Lawrence nodded. "This is a pleasant room. Do you spend much time here?"

"Not," confessed his companion, "usually. But just now the house seems crammed with detectives. And they all," he finished glumly, "disapprove of me."

Algy laughed.

"Never mind. I'll smuggle you a book from the library."

"I am," said Uncle Russ, "reasonably well supplied with reading matter."

He indicated a volume lying beside him on the bed.

"Krafft-Ebing," grinned Lawrence. "I hope you can understand Latin."

"My boy," returned Craig courteously, "I never fully appreciated the benefit of a classical education until I first saw a copy of *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

However. Enough," he said expansively, "of frivolous matters. I have been employing my time more usefully of late."

"How, exactly?"

Uncle Russ said impressively:

"I have been evolving a solution to the mystery of Roger Querrin's death."

"Have you, now?" Lawrence eyed the old rogue quizzically. "I'd like to hear it."

"You will, my boy. But not just yet. In any event," Russell Craig admitted, "my analysis is not entirely completed." He hesitated. "There is one point, my dear fellow. I understand that in a measure you have, shall we say, the ear or confidence of the police? Yes. Well, then." He looked a trifle embarrassed. "Are they offering anything in the nature of a reward?"

Algy hid a smile. He replied: "I'm afraid not."

"Oh." Craig looked disappointed. "That's a pity."

Lawrence went on:

"Of course, Peter may——"

"Ah." Uncle Russ was cheered. "Peter. Yes, I may speak to Peter."

Lawrence stood up. "If that's all, then——"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door. As Craig called out: "Come in," Algy turned to see Susan York on the threshold.

She spoke to the young man demurely.

"Excuse me, sir. You're wanted on the telephone."

"Thanks." He nodded and smiled.

She went out with a sidelong glance at Russell Craig in which amusement and mischief showed clearly.

Uncle Russ turned slightly pink.

He said defensively:

"I hope the police aren't still brooding over that little affair involving Susan."

"Don't worry about it."

Craig fumbled an apologia. He said:

"I like to stroke a pair of pretty legs, or pat a sleek behind. There's nothing wrong in that, my boy. It's natural."

"This," murmured Algy, "was more than a pat."

"She has such a provokingly attractive *derrière*," said Craig. "A slap seemed the most appropriate salute."

A smile was still flickering at the corners of the young man's mouth as he picked up the receiver from the table in the hall below.

"Lawrence speaking."

"Hallo, sir. Hardinge here."

"Hallo, Sergeant. I'm glad you rang. I was thinking of calling you myself."

"Oh." Comprehension sounded in the Sergeant's voice. "About Turner, perhaps?"

"That's right."

"Good." Hardinge seemed pleased. He said:

"I'd like to speak to you about old Simon. I have an idea he might prove rather useful."

Interest quickened the young man's words.

"Of course. You're at the station, I suppose? Shall I come down to see you?"

"If you would, sir." The Sergeant said with decision:

"I'd prefer not to talk over the 'phone."

"I understand."

"One other thing, sir." Hesitation showed faintly in Hardinge's metallicly distorted tones.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Peter, sir. He told us plainly enough last night he suspects Turner of complicity in his brother's murder—."

"Well?"

"Without offence, sir, Mr. Querrin is at the moment a trifle hysterical. Turner and he—."

"Had better not meet." Lawrence helped the Sergeant to finish. "I agree. Don't worry. I'll keep Peter out of the way."

Hardinge suggested:

"Miss Craig might be willing to help you."

"Mmmm," said Algy, thoughtfully. "That's an idea. She needs company. I'll mention the matter to her. Her uncle," he grinned briefly, "is otherwise engaged."

Hardinge said smoothly:

"I'll expect you, then."

"I'm leaving at once."

Lawrence dropped the receiver into its cradle. He stayed for a moment with his hand resting idly on the instrument. He was alone in the hall.

Somewhere above him, a door closed softly.

It was late afternoon before Algy Lawrence entered the police station again. The front door stood open. The fair haired young man walked over the step and found himself in the equivalent of a three-sided box.

Pushing open the inner door marked Inquiries, Lawrence went into the Charge Room.

John Hardinge was seated behind the desk, looking tired and a little worried. When he saw who had arrived, he stood up with a smile.

"Hallo, sir. I'm glad you're here."

"I came at once." Lawrence arched one eyebrow in a question. The Sergeant replied with brevity:

"It's Simon Turner."

Algy looked thoughtful. He fumbled for his silver cigarette-case, then let it slide out of his fingers once more.

He said:

"You're holding him, of course."

"Yes." Hardinge leaned against the desk. "We could hardly do anything else. He assaulted you, and he also attacked me." The lips beneath the dapper moustache curved in a brief grin. "That last offence is, I'm afraid, in the eyes of the police the more serious."

Lawrence laughed.

He said:

"Even that's trivial compared to the major crime last night."

Hardinge was serious. "I agree. That," he confessed, "is what's bothering me."

Lawrence was alert. "What is it?"

"I have the feeling," returned the Sergeant slowly, "that Turner knows something more than he's told us."

Lawrence said, not as a question:

"Hazlitt doesn't agree with you."

"No. Mind you, I don't blame him. I've no reason for thinking as I do. It's just a hunch."

Algy rasped the angle of his jaw.

"I'd like to see friend Turner."

"Ah," said the Sergeant, with relief. "That's what I thought. A talk may give you his measure. It's as well you came to-day," he added. "The Inspector is thinking of shifting old Simon away from the village. Bristley is a peaceful place. I'm not used to guarding important prisoners in our cells."

Lawrence nodded. "Lead on, then."

Hardinge opened a door at the rear of the main room and the two men stood for a moment in the short corridor to which it gave access. The Sergeant indicated a cubby hole to their left.

"We use that as an office, when necessary. Down there," he pointed, "are the cells."

He jangled the keys in his hand.

Lawrence glanced at the solitary barred window and let a faint grimace of distaste flit across his face. He felt vaguely depressed.

Interpreting the look, Hardinge said lightly:

"Whoever converted this place into our police station had a fondness for iron grilles. Heaven help me, even the windows in my living quarters are barred. What I should do in case of fire, I shudder to think." He smiled. "Still, never mind that."

He stopped by the door of Turner's cell and twisted a key in the lock.

Old Simon looked up as the two men entered. He made no attempt to rise, but merely blinked at them suspiciously.

Lawrence, gazing at the old fellow's skinny frame, could hardly believe that this was the man who had attacked him so viciously the previous evening. Another glance showed him the crustiness in Turner's features and the malignity in his faded eyes.

Lawrence sat down on the bunk beside him.

Hardinge stood with his back to the door and remarked unnecessarily:

"This is Simon Turner."

The young man said grimly:

"We've met."

He stroked the adhesive plaster on his temple.

Turner blinked again, apprehensively, but made no comment.

Algy said abruptly:

"How would you like to get out of here?"

A puzzling expression, almost of knowing amusement, peeped round the fear. Then Simon spoke, with a slur.

"Could y' fix it, then?"

"Well, now." Lawrence spoke slowly. "I might be persuaded to drop the charges against you."

Turner squinted at him.

"Y' wouldn't do that for nothing, would y' now?"

"No." Lawrence took the cigarette-case from his pocket. He asked politely:

"A smoke?"

Hardinge frowned but made no objection. Old Simon took a cigarette without noticeable gratitude. Lawrence shut the case and flicked up a flame from the lighter set in its spine.

He went on:

"You'd have to help me first."

"How?"

"Tell me anything you know about Roger Querrin's death."

Turner's response was a disgusted growl. He jerked a thumb towards the Sergeant. "Ask him. He already knows all I'm telling."

"Don't be impertinent." Hardinge's voice was a warning. "And answer Mr. Lawrence's questions."

The young man said patiently:

"I've no connection with the police. Naturally, you wouldn't want to incriminate yourself. But I promise you faithfully that if you can throw any light at all on the mystery, you certainly won't suffer by it."

Simon scowled. "What makes y' think I know anything?"

"You were prowling round Querrin House all day, weren't you?"

"Maybe I was. Maybe," said the old man bitterly. "I wanted to see that stiff necked bastard get what he deserved. I—."

"That's enough of that," interrupted Algy sharply. "We're not interested in your grudges. And unless you want us to believe you had a hand in Roger Querrin's death, you'd better not abuse him in our hearing."

Simon said obscurely:

"I'm not worried."

"You should be. You've shown you don't shirk violence. Murder might be within your capacities."

Turner smacked his hands together. The cigarette jerked wildly between his lips.

"So I hit y'! That was your fault. Y' jumped on me, didn't y'? I had to get free."

"Why were you there in the first place?"

The faded eyes glowed with malice. Old Simon whispered:

"He robbed me of my home. Turned me out after a lifetime's service... I couldn't do anything about it." He laughed soundlessly. "I didn't have to. I just waited. I knew he wouldn't escape old Tom. Old Tom was my friend. Old Tom would avenge me...."

His voice dropped.

"I wanted to be there."

Hardinge broke the silence.

He said:

"I was on guard from eleven till midnight. You didn't come anywhere near the house."

Turner sneered. "You're clever, aren't y'?" His voice shifted tone. "I knew ye'd be there. So I wasn't outside Querrin's room. I was in the grounds, though. And I heard—the scream."

He finished on a note of obvious pleasure.

Lawrence felt momentarily sickened. "And then?"

A shutter seemed to drop behind the old man's eyes. He returned evasively:

"I wandered around. The police came. And I saw them take Querrin away."

Lawrence made a gesture. "Forget that. What else did you see, as you prowled about?"

"Nothing." Turner bit off the word sharply. "When the police left, so did I. At least I meant to, until—." Temper twisted his mouth. "Until the Sergeant caught me on the way out."

Simon drew hard on the cigarette, then dropped it on the floor and crushed the stub with his boot.

He looked up with a sneer.

He said deliberately:

"I didn't see or hear a thing."

Lawrence accepted defeat. He stood up. "Don't expect any help from me, then."

Again that puzzling expression, peeping round the weakness and the anger. Turner said slowly:

"The devil take y'."

Hardinge stood aside as the young man went past him out of the cell. Standing in the passage, Lawrence had one last glimpse of old Simon squatting disconsolately on his bunk, lips moving silently and faded eyes shifting, then the door swung shut and the Sergeant rattled the key in the lock.

The two men went back to the Charge Room.

Hardinge asked quietly: "What do you think, sir?"

He slipped the keys into his desk, and locked the drawer.

Lawrence said:

"I think you're right, Sergeant. That old rascal knows *something*."

"I'm glad you agree," Hardinge smiled wryly. "I was wrong about him once before—you remember, I told you there would be no more danger from *him* last night—so I was afraid I might be wrong again."

Lawrence perched on a hard backed chair. He mused:

"We needn't suspect him of any actual complicity in the murder. He obviously believes in his own ghost stories."

The Sergeant agreed. "He's not entirely normal. Some vague malice sent him prowling around Querrin House."

"Mmmm. But he may have seen or overheard something that could help us." Lawrence rubbed his cheek. "If we could only track his movements throughout the day."

"Quite impossible, I'm afraid, sir. The heavy rain obliterated every trace." Hardinge paused. "We did find some confused marks on the ground beyond the path skirting the building. They were probably made after midnight though, when we were all in the house. Turner saw Hazlitt arrive with his men, so he must have ventured as near to the room as he dared."

Lawrence nodded. "He'd be anxious to know exactly what had happened." He looked sleepy. "I wish we knew his precise position at the time of Roger's death."

Hardinge murmured:

"He says: in the grounds...."

"But was he?"

Interest sharpened the Sergeant's voice. "What do you mean, sir?"

"I'm wondering if Turner could possibly have made his way into the house."

"After you were knocked out," Hardinge pointed out, "all the doors and windows were locked from the inside."

Lawrence agreed wryly. It was a piece of evidence, and an objection, which he had already provided himself. "I know. Oh, Lord. I'm spinning round in circles."

Hardinge inclined his head sympathetically.

Lawrence stood up with a sigh.

He said:

"I might as well go back to Querrin House."

The Sergeant followed him to the door, his pleasantly strident voice ringing loud in Algy's ear and providing a not unwelcome distraction to the young man's troubled thoughts.

The two men stood for a moment in the porch, gazing down the village street. Then Lawrence caught a movement behind the curtained windows of the post office opposite, and smiled.

"Miss Watson," he murmured, "is still on guard."

Hardinge responded with a cynical yet tolerant laugh.

He said:

"That's only to be expected. Bristley has never known a more sensational affair than this."

"Neither," said Lawrence flatly, "have I."

The Sergeant snapped his fingers. "I nearly forgot. Your gun, sir. I can return it to you now."

Since Lawrence's automatic had to some extent figured in the case, the police had confiscated the pistol to make their routine checks.

Hardinge re-opened the door marked Inquiries, and they re-entered the station.

The Sergeant indicated the communicating door on their left. "I left it in my quarters. I'll get it for you."

Lawrence rested one hip on the desk top and glanced after him lazily.

Hardinge came back with the pistol in his hands. "If you'll sign a receipt, sir—."

Algy scribbled his signature on an official scrap of paper and pocketed the automatic.

Hardinge sat down in the chair behind his desk.

He asked hesitantly:

"Had you any special reason for returning to Querrin House?"

Lawrence admitted:

"No. There's not a thing I can do there."

"Then," pursued the Sergeant, "I have copies of every report on the case. Would you like to study them? They might give you a lead."

Algy grinned ruefully. "I doubt it. Steve Castle and I—Wait a second. There was one report we didn't consider. The fingerprint analysis."

Hardinge slid open a drawer and produced a folder. He extracted some papers and passed them over.

Lawrence thanked him and sat down.

The Sergeant said politely:

"I'd suggest we went into my quarters, but I'd rather not leave the Charge Room as I've a prisoner to guard."

"Mmmm? Oh, never mind that. I'm comfortable enough." Lawrence flipped through the report. "You've studied this, of course."

"Yes." The Sergeant said slowly:

"It's not very helpful. We can account for all the identifiable prints. There was a confused medley of finger marks in the room, including the dead man's, your own, Mr. Peter's, Miss Craig's, the servants'—as you might expect, on the various surfaces. Mr. Roger's were the plainest, of course, overlying the others on the door, the key, the table, the mantel, the lamp, the bolts, the handles—."

Lawrence was paying no great attention. He interrupted:

"The dagger, now. There's a curious point here. The haft, I see, was *wiped clean*."

Hardinge was puzzled.

"What of it? We didn't expect the killer to be so obliging as to leave his prints."

Lawrence gesticulated.

"You're missing the point. If the murderer had been wearing gloves, as I'd have expected, you would have found smudges on the knife."

"Yes. But in this case the haft of the dagger had been wiped clean—polished, almost. With a handkerchief perhaps." A query indented the Sergeant's forehead. "I still don't see any particular oddity there."

Lawrence said:

"It's the time element. Think of it. The killer was crouched over the body of his victim, and thinking only of escape. He must have needed all the time he could get to work his vanishing trick. Every second would be valuable. Why waste time rubbing the knife with a cloth when it's so much easier to slip on a glove before?"

Hardinge wrinkled his brow. He suggested:

"Perhaps the dagger was thrown. Then the killer would not have touched the haft. He'd hold the tip of the blade, which would wipe itself clean as it passed into Querrin's body."

Algy rubbed his cheek. "It wasn't a throwing knife. The weights and balances were all wrong."

Hardinge said reasonably:

"Such a minor point hardly matters when the whole case is a blazing impossibility."

Lawrence was rueful. "Maybe you're right... Were there any prints on the sheath above the mantel?"

"Yes," replied Hardinge, with a twinkle. "Yours."

"What?" The young man's mouth opened wide. Then he remembered handling the dagger the previous afternoon, and grinned. "Forget I asked." He pondered. "Roger's prints were on the oil lamp, you said. Did he turn it out, then?"

The Sergeant did not reply immediately.

He said slowly:

"I don't know. The prints were slightly smudged, so it's possible the murderer extinguished the light himself. With a handkerchief wrapped round his fingers, perhaps."

Lawrence felt a twinge in his temples.

He said:

"My head's aching. Let's change the subject."

Hardinge smiled:

"Shaw will relieve me at six o'clock. Till then we won't be disturbed. Let's just talk quietly. I'd be grateful for your company."

Lawrence nodded. He slumped back in his chair.

They chatted for a while, desultorily. Algy began to relax.

And somewhere in the recesses of his mind, a new idea was seeking the consciousness of thought.

A heavy footfall sounded on the porch outside, interrupting their talk. Lawrence turned his head and saw a formless blur behind the glass panels set in the upper part of the door marked Inquiries.

Then the door pushed open to disclose the figure of Russell Craig.

Uncle Russ said benignly:

"Ah, Lawrence, my boy. I thought I'd find you here."

"Your niece told you where I was?"

"Er, no." Craig said, with the appearance of great frankness:

"I happened to overhear your talk on the telephone to our friend the Sergeant."

Ignoring their quizzical glances, Uncle Russ removed his Homburg hat, placed it on a small filing cabinet, laid his gloves beside the hat, then crooked his walking stick through the metal handle.

He turned towards them, smoothing his silver-grey hair with delicate fingers.

He announced impressively:

"Gentlemen, I have solved the mystery of Roger Querrin's death."

Hardinge scratched his jaw. "The Inspector will be delighted to hear it."

Lawrence murmured unkindly:

"But he won't supply any reward."

Craig gazed at him reproachfully.

"My dear boy, I'm not a mercenary man. I shall be only too happy to fulfil my duty as a citizen, without the vulgar expectation of financial gain. I—."

"Yes, sir," returned the Sergeant. "But what have you to tell us?"

Craig was not to be hurried.

He seated himself, produced his spectacles from his breast pocket, polished them, and adjusted the horn rims over his large nose.

He said:

"I shall now begin."

"Please do," replied Lawrence politely.

Uncle Russ coughed.

"You must understand, my boy," he commenced blandly, "that the theories I am about to propound are largely tentative. I may need assistance with some minor facts of the case."

Lawrence concealed a grin and peeped towards the Sergeant. Despite the official gravity of his face, there was an answering twinkle in Hardinge's keen blue eyes.

Russell Craig cleared his throat.

He said:

"First, the scream that you heard at midnight. Has it occurred to you that cry may not have been genuine?"

Lawrence nodded. "It has. I don't see that it makes the problem any easier, though."

Craig squinted at him thoughtfully.

He said:

"You appreciate the fact it's very difficult to locate the source of sound, especially in the dark?"

"Yes."

Craig said slowly:

"There was another person with you. *Suppose he threw his voice?* It's not very difficult. You keep your lips still while talking, like this"—he demonstrated—"and produce a strangled muffled cry, deep in your throat."

He emitted a ghastly croak.

Algy laughed. He couldn't help it.

When he regained his breath, he said dazedly:

"Peter's no ruddy ventriloquist. And if you're suggesting that Roger was unharmed at the time, and Peter stabbed him as he entered the room—well, I can tell you now, Querrin never went near his brother's body."

"Oh." Uncle Russ was disappointed, but didn't seem nonplussed.

He said:

"I thought it advisable to test your reactions to the theory. However it doesn't affect my main hypothesis at all."

The Sergeant muttered something that sounded more like a profanity than a prayer.

Craig ignored him elaborately.

He continued:

"Let us suppose the killer to be concealed in the room when Roger entered: never mind where, for the moment."

Lawrence opened his mouth, then shut it again.

Uncle Russ went on:

"He emerges and strikes down Querrin from the rear. Then leaving Roger for dead, he turns out the lamp and unlocks the french windows."

About a dozen objections crowded into the Sergeant's mind at once. Catching his eye, Lawrence waved him hurriedly to silence.

Craig, however, did not continue immediately. He moistened his lips and said cautiously:

"I'm rather dry. I suppose there's no such thing as a —as a drink in the station?"

Hardinge stood up. "I'll make some tea."

He went through the communicating door. Uncle Russ stared after him without enthusiasm.

"That wasn't," he confessed, "exactly what I meant."

Lawrence knuckled his chin. "About this theory of yours. So far—."

"Please." Craig held up his hand. "Allow me to finish. I am no professional," he said smoothly, "but this could very well be an occasion when the looker-on sees most of the game. You, my boy are too close to this affair to view it clearly."

"How's that?"

"My dear fellow," said the old rogue expansively, "you believed your various precautions to be adequate. Since Roger's death proves them otherwise, you have retreated to the illogical acceptance of a patent impossibility. As a defence mechanism, you understand. I say this," added Uncle Russ hastily, "I hope, without offence."

Lawrence was gracious. "Quite. And I'm always ready to learn. Carry on."

"Thank you. I await the Sergeant's return." Craig folded his arms portentously.

Lawrence nodded.

Hardinge came back and announced cheerfully:

"I've put the kettle on."

Craig haa-humphed. "I will continue."

The Sergeant resumed his position behind the desk without betraying any great interest.

Uncle Russ went on:

"As I mentioned before, my analysis of the mystery depends upon the killer's exit through the windows. How then were the bolts secured behind him?"

"How indeed," echoed Algy, with a glint of mockery.

"You have forgotten," said Craig reprovingly, "one very important fact. *Roger was still alive.*"

Lawrence stared.

"You're not suggesting that Querrin himself secured the windows after he was stabbed?"

Russell Craig was eager.

"Certainly. Put yourself in Roger's place. With his last reserves of strength, he drags himself upright. The windows are open, perhaps his murderer is

still standing on the steps outside. What is the most urgent thought in Querrin's mind? To protect himself against a further assault. He slams shut the windows and shoots the bolts. Then utterly spent, he collapses."

Hardinge thought the theory preposterous. He was also angry at its implications. Unable to contain himself any longer, he burst out:

"Do you think I'm blind? And how do you imagine your hypothetical killer vanished from the steps?"

Craig was unmoved.

He said, not replying to the first question:

"It's simple. The murderer climbed *up*."

Lawrence grinned.

"Would you elaborate?"

"We know," continued Uncle Russ, "that he had no way of crossing the flower beds without leaving footprints. Obviously then, his only recourse was to climb the side of the house till he reached a window or the roof. He could have let down a rope from the guttering, ready for his escape."

"What," interrupted Algy, "about the scream?"

"That," returned Craig, "was the final touch. We will assume that the killer had reached the sanctuary of the roof. He drew up the rope. The time, I should add, was nearly midnight.

"One thing remained to be done. He had to provide himself with a small hand microphone—."

"What?"

"A small hand microphone with a long flex. He lowered this down the chimney—."

Hardinge groaned audibly, and even Lawrence was moved to protest. "Hold on. What about the fire?"

"My boy," Craig reproached him, "when you broke into the room the fire was nearly out. Only embers remained... The killer screamed into the microphone, and the sound was relayed through the speaker into the room. Then he wound in the flex and re-entered the house through the skylight."

The Sergeant asked with restraint:

"And the murderer's name?"

"That," admitted Craig, "is the one thing I don't know."

Hardinge was saved from further comment by the shrill blasting of steam. He said: "That's the kettle," and hurried out.

Uncle Russ said complacently:

"There, my boy. I'll leave you to work out the details."

Lawrence wondered how to spare the old rogue's feelings. He answered patiently:

"Let's take your theory step by step." He ticked off the points on his fingers. "First, you say the killer was hidden somewhere in the room. Yet I searched it before I left, and there was no one there. Roger was quite alone.

"Then you want us to believe Querrin re-locked the windows himself. Yet both the bolts are so stiff considerable exertion is needed to shift them. A dying man could never find the strength to shoot them."

Craig rallied. "What about the door, then?"

"The same objection applies. It isn't reasonable to assume that a mortally wounded man would drag out his key, lock the door, then carefully replace key and chain in his trousers pocket... Let's get back to your original theory.

"You say the killer escaped by climbing a rope to the roof—there aren't any windows immediately above the room where Roger died, by the way—but he couldn't do that without leaving slight traces. The police examined the roof, you see, and it's their opinion nobody's been up there for months. The inside of the skylight, also, was fringed with unbroken cobwebs.

"As for the chimney, it's so choked with soot that even the passage of a flex would inevitably have deluged the fireplace with dirt."

Craig appeared unconvinced. He said with spirit:

"At least, I've provided an explanation. Which is more than the police have done."

Lawrence grinned. "I have an idea their thoughts have already drifted in a similar direction. They searched the house and grounds, you see. There were no serviceable ropes or ladders at all."

Craig admitted defeat. "All right, then. Perhaps we should approach the problem from another angle." Uncle Russ laid a finger along one side of his large nose. "Look for the motive, my boy. Look for the motive."

"Which was?"

Craig said slowly and impressively:

"If Roger died intestate, his brother will inherit the Querrin fortune."

"Oh, Lord. Are you telling me Peter stabbed his brother before we left him alone in the room? That's crazy. I was the last to leave. Besides, what makes you think Querrin didn't make a will leaving the money away from his brother? It's possible."

"Surely we'd have heard if there were such a document in existence?" countered Craig. "You have only to contact Roger's solicitor."

"If Querrin killed his brother, why did he previously invite me down to guard him?"

"That's easy," said Uncle Russ promptly. "To divert suspicion."

Lawrence laughed.

He said:

"You've been reading too many detective stories."

Craig seemed slightly ruffled. "Very well, my boy. Very well. I shall submit my original theory to the proper authorities."

"Please do," returned Algy politely. "But I'd advise you to explain why Sergeant Hardinge saw nothing of all that funny business with ropes."

"Obviously," said Craig calmly, "the Sergeant saw everything. And is planning to blackmail the murderer."

John Hardinge pushed open the communicating door just as Craig made his last and least expected suggestion. For an instant, the shock and the surprise held the Sergeant motionless.

Uncle Russ had time enough to say cheerfully: "We shall probably discover Hardinge was Roger's illegitimate half-brother, or something of the sort," before Lawrence caught sight of the Sergeant's face and jumped up hurriedly.

Amusement, however, had already begun to seep round the anger in the policeman's eyes as he heard Craig's further contention.

Uncle Russ gazed at him uneasily.

Hardinge put down the tray he was carrying and handed the old rogue a steaming cup.

He said placidly:

"I'd prefer not to bring an action for slander, sir. So perhaps you'd better not mention that part of your theory to my Inspector... Sugar?"

Craig said with dignity:

"I had better retire." He picked up his hat, gloves, and stick. "Good day to you both."

The door closed behind him with a certain emphasis.

Hardinge smiled faintly, then replaced cup and saucer on the tray. He said:

"I suppose I should have expected something of the kind." He sounded rather tired.

Lawrence murmured a question.

"What?" The Sergeant fumbled for a reply. "You understand, sir. You're in much the same quandary yourself. Our evidence was substantially the same. We're both in the unhappy position of having to swear to an impossibility. No wonder we're not believed."

"Come on," said Algy cheerily. "Things aren't so bad as that."

"Aren't they?" The Sergeant seemed depressed. "I was on guard, and a man died. In Hazlitt's eyes, I'm guilty of criminal carelessness at the very least."

Lawrence reflected that Craig's wild talk had hurt the Sergeant more than he had thought.

He cried roundly:

"The Inspector's an ass."

"He's my superior officer," Hardinge reminded him wearily. "I may have to resign from the force."

"Not if I know it," roared Algy, shaken out of his habitual good humour.

He leaned across the desk. "Listen, Sergeant. I'm going to solve this problem... And when I do, the credit will be yours."

Hardinge shook his head. "You don't have to worry about me, sir."

It was a lame and inadequate reply, but as he realized the genuineness of the young man's intentions, he felt a warm flush of pleasure.

Algy picked up his cup and swallowed the tea rapidly.

He said:

"We've got to work."

He added:

"I have the feeling that every clue we need to explain the mystery is already in our hands.... "

They settled down to study the reports once more. The Sergeant's tea, standing unheeded near his elbow, grew cold and unpalatable in the cup.

At a quarter to six the Sergeant slapped the papers back into the folder and leaned back in his chair.

"It's no good, sir. We've made no progress at all."

Lawrence hunched one shoulder. He made no other reply.

Hardinge smiled suddenly.

"Don't think I'm ungrateful. But we're both very tired. I doubt if our brains are sufficiently alert."

"Maybe you're right." Glad enough to escape, Lawrence stood up in his turn. "Though I won't forget the problem completely."

"Sleep on it," advised the Sergeant. He added with a smile:

"Shaw will be here soon. I'd better see things are in order."

Lawrence exchanged farewells with Hardinge, then sauntered out of the station into the street.

He stood for a moment gazing at the post office, wondering if an interview with the vigilant Miss Watson would prove helpful.

Then he shrugged and moved on.

His head was still aching; and a sense of angry hopelessness was obscuring the clarity of thought... He frowned irritably.

He ought to know the answer.

Somewhere in the maze of questioning, analysis, and report, was the key to the crime's solution.

He shaded his eyes wearily. Faces and typescript sprang up on a mental screen, swirled together, blurred and faded. Voices sounded in a nightmare medley....

*He saw it!*

The question that was itself an answer, which pointed the way from the labyrinth.

He whispered: "How could—?"

He broke off, and the blood pounded in his throat.

He slumped against a wall, looking back without vision at the entrance to the station.

He fumbled the silver case from his pocket and jammed a cigarette between his lips.

He seemed relaxed and idle, but while the amiable vagueness in his lazy blue eyes deepened to absolute vacuity, the shutters in his mind flew open one by one....

Hardinge straightened up with shaking hands.

He backed out of the cell, then clattered heavily along the short corridor back to the Charge Room. His loud footfalls seemed to ring with a threatened panic.

"Mr. Lawrence!"

He began to call before he had even reached the door to the street.

"Mr. Lawrence!"

He wrenched at the handle, and stumbled through the porch. Standing outside, he cried out again.

Catching the urgency in the Sergeant's voice, Lawrence straightened up hurriedly. The cigarette dropped from his mouth unheeded.

"Mr. Lawrence! Come quickly!"

Algy shoved himself away from the wall and set off at a run. Coming up to the Sergeant, he grabbed his arm with unmeant force.

"What is it? What's happened?"

Hardinge said, with an effort; "In the cells, sir. Go quickly."

Lawrence stared into the other's strained face. Then without another word, he ran past him into the station.

In the passage behind the Charge Room, he stopped suddenly.

The door to Turner's cell was open. Lawrence went forward slowly.

Old Simon sprawled face downwards on the floor beside his bunk. Lawrence dropped to his knees beside him.

He lifted the old man's head gently, and looked into the sightless eyes. He shivered. The flesh was cold against his hands.

He stood up. His gaze went up to the small barred window above the bed, then round to the open door.

Hardinge stepped in from the corridor.

He said dully:

"I found him, like that." His tongue flicked briefly over his lips.

He whispered, incredulously:

"He's dead."

Hazlitt said coldly:

"This man was murdered."

His tone was an accusation.

Algy Lawrence made no reply. He was feeling slightly sick.

A barely controlled anger showed clearly in every cadence of the Inspector's voice. He came through the communicating door from the Charge Room and stood gazing at them sourly.

Lawrence and Hardinge had been waiting in the Sergeant's quarters. In the station proper, Hazlitt and his men were investigating Turner's death.

Hardinge stood up. His superior officer said grimly:

"You can sit down, Sergeant. You've no official status in this particular affair."

The words were ominous.

Lawrence asked, with an effort:

"How did old Simon die?"

The Inspector scowled. "Don't you know?"

"I'd say, at a guess, that the old man was strangled."

"It was," admitted Hazlitt, "a form of strangulation. Though not," he added, "the usual, rather clumsy, kind."

He walked towards them. He said:

"You can throttle a man in many ways. With your hands round his windpipe, with a cloth, with wire, even with the crook of a stick. But this—"

He broke off. "This was different. I'll demonstrate."

He stepped behind Hardinge's chair. The Sergeant sat upright, but kept his face impassive.

The Inspector said:

"I won't explain in detail. But roughly, this is the method. You approach your victim from behind, then dig your thumbs in the hollows of his neck just below the ears, like this"—he seized Hardinge's neck—"and press hard... I

don't pretend to know all the medical details. It's something to do with the nerve centres, and the carotid arteries."

He dropped his hands.

"The pressure produces unconsciousness, then death. It's swift. And it's deadly."

Lawrence nodded. "So that's how Turner died. I suspected as much. You're right about the method, Inspector. It cuts off the supply of blood to the brain."

Hazlitt thanked him ironically. "There's no mystery there. My job is to discover who killed him."

"No easy task," said Lawrence thoughtfully. He was beginning to appreciate the complexities of this, the latest problem.

"That's right," agreed Hazlitt grimly.

He paced away from them, and turned his back.

He said, over his shoulder:

"Motive, means, and opportunity. Those are the three things we need to consider. We don't know why Turner was murdered, but we do know how he died." He twisted round to face them. "But *who* killed him?"

Lawrence swallowed. He said irritably:

"Get on with it, Inspector. We know what's in your mind."

Hazlitt said:

"First, let's establish the time of death." He looked towards Lawrence. "You, sir, arrived at the station shortly after four o'clock."

"Yes. Sorry I can't be more precise."

The Inspector went on:

"You interviewed the prisoner—I won't comment on that, for the moment—and left him in his cell about ten minutes later. At that time, he was alive and unhurt."

Algy nodded. "I'll swear to that."

"You may have to. Right, then. At seven minutes to six, you, Sergeant, made a routine check of the cells before your relief arrived."

Hardinge jerked his head. "Yes, Inspector. P.C. Shaw was to have taken over at six o'clock... The door of Turner's cell was open. I ran forward and found him on the floor. He was dead."

Hazlitt muttered:

"Then you called back Mr. Lawrence, and rang Tyssen and myself. Meanwhile Shaw reported for duty"—he mumbled—"we know the rest. Well, now."

He stared at them both. "We've established, then, that Turner died some time between fifteen or twenty-minutes past four and seven minutes to six. Those are wide enough limits. Fortunately we can narrow them down a little."

Lawrence interrupted. "I can help you there. I examined Turner's body. I'd say he'd been dead for at least an hour."

Hazlitt eyed him. He said stiffly:

"The Doctor agrees with you. The old man died some time before his body was discovered. But to be on the safe side, we'll say Turner was murdered somewhere between twenty past four and a quarter past five. Those are definitely the outside limits."

Lawrence's mouth tightened.

He mused softly:

"So he died while the Sergeant and I were sitting in the Charge Room."

"Exactly." There was an odd note in the Inspector's voice. "I suppose you're prepared to testify that nobody went through the door to the cells?"

"Yes." Lawrence and Hardinge spoke together.

"Thank you." Hazlitt was heavily courteous. He smacked his hands on the back of a chair, and pressed his fingers hard against the wood. He said slowly:

"Once more, your evidence proves the crime could not have been committed."

Lawrence protested, not very hopefully:

"Surely things aren't as bad as that."

"Judge for yourself." The Inspector twisted round the chair and straddled it. "Listen, both of you. Every window in this station is barred. You know that, Hardinge. You've complained of it often enough... There is no back door, no means of reaching the cells except by way of the door at the rear of the Charge Room, and no means of communication between that office and the Sergeant's living quarters except through this door here." He jerked his thumb behind him.

"In other words, there's only one entrance to the station. The front door."

"Oh, Lord," breathed Algy Lawrence. "We know that no one came through there except—."

"Except Russell Craig. Who went no further than the Charge Room, where you were talking."

"And left again soon after." Wisely, Lawrence made no mention of the old rogue's wild theories. "Wait a second. Could someone have been hiding in the station?" He answered his own question. "No, that's out. We searched everywhere, as soon as we discovered the body."

"Yes. It's hardly likely that any one could enter the station unseen. But in any case there was no way of leaving without detection." Hazlitt rasped knuckles against his chin. "Nobody tampered with the grilles, or walked through solid walls."

Lawrence shifted uncomfortably. Fear squirmed through his mind.

Hazlitt said:

"We have another witness."

He hesitated, then added half apologetically:

"Miss Watson, the post-mistress."

Algy remembered the lady with a shock. "Of course. She must have been watching us all the time."

"You're right. She was. Since we put old Simon in the cells, she's hardly taken her eyes off the station."

Hardinge chuckled faintly. "I can vouch for that."

The Inspector muttered:

"She's an infernal old busybody, but for once her prying has been useful." Hazlitt directed his next remark to Lawrence. "She saw you go into the station shortly after four. That roused her curiosity—she knows your reputation, apparently."

"Such," said Algy idly, "is fame."

The Inspector grunted. "Um. Anyway, that did it. She can't see into the station, thank God—the frosted windows cut off vision—but she kept her eyes on the entrance. She's willing to swear that nobody went into or out of this building between the time of your arrival this afternoon and mine this evening, except Russell Craig—."

"And the Sergeant and myself, when he called me back at five minutes to six. Oh yes, and the constable who arrived on the hour."

"We needn't consider Shaw," growled Hazlitt. "Or Tyssen."

"Right." Lawrence was thoughtful. "Well, that seems conclusive. Always provided that the old girl's reliable."

Hardinge coughed. He pointed out:

"We've agreed her testimony ourselves. You can't get into the station or the passage to the cells without passing through the Charge Room."

Hazlitt cut in:

"That's right. Besides Simon Turner, there were only three men in the building: the Sergeant, here; yourself, Mr. Lawrence; and Russell Craig."

His eyes slitted.

He repeated grimly:

"Only three."

Lawrence said flippantly:

"You pays your money, you takes your choice. Which of us killed him, Inspector?"

The Sergeant's face was strained. He protested:

"It's no joke."

Lawrence nodded. "I'm sorry."

Hazlitt stood up suddenly. "Let's get down to essentials. No one is above suspicion in a case like this, whether he's a Sergeant of Police"—his gaze switched to the smiling young man with the smooth blond hair—"or a story-book amateur."

"Agreed," said Algy politely. "Fortunately, I have an alibi."

"We'll check it in due course," returned the Inspector coldly.

He pushed open the communicating door and called some instructions to his men. Turning back, he commented sourly:

"There was a case, a few years ago, where we found a trick exit in a police station wall. I'm making sure there's no such funny business here."

"You should rid yourself," remarked Lawrence brightly, "of this secret panel complex. It's hopelessly *vieux jeu*."

Hardinge glanced at his young friend sharply. He realized that Algy's flippancy was only a mask... Lawrence was obviously deeply troubled.

As if he had read the Sergeant's thoughts, Algy murmured:

"Don't mind me, gentlemen."

He grinned. "I haven't a clue."

The Inspector did not laugh. He said:

"Three men. We'll consider each of you in turn."

He paced the floor. "First, Russell Craig. He arrived about a quarter to five, and stayed fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Uh huh."

"During that time, he remained seated in the Charge Room. That's your evidence, Mr. Lawrence, and the Sergeant's. It seems conclusive."

He added in parenthesis:

"I've sent a man to interview him at the House. Though I don't imagine we'll learn anything we don't already know." Just the same, his tone implied, we'll put the old rogue through it.

Lawrence said sleepily: "So we eliminate Uncle Russ." He yawned. "One from three leaves two."

"Then," continued Hazlitt grimly, "there was Sergeant Hardinge."

Lawrence glanced at both the policemen curiously. He knew that neither was at his ease.

The Inspector said:

"We'll examine the Sergeant's movements in detail. The corroborative evidence is all yours, Mr. Lawrence. Check me if I go wrong."

Hardinge flushed painfully. He confided to Algy later: "It was the most awkward moment of my life."

Hazlitt, repressing his feelings and his professional pride, went on:

"The Sergeant escorted you to the cells, where you interviewed the prisoner. Turner was still alive when you left. Hardinge went with you along the corridor, through the Charge Room, and out on to the front porch. Then you re-entered the station. The Sergeant fetched your gun, then you both remained seated in the Charge Room until Craig arrived to interrupt your discussions. He stayed, as I said before, for about twenty minutes. During that time, the Sergeant left you twice—for brief periods—to make tea."

Hazlitt's tone suggested disapproval.

He continued:

"Craig left, and Hardinge and yourself remained in the Charge Room until just after a quarter to six. At that time, as we now know, Turner was already dead. And had been so, in fact, since (at least) one half hour before."

The Inspector relaxed and smiled.

"Well, Sergeant, that clears you. You had no opportunity to go into the cells. You were alone only briefly, while making tea in your quarters. Since every window is barred—and we've checked the grilles thoroughly—and there is no communicating door, you had no possible means of going from these rooms here"—he glanced round—"to the cells at the rear. The rest of the time, you were with Mr. Lawrence."

He looked towards Algy for confirmation. Lawrence inclined his blond head slowly.

He said quietly:

"Two from three leaves—one."

John Hardinge jumped up suddenly.

He said, with a faint trace of excitement: "Before you go any further, sir. I have an idea."

"I'm glad to hear it," returned the Inspector with ferocious humour.

The Sergeant pursued, undaunted:

"Perhaps we're approaching this problem from the wrong angle. All our evidence goes to prove that no one could have reached old Simon from the front—."

"The door in the Charge Room," interjected his superior testily, "is the only means of access."

"Yes, sir. But—." Hardinge followed a side trail momentarily. "I'd suggest that somebody was hiding in one of the empty cells, or in the office at the back, until the coast was clear; strangled Turner, then waited till Mr. Lawrence had left, and I hurried after him—."

"But—."

The Sergeant swept on breathlessly: "And slipped out of the station then. But we know that didn't happen, since Miss Watson was watching and swears that no one left. So we can disregard that particular theory."

Hazlitt thanked him ponderously. "I'm not a complete fool. That solution was the first I considered. So if that's all you can suggest—."

"It isn't, sir." The Sergeant sounded eager. "There is no back door. Nevertheless, the killer could still have struck from the rear."

"Through brick walls?" queried Hazlitt sarcastically.

"If I could demonstrate, sir—.?"

Hardinge trailed the question invitingly.

"All right," grunted the Inspector. "What do you want to do?"

The Sergeant explained quickly.

Hazlitt nodded again, then went to the door and called:

"Shaw! Go with the Sergeant, will you?"

Hardinge and the constable left the station. Lawrence and Hazlitt went through the main office and into the corridor behind.

Men were working in the passage, examining the walls.

The Inspector commented:

"Every inch of this building is going to be tested. If there is a trap, we'll spring it."

They went into the dead man's cell. The body had been removed, though chalk marks on the floor showed where it had fallen.

Hazlitt growled to himself. "What now? I—. Ah, there's Hardinge."

The Sergeant's voice floated down to them from the small window above their heads. There was the sound of a scramble, then Hardinge's face appeared behind the bars.

He said:

"I'm standing on the constable's back, sir, so we'd better not delay. Mr. Lawrence, will you act as Simon Turner?"

Algy agreed, not without a certain apprehension. He sat down on the bunk.

Hardinge called softly: "Simon!"

Lawrence glanced up.

"Here, quickly... Don't make a sound."

The young man clambered up on the narrow bed.

Hardinge whispered:

"I'll get you away."

The window was open. He pointed a hand through the bars. "What's that, behind you?"

Lawrence twisted. The Sergeant's hands shot round the bars, seized the back of his neck, and held him tight.

Algy struggled involuntarily, but did not succeed in breaking the other's grip.

Hardinge said calmly:

"Before Turner could escape, he would be unconscious. A strong man wouldn't find it too difficult to support his weight. When old Simon was dead, his killer let him fall down to the floor."

He released his grasp. Lawrence co-operated handsomely, allowing himself to slide off the bunk and sprawl near the ominous chalk marks.

Hardinge said triumphantly:

"There you are, sir. I—. What's that? Oh, sorry, Constable. I'll get down."

He disappeared.

Lawrence stood up, brushing the dust from his clothes. He angled an eyebrow. "Well, Inspector. What do you think?"

Hazlitt shook his head.

"It's a pretty theory. But it won't hold water."

Lawrence squatted on the bed once more. "I can see one flaw, of course. But—."

The Inspector interrupted.

"I'll explain in a minute."

Footsteps sounded in the passage outside. Hazlitt went to the door and glanced out. "In here, Sergeant."

Hardinge appeared, followed by Shaw. The constable was rubbing his back ruefully.

Lawrence said, with a twinkle:

"Fine acting, Sergeant. You scared me silly."

Hardinge smiled. "I hope you weren't hurt."

"No," grinned Algy. "I fared better than the constable, here."

Hardinge said seriously:

"I didn't mean to suggest the killer had a confederate. He must have found some other support for his feet."

Lawrence grinned again. "I hate to picture even the most enterprising of murderers wandering through Bristley with a step ladder or an old soap box."

The Inspector frowned. "Please, Mr. Lawrence." He turned to Hardinge. "I don't like to disappoint you, Sergeant. Your explanation is fairly good. It fits most of the facts. Unfortunately, we know this crime was not committed in that way."

Lawrence sparked interest in his lazy blue eyes.

He said accusingly:

"You have something up your sleeve."

"Yes," returned Hazlitt, heavily.

He said:

"We have—another witness."

He finished wearily:

"Tell them, Shaw."

The young constable stepped forward. Pride and a certain embarrassment showed clearly on his face. It was his first experience of the spotlight.

He murmured:

"On the afternoon of—."

"You're not in the witness box now," interrupted the Inspector. "Just tell us informally."

"Yes, sir. Well—." Shaw moistened his lips. "I wasn't on duty this afternoon, as you know. When I left Querrin House this morning, I didn't have to report here till six o'clock this evening. But as I lodge in a house behind

the station, and—and as I knew Turner had been arrested, I decided to keep watch."

"Like," interposed Hazlitt sardonically, "our Miss Watson. I think the constable suspected that the prisoner would attempt a movie-style break out."

Shaw flushed. "Anyway, there's a clear view of the back of the station from the window of my room. I kept an eye on Turner's cell."

"All the time?"

"From three o'clock till half-past five." He hesitated. "I had to get ready for duty. So—so my landlady took over then. She watched till six o'clock."

"Amateur detectives," growled Hazlitt. "Everywhere."

The comment was not unkindly meant.

Lawrence rubbed his cheek. "I know what's coming."

He paused invitingly.

Shaw said clearly:

"No one, at any time, approached the window of Turner's cell."

Lawrence slouched back on the bunk. He was not happy.

He said:

"That's that."

"Yes." The Inspector turned to Hardinge. "I'm afraid we've exploded your theory. In any case, there were other objections."

He pointed upwards. "That window was locked from the inside. We opened it ourselves after the investigation began. Then there was the door."

He stepped towards it. "You told us yourself it was open when you discovered the body."

Hardinge nodded slowly.

Hazlitt scowled abstractedly. "We've examined the interior of the lock. There were scratches inside—marks in the coating of grease—which suggest the use of a picklock, or a skeleton key."

"Held," supplied Lawrence, "in a phantom hand."

The Inspector made no reply.

He said:

"There's one other point. Turner may well have been stunned before he was killed. Doctor Tyssen found a bruise on the back of the dead man's head, under the hair."

Lawrence sat up. The words were oddly familiar. He snapped his fingers. "Roger Querrin. His head was bruised, too."

Hazlitt agreed. "That's not the only similarity between the crimes."

"Both murders," nodded Algy cheerfully, "being committed by an invisible man who walks through solid walls."

He added wickedly:

"According to the evidence."

The Inspector contradicted him with surprising mildness. "You may remember that the Sergeant interrupted my analysis of your testimony with his demonstration of a theory."

He stared down at the young man on the bunk.

"I was about to say that one person only had an opportunity to reach Turner's cell unseen. This man, for a brief but vital period, had no alibi whatever."

Algy's eyebrows went up.

"So you've found the guilty man. Who is he, Inspector?"

Hazlitt said gently:

"You are, Mr. Lawrence."

Lawrence asked equably:

"Am I under arrest?"

Hazlitt laughed, and broke the tension. Still enjoying the young man's discomfort, he said:

"No. But according to the evidence"—he accented the phrase maliciously—"you were the only man with sufficient opportunity. Logically, then, you killed Simon Turner."

"That kind of logic," murmured Lawrence, "doesn't meet with my approval."

Hardinge made a protest.

"Sir, I've already provided Mr. Lawrence with an alibi."

The Inspector shook his head. "No, Sergeant. Think. After you left the prisoner, you went with Lawrence to the front door. Then you both re-entered the station. Why?"

"I had to return his g—."

The word died on his lips.

Hazlitt was satisfied. "Exactly. You went into your living quarters to fetch and return this young man's gun." He broke off, and turned.

He said politely:

"You might let me have that pistol, by the way."

Algy grinned. He produced the automatic and levelled it at the Inspector. Then he laughed and reversed the gun, holding it by the barrel.

Hazlitt grasped the butt and thanked him politely.

He went on smoothly:

"At this point, Mr. Lawrence was alone in the Charge Room and had access to the passage leading to the cells."

Lawrence stretched his legs out lazily. "I'm willing to let myself be searched. You'll find I have no picklock with me."

"You didn't need one. The Sergeant had left the keys to the cells in his desk."

"The drawer," objected Algy, "was locked."

"It could still have been opened." Hazlitt went on hurriedly: "You could have reached the prisoner—."

Lawrence held up his hand.

"I dispute that, Inspector."

He stood up.

"I think," he said placidly, "we'll stage a reconstruction."

He led the way through the corridor and into the Charge Room. "Sergeant, would you please replace my gun in your quarters?"

Hardinge took the automatic from his superior's hand and went through the communicating door. He returned to find Lawrence sitting on the desk top.

The young man murmured:

"Let's say we've just re-entered the station. That's your cue, Sergeant."

Hardinge repeated mechanically:

"I left it in my quarters. I'll get it for you."

As soon as the Sergeant disappeared through the door, Lawrence straightened up and darted towards the entrance to the passage. He moved silently but with amazing swiftness.

Hazlitt followed him, holding open the door at the rear.

Hardinge came back with the pistol in his hands.

The Inspector called out: "Right, Mr. Lawrence. Stay where you are, please."

He turned back to Hardinge.

"Your timing was accurate?"

"Yes, sir. If anything, my movements were slower than formerly."

They went into the corridor. Lawrence stood just inside the cell. He grinned.

"Well, Inspector?"

Hazlitt shrugged his shoulders. "You win. You barely reached the cell before the Sergeant returned. Certainly you had no time to force an entrance, strangle Turner, and get back to the Charge Room... Your alibi stands up."

"Thank you." The amusement had gone from Lawrence's face. He murmured:

"Three from three leaves—what, Inspector?"

Hazlitt was too weary for anger.

He muttered:

"This crime is as crazy as the first."

Hardinge held up the gun in mute inquiry. The Inspector jerked his head impatiently. "You can give it back."

Lawrence took his pistol and stroked the butt gently.

Hazlitt smacked his hand, suddenly, against the wall.

"God damn it! How was Turner killed?"

Lawrence said honestly:

"I've no idea."

He stared down at his feet.

There was a silence, then he murmured:

"It's strange. You remember what Peter told us? Old Simon threatened his brother with the vengeance of a ghost." He looked up, and stared at the Inspector. "You talk about evidence and proof. We've proved these murders couldn't possibly have been committed. So what remains? Did Roger,"—he paused uneasily—"whistle up a devil? Or did Turner send him the shade of old Tom Querrin?"

There was no humour in his laugh. "But if Simon called up another spirit, to blast out locks and set him free—" He stopped, then mumbled: "This time, he lost control."

He finished slowly:

"This demon wrung his neck."

"Lawrence !"

Algy came to a sudden halt as he reached the gates of Querrin House.

A figure loomed out of the darkness and repeated his name anxiously.

Lawrence relaxed. "Hallo, Peter. I didn't recognize you."

Querrin seized his arm. He cried, without preamble:

"What's been happening at the station?"

The strain showed clearly on his face. He seemed almost haggard.

Lawrence gazed at him curiously. He had wondered how Peter would react to the news.

He said simply:

"Turner has been murdered."

Querrin's fingers slid away from the other man's sleeve.

He whispered:

"Old Simon—dead? But why... And how?"

The moonlight cast fitful shadows across his face.

Lawrence said gently:

"Let's go in."

They walked along the drive. Words began to spill worriedly from Peter's trembling mouth.

"The police came—from the village—to interview Russell Craig. We heard rumours, wild stories... I didn't know what to believe. Craig was no help. He keeps talking about invisible men, and goblins, and—and heavens knows what."

It looked as if Uncle Russ had been revelling in the dual roles of mystery man and key witness. Lawrence resolved to have a word with the old rogue. Meanwhile, he was more interested in the young man at his side.

Clearly, but with economy, he sketched out the main features of the puzzle of Turner's death.

Querrin listened with attention. Oddly enough, Algy's frank statement of the complexities of the case seemed to bring Peter a measure of relief.

Lawrence sensed the change, and Querrin tried to explain.

He said, remembering the shock the news had given him:

"When we heard—there had been another death— another murder which couldn't have been committed—."

Lawrence sighed. Peter hurried on jerkily:

"I was scared, horribly. It—it made the nightmare worse, somehow. There didn't seem to be any reason in the world, any sanity. Now I have the facts, and though you tell me that there's no conceivable explanation, yet I still feel easier in my mind. There's a solution somewhere, and I'm sure you'll find it."

Lawrence grimaced into the darkness.

Peter went on:

"I've never been able to put away the fear that my brother died because he tampered with the—with the supernatural... And I've always believed, as you know, that old Simon had something to do with his murder."

"You're wrong there," said his companion mildly. "Turner could not have harmed your brother."

Peter's speech, like his reasoning, became muddled.

"But we know, at least, that old Simon died at the hands of a man. Not a ghost."

Despite his own talk of demons, Lawrence was ready to agree. Yet he queried:

"What makes you say that?"

He was curious to hear Peter's comments.

Querrin replied:

"The cell door was forced open."

"The lock was picked, yes. Well? Oh, I see. You mean that was a man's trick, not a goblin's."

"Yes." Peter mused thoughtfully. "Why didn't Turner cry out when he heard someone tampering with the door?"

"Why should he? He thought somebody was helping him to escape." Lawrence shivered. He had a swift disturbing picture: of old Simon, eagerly and unsuspectingly awaiting the entry in his cell of a faceless man who wanted his life.

He murmured:

"A man who burst and vanished like a soap bubble."

"What?" Querrin was startled.

"Sorry, Peter. I was thinking out loud."

He asked:

"By the way, who told you the news?"

Querrin blinked. "One of the housemaids. Miss Craig and I went out for a walk—."

Lawrence remembered he had asked Audrey to keep an eye on Peter that afternoon, in case he should think of wandering near the station.

"—we've been together for most of the afternoon and evening, as it happens. Anyway, this girl Susan—."

"Susan York?"

"Yes, that's her name. She told us the police were here, interviewing Audrey's uncle, and gave us a garbled version of the affair. Whether she'd picked it up from one of the constables or by eavesdropping, I don't know —."

"It doesn't matter."

They walked on in silence, and reached the entrance to the house.

Lawrence made some excuses and strolled away, leaving Querrin on the steps.

He felt he had spent enough time wandering with Peter in the grounds. He wanted to think.

He sauntered along the flagged path round the building, and gazed thoughtfully at the room in which a man had died. Then he shrugged and retraced his steps.

He was not long alone.

A cigar glowed redly in the shadows, and a benign voice hailed him smoothly.

"Lawrence, my boy."

Algy groaned.

"It's Uncle Russ," he told himself gloomily. He was in no mood for any more of the old rogue's theories.

"My dear fellow," said Craig. "I'm glad I found you. I've had," he continued impressively, "another idea. What was that, my boy? Did you speak?"

"No."

"Another idea, as I say, about Roger's death."

Lawrence muttered something. He asked:

"Did you speak to Peter about offering a reward?"

"Er, yes." The old rogue seemed a trifle put out. "I did. I regret to say this, but Peter was rather offensive. He actually implied"—Russell Craig spoke

more in sorrow than anger—"that my interest in the matter was completely mercenary. I disdained argument, of course."

"Of course. Well, what's your latest theory?"

"Hardly a theory. Merely a suggestion."

Craig removed the cigar from his mouth and gestured with the stub. "That is the outside wall of the passage between the hall and the room where Roger died."

"Uh huh."

"You observe the solitary window. Possibly the guilty man, after securing the door—."

Lawrence opened his mouth, but Uncle Russ gave him no opportunity to raise an objection. He hurried on:

"—made his escape from the house through that window."

Lawrence sighed. "It was locked."

"Never mind that," said Craig grandly. "To my mind, the only objection to my latest hypothesis is the absence of footprints on the flower beds."

"Well?"

"That can be explained." Craig pointed again. "You observe an upturned box beneath the window?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't its presence there strike you as rather odd?"

"No."

"No?"

"No." Lawrence explained briefly. "Querrin helped me test the window yesterday afternoon. He used the box as a step."

"Oh." Uncle Russ was disappointed. Then he rallied. "Even though its presence was fortuitous, the killer may still have used it to advantage."

"How?"

"He procured a plank—."

"A—what?"

"A plank, resting one end on the box, and the other on the path. Thus," finished Craig with pride, "he was able to cross over the soil without leaving a mark."

Lawrence stared. Then he roared with laughter.

"I'm sorry, sir. But, believe me, no one could leave that way. Those beds are much too wide. And the plank would dip in the middle under a person's

weight. And the board itself would be too unwieldy to shift afterwards. And anyway, there was no such article in the grounds. And—."

"Never mind," interrupted Craig. "I withdraw the suggestion."

The young man choked back another chuckle. "If that's all, sir, I'll go in."

They went up to the side door, which Craig had left open. Inside the hall, Lawrence said pointedly:

"I'm going up to my room."

Uncle Russ didn't take the hint. "Lead on, my boy."

Algy repressed his irritation. They climbed the stairs together.

In the young man's room, Craig settled himself comfortably in a chair. Lawrence eyed him with increasing impatience.

He said:

"If you'll pardon me, sir, I intend to spend the rest of the evening reviewing the evidence."

He decided with dismay that his speech was rather pompous.

Uncle Russ said cheerfully:

"By all means. I'll help you."

He began to lecture. He showed such a detailed knowledge of Turner's killing that Lawrence asked curiously:

"When the police came this evening, were they questioning you, or were you examining them?"

Craig looked amused. "The honours were approximately even." He drew heavily on his cigar, then stubbed it out. "I should be grateful, my boy, if you would apprise me of the latest developments."

Rather regretfully, Lawrence found himself once more discussing the mystery.

Craig listened attentively. He said:

"I have a shilling shocker mind. Are you sure that the inner and outer walls of the station are all they seem to be?"

"Yes. There's no chance of trickery of that sort. The building is everything it seems to be, no more and no less."

"The chimneys?"

"Impassable."

"Then," said Uncle Russ. "I can see only one possible solution."

Lawrence blinked. "Again?"

He went over to the dressing-table, and pulled out the gun from his pocket.

Craig said, to the young man's unresponsive back:

"Obviously Turner died the way Sergeant Hardinge described."

Algy stared into the mirror.

"That's impossible. Shaw was watching the window."

Uncle Russ smiled blandly.

"The constable was lying. He murdered old Simon himself."

"What?"

Lawrence swung round. The gun in his hand pointed like an accusing finger at the old rogue's head.

Craig shied away from the muzzle.

"My boy. Could you, er, direct that thing somewhere else?"

Algy grinned. "Sorry." He dropped the pistol in a drawer, which he locked.

He tapped the key on his thumb nail reflectively.

He said firmly:

"You'll have to be more discreet. You can't keep making these wild accusations. Really you can't. You'll be accusing the Chief Constable next."

"Was he," inquired Craig, "anywhere about?"

"Oh, dear." Stronger language deserted him.

Uncle Russ pressed home his case.

"You will have to admit, my dear fellow, that the hypothesis of Shaw's complicity is the only one that explains the facts as we know them."

"Oh no, it isn't," smiled Algy. "Maybe you and I were accomplices. Then you could have nipped into the cells while I kept up a one-sided conversation for the Sergeant's benefit."

Craig looked surprised. "But, my boy, we know that isn't true."

"We do," returned Lawrence. "But do the police?"

When Uncle Russ had gone, Lawrence settled down to work.

His methods were unique. First of all, he kicked off his shoes and stretched himself lazily on the bed. Then he clasped his hands behind his head, pressing them into the pillow, and closed his eyes.

He seemed to have gone to sleep.

Entirely lost to his surroundings, the young man was reviewing the case on a mental screen.

Roger Querrin had died in a locked and guarded room. Lawrence knew now, with a bitter and angry feeling of disgust, how Peter's brother had been murdered. And he knew who had killed him....

That wasn't the problem. Another man was dead. Another victim he might have saved.

Nausea gripped him. Was this the final crime, or was there to be more violence?

He shook away sick thoughts of failure. His thinking had to be clear....

How had Turner died? Like Roger?

No.

This room wasn't sealed, Lawrence told himself. It was merely inaccessible.

And this problem was worse than the first.

The crimes must have been linked. Could he believe the person who murdered Querrin had also killed old Simon?

Yes, surely.

And yet—.

Lawrence groaned impatiently.

The evidence was clear. He had to believe Miss Watson's story, and the constable's: they couldn't be lying, any more than he.

He grinned ruefully. His own testimony was the stumbling block....

The medical evidence? No, that couldn't possibly have been faked. Turner had died between twenty past four and a quarter past five. At a time when no man could have reached him.

Steady! There's trickery somewhere. There has to be.

Lawrence released his hands, then folded them over his chest.

He thought:

Hardinge's theory. Surely that can't be the truth. No, of course it wasn't. Shaw proved that.

Oh, hell!

He opened his eyes and gazed up at the ceiling.

The cell door. The lock and the handle had been wiped clean of fingerprints, both sides. What did that mean, if anything? Naturally, a person forcing the door wouldn't want to leave his prints... What about those scratches, anyway? Surely—.

Damnation! Lawrence pressed his fingers against his aching head.

Craig's wild ideas seemed to have driven away his powers of concentrated thought. He was glad now that he'd sent the old rogue away with something to worry about.

Lawrence sat up suddenly, and glared without vision through the window. Wipe away all preconceived ideas. Let X be the murderer.

Wait a minute!

The door to the cells had been under his own continuous guard during the vital times except for one brief period: while Hardinge and he stood on the porch outside.

Suppose X had slipped into the passage then?

He shook his head. Nobody had gone past them into the station. Unless—

He caught his breath.

Suppose somebody had got into the Charge Room while they were questioning old Simon in his cell; suppose that somebody had hidden in the Sergeant's living quarters till they had gone out to the porch; suppose X then hurried into the passage behind—

For a fleeting moment, Lawrence tasted triumph. And then he remembered.

Miss Watson.

No one could possibly have entered the station without her knowledge. And her evidence was clear.

Nobody had approached the entrance.

Lawrence himself had gone in just after four.

Russell Craig had arrived at a quarter to five, and had left at five past.

Lawrence had left just after a quarter to six; and at that time, Turner had been dead for—at least—half an hour.

Hardinge had hurried out to call Lawrence back at five to six, then they had both re-entered the station.

Shaw had arrived at six o'clock; then Doctor Tyssen, and Inspector Hazlitt, with his men.

These were the only people to pass into or out of the building—and nobody had the smallest opportunity to commit the crime.

Oh Lord, breathed Algy. It was almost a prayer.

He shaded his eyes, then squeezed his hands over closed lids. His head was splitting.

He decided, very suddenly, he wanted a talk with Audrey Craig.

She wasn't in bed.

He tapped on the wooden panels, and she came to the door with surprise on her lovely face.

"Algy!"

He asked without preamble:

"May I speak to you?"

She said doubtfully: "It's very late."

"Please."

His need was almost physical.

She smiled quickly. "Very well." She glanced round her room. "We'd better not stay here. Let's go down to the library."

They descended the stairs in silence.

In the book-lined room, she turned to face him. "What do you want to say?"

There was no impatience in her voice, only an instinctive sympathy.

"Sit down, Audrey." Lawrence balled one fist and smacked it reflectively into the palm of his other hand. He seemed uncertain how to begin.

He said:

"Roger died. He was murdered—and I think I know who killed him."

The girl said nothing, but her eyes grew wider.

Lawrence murmured softly:

"I'm confused, and I need your help. I don't know if what I'm doing is right... Old Simon is dead, too. I've no idea how he was murdered."

He was threatened with incoherence. Then he went on clearly:

"Audrey, I can drop the case now, with a fairly clear conscience... But if I go on, I go through to the end."

Her eyes were dark.

She whispered:

"What are you hinting?"

Lawrence sounded tired.

"Only that the truth might hurt you. That it might be better to continue believing that your fiancé died because he challenged the powers of another world."

There was a tiny silence.

Then Audrey spoke: distinctly, and with finality.

"I want you to find the truth."

Lawrence smiled at her. His face was once more lazy, placid, and carelessly good humoured.

"Right." He pulled out his silver case and offered it to her. "Cigarette?"

"No, thanks."

Algy nodded pleasantly. "You don't mind if I smoke myself?"

"No, of course not."

The young man lit up. The girl regarded him curiously.

Lawrence inhaled deeply, then took the cigarette away from his lips.

He said:

"There's one small matter. You might be able to help me." He asked suddenly:

"Did Roger make a will?"

She seemed surprised. "Surely—his solicitors—."

Lawrence interposed quietly:

"We contacted them this evening. They say that Querrin intended to make a will, but they've drafted no document. As far as they know, he died intestate. Which means, of course, the property goes to his brother."

Audrey nodded slowly.

She murmured uncertainly:

"Roger told me—that when we married—he intended to leave most of his money to me. I had the idea—." Her voice caught. "I suspected he meant to give me the will on our wedding day." She was warm with affection. "That would have been the kind of gesture he loved."

Lawrence glanced at her sleepily. The dead man, for all his shrewd business dealings, had had a streak of the school-boy in his make-up. He might have by-passed his solicitors completely.

"Mmmm." He mused pensively.

Audrey said:

"Now it's my turn to ask a question. Algy, why did you ask me to look after Peter this afternoon?"

Lawrence started. "Eh? Oh, sorry, Audrey. I was day dreaming... Why? Well, frankly, I wanted Peter kept out of mischief. He believed Turner had something to do with Roger's death, you see. I didn't want him creating a scene while I interviewed old Simon in his cell."

He rubbed his cheek.

"Young Querrin is so nervy, you never know what he might do."

Audrey gave a tiny gasp.

"You don't mean—."

She stopped.

Lawrence eyed her curiously.

"Go on."

She said, with an effort:

"Turner was murdered. Did he die because Peter wanted his brother's death revenged?"

Lawrence smiled. "That's a query you can answer best yourself."

"I?"

"Yes. Where was Peter between the hours of four and six?"

The light died from the girl's eyes. She laughed ruefully.

"He was with me."

"Exactly. You're his alibi," Lawrence shook his head. "No, Audrey. Peter didn't kill old Simon."

She moved closer, and laid her hand on his sleeve. The touch was an unspoken question.

Lawrence replied:

"I don't know, Audrey. I can't explain the mystery."

Her voice was soft. "You'll find the answer."

"Perhaps. I'll try."

"Try now."

She went out. Lawrence stared after her with an odd smile on his lips.

The cigarette had smouldered down to his fingers. He threw it away, then took another from his case and tapped it absently on the silver.

He sighed. "Ah, well."

He settled himself in a comfortable chair, with a cushion behind his head and his feet on a padded stool.

His eyes closed.

There was silence in the room.

Susan York tapped on the door, then pushed it open. She gazed round the library with frank curiosity.

The only light came from a small reading lamp, obscured now by a blue-grey haze of smoke.

Algy Lawrence stirred himself as the girl entered, and eased his cramped legs to the floor. He blinked at the housemaid sleepily.

Susan excused herself demurely. "It's very late, sir. I looked in to see if you required anything more."

Lawrence croaked, then cleared his throat. He was feeling very tired.

Susan said:

"My, sir. Look at all those cigarettes. You have been indulging."

"Tobacco helps me to think." Lawrence squeezed the skin stretched over the bridge of his nose. He stood up. "It's all right, Susan. I'm going up to bed."

He said obscurely:

"I've finished."

Susan York was an intelligent girl, and she knew why Lawrence had come to Querrin House.

She asked timidly:

"Are you still working on the case, sir?"

"Mmmm? Why, yes, I am. Is anything bothering you?"

Susan hesitated. She smoothed her hands over her shapely hips, then blurted out:

"It's about Mr. Craig. I didn't want to tell the police about—." She managed a creditable blush. "About that little affair between us. But they dragged it out of me, sir. And Mr. Craig is a very kind old gentleman, though a little impulsive. I shouldn't like to think of him getting into trouble, sir."

Lawrence concealed a twinkle. He said gravely:

"Don't worry, Susan. I'll see the police don't bother him unduly."

"Oh, thank you, sir." Susan fluttered her lashes. Her wide brown eyes were ingenuous. "You have such influence. And Mr. Craig would be so grateful. And I—I'd be grateful, too."

She stepped up to him quickly.

She whispered:

"I can be *very* grateful."

Lawrence blinked.

He said:

"Susan, you're a very attractive girl."

Her reply was a pleasant one. Her lips came up to his. The gentle pressure lightened, and went away.

She scurried away with a fleeting laugh.

Lawrence gazed after her with surprise. Then he grinned faintly and wiped his mouth with a handkerchief.

He murmured:

"That old rogue Craig! I wonder if he—."

He shrugged his shoulders. Then he turned out the light and closed the door behind him softly.

The humour had vanished from his face before he climbed the stairs. He felt physically exhausted.

For he knew, at last, the answer to every question.

The traps were sprung, and the ghosts were laid. The illusions were explained....

He smacked his fist against the balustrade.

This was the time he hated. He was now the hangman's ally.

He felt sick. A decision had to be made....

His mind rebelled.

He cried aloud:

"But not to-night!"

Then, ashamed, he went into his room. He undressed quickly and slipped between the sheets.

It wasn't any use. Sleep wouldn't come to him.

He sat up and clicked on the bedside light.

He lay back against the pillows. He needed something to ease the tumult in his brain. A book, perhaps. His old remedy.

He leaned out and dragged the zippered bag towards him. He never travelled without a selection from his library.

He thumbed over the much used volumes, then a smile of pure pleasure nickered across his lazy mouth.

He leaned back with a tattered, paper-backed novel in his hands. He studied the Savile Lumley illustration in red and blue on the cover, then flipped open the slim book.

It was a much-prized survival from his boyhood: *The Schoolboy 'Tec*, by Charles Hamilton.

For an hour and a half, he found his release in the adventures of Len Lex and Peter Porringe, of the Oakshott Fifth....

He closed the book with a sigh. He felt relaxed and happy.

For a while at least he had escaped from the grim problems he had still to face.

He turned back to the cover. The Schoolboys' Own Library, No. 353. Dated 3.11.38.

November, 1938. The smile faded from Lawrence's. He had been a boy, then. Crime puzzles had been a game to him: comfortable affairs, between the covers of a book.

Even at that time, he had been gifted with a flair for analysis. He could solve any problem. It had all been fun.

But this time it wasn't amusing.

Now that the game was approaching its last and most deadly stage, it wasn't fun at all.

The tinny voice was urgent.

"You can't do it, Algy. It's too crazy for words."

Lawrence gripped hard on the receiver.

He said wearily:

"It's the only way. Haven't I convinced you?"

Steve Castle's pleasant baritone was distorted. It rang through the 'phone's diaphragm with the ugly force of fear.

"You've convinced me you've solved the mystery. You haven't convinced me this is the way to prove your theories."

Lawrence slumped against the wall of the booth.

He argued stubbornly:

"There's no evidence you can produce in court."

"That's our worry." Lawrence could hear his friend's heavy breathing. "Make your report to the Chief Constable. He'll know what to do."

"Colonel Johnson? That's an idea." Algy drew in his breath. "I'm practically on his doorstep."

"Aren't you in Bristley then?"

"Eh? Oh. No, I couldn't risk calling you from the village."

"You can't risk anything else, either. This crazy plan— it's dangerous."

"It needn't be." Lawrence was patient. "I've worked it out in detail. But I need co-operation."

"You won't get it." The Chief Inspector sounded positive. "Anyway, the Yard has no authority—we haven't been called in yet." He growled. "This isn't like you, Algy. Are you trying to earn yourself a medal?"

Lawrence said coldly:

"I don't want to be a hero. As for the credit, the local police are welcome to it. I've said that all along. Hardinge—."

"Never mind, never mind." Castle was gruffly apologetic. "You aren't a publicity hound, I know that... But why, why—."

Lawrence felt anger stir inside him. The placidity had vanished from his face.

He said:

"You know how Querrin was murdered. *Aren't you angry, too?*"

There was a pause.

Then the Inspector replied:

"Yes, burn it. I am. Roger was my friend."

The answer was in itself permission.

Lawrence sighed.

He said dully:

"All right, then. I'll speak to the Chief Constable."

He had won his point, yet he didn't seem happy.

Castle returned:

"Yes." He hesitated. "You can tell him—your plan has my approval."

"Thanks, Steve. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. And, Algy—"

"Yes?"

"Good luck."

Colonel Johnson's normally ruddy face was pale.

He said:

"It's incredible!"

Lawrence returned quietly:

"It's the truth."

The two men were sitting in the Chief Constable's study. The Colonel's hand opened, then closed again wearily.

He muttered:

"I believe you." He spread his fingers on the desk top. "What do you want me to do?"

Lawrence leaned forward.

He said gravely:

"I want you to co-operate—"

The Colonel barked:

"I won't authorize any such crazy scheme!"

"Suit yourself." Lawrence rubbed his cheek. "But the inquest is fixed for this afternoon. And your police won't show to advantage."

The Chief Constable reddened. He snapped:

"If you're looking for cheap notoriety—."

It was the young man's turn to interrupt.

He said, coldly:

"I don't hang murderers to flatter my ego. Whatever a killer's done, it makes me sick to trap him... I don't want to sound pompous, damn it, but I think I serve the cause of justice. And I believe, with all my heart, that the person who killed Roger Querrin deserves to be sent to trial."

Colonel Johnson gazed at him keenly.

Then he apologized. "I don't doubt your integrity. But this plan of yours—to force a confession—it might so easily go wrong."

"It won't. I promise you."

The Colonel hunched one shoulder. "My job is to guard the public, not to get men killed."

"It's a citizen's duty to help the police."

The Colonel clenched his fist.

"But the idea's so wild, so preposterous! How can I give it official approval?"

Lawrence said, dryly:

"Policemen aren't always so scrupulous. It's a shabby trick when a plain clothes man tempts somebody to serve him a drink after hours, or writes a letter asking for dirty postcards... This is a murder case, sir."

The Colonel inclined his head.

Still staring downwards, he said quietly:

"Very well, Mr. Lawrence. I agree."

He looked up sharply.

"You're certain," he asked, "*absolutely* certain that the killer is—?"

"Yes," said Algy Lawrence.

John Hardinge was startled.

Lawrence leaned towards him across the desk, his speech spilling urgently.

"Things are moving, Sergeant. To-day might see the finish." He relaxed, and grinned lazily. "I kept my promise. When you arrest—a certain person, you'll have the cuffs on a dangerous killer."

"But what—and who—."

"I haven't time to explain." Lawrence took his hands off the desk. "I've by-passed the Chief Constable, even. He puts his trust in Hazlitt... Stay by the

'phone, Sergeant. But when I call you, go out to Querrin House *as fast as you can.*"

Hardinge jerked assent. His blue eyes glittered with suppressed emotion.

Lawrence smiled. He said sleepily:

"This could mean promotion."

He went out.

Lawrence went up the steps with dragging feet. He thought wretchedly :

"I don't want to go on. Yet I must."

He pushed open the door, and went into the hall.

The blood pounded in his throat.

This was the time....

His mind sketched the shape—of a hangman's rope.

He shivered. The house was quiet. It seemed to be waiting...

He walked past the entrance to the passage.

The curtains shrouding the double doors stirred suddenly, and a man stepped out from the corridor.

He said:

"My dear chap. I've been expecting you."

Lawrence turned his head. Fatigue, born of too little sleep and too much mental stress, dulled his eyes and slurred his tongue.

Yet a queer elation, sprung from a challenge and its acceptance, forced its way into his reply.

He said quietly:

"Come up to my room."

So many people were waiting.

While two men talked, there were others who stayed by their telephones.

In his room at the Yard, Stephen Castle worked steadily, but his mind was not completely occupied with the task in hand. His gaze strayed often to the black receiver on the desk before him.

His mind echoed:

"Good luck, Algy."

Colonel Johnson paced up and down his study floor. His ruddy face was anxious.

He exploded suddenly:

"These damned civilians!"

Then he smiled ruefully.

He told himself:

At least, young Lawrence is trying to save my face.

His eyes went back to the telephone.

Sergeant Hardinge fingered the twisted cord.

He thought:

One tug, and this instrument is out of commission. I'm tempted to do it, and save myself the tension. I could go out to the House at once—.

He laughed at himself. Keep calm.

Your thoughts are queer when you're puzzled. Lawrence will explain when he wants to. He's paid you a compliment....

He stayed in the station, waiting for his summons.

There were others: Hazlitt, and his men.

And a girl hugged cover in her bedroom, attentive for the alarm.

The minutes crawled by. Time seemed to be losing its meaning.

The duel was on.

Time passed....

Algy Lawrence reeled backwards. The blood showed, red and angry, across his forehead. He crashed blindly over a chair, fell to the floor, and lay still.

Peter Querrin came out of his room and paused uncertainly in the passage. He stood listening. The sudden noise had jarred his nerves.

He heard a faint groan.

He mumbled foolishly:

"What—who—?!"

He went up to the door of Lawrence's bedroom and pushed it fully open. He stared in shocked surprise.

"Good Lord!"

He stumbled across the threshold, then half fell, half knelt beside the young man sprawled on the carpet.

"Lawrence!"

Peter gazed wildly round. The room was empty.

Lying on the floor, as if dropped from a hasty hand, was a stick with blood on its ferrule.

Querrin slipped his hand under Lawrence's collar and gently lifted the young man's head. Algy's eyelids stirred. He groaned again.

Peter spoke his name, urgently. "Are you all right?"

Lawrence mumbled:

"All ri'—."

His head fell back once more.

Querrin released his grip and straightened up. He looked round dizzily. Then he spilled water from a carafe on a clean handkerchief and began to bathe Lawrence's temples gingerly.

Algy's eyes flickered open. The intelligence seeped back to them rapidly.

Grabbing Peter's wrist with surprising strength, Lawrence croaked:

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

The blond young man did not reply. He levered himself up to a sitting position, muttering:

"He hit me with a stick—. Heavens! I remember."

He broke off abruptly.

His fingers pressed hard into Querrin's flesh. He mumbled incoherently:

"It all went wrong. I—I—you'll have to help me. The man who murdered your brother... Which way did he go?"

The shock held Peter silent. He shook his head numbly.

Lawrence cried:

"You must have seen him."

He struggled up, then sank back once more. He kept on talking.

"He was waiting for me when I came in... We talked. I meant to trap him, but I over-played my hand... God damn it! There's no time to lose. Where is he?"

Peter shook his head again.

He whispered:

"You don't understand. I was close at hand when you fell and cried out. I was coming out of my room, and the noise startled me. I was looking along the corridor. I didn't take my eyes from your door."

He paused, remembering.

He concluded fearfully:

"No one came out."

Lawrence's eyes blurred.

"So he's vanished again. It's a trick, Peter. A devilish trick."

He put out his arm. Querrin helped him to stand.

Lawrence gasped:

"I need a drink."

He lurched against the bedrail.

"Here." Peter pulled out a flask from his hip pocket, put it in the other man's hand. Lawrence let a few drops of the fiery liquid trickle down his throat.

"Thanks." He wiped his mouth. "I'm better now." New strength had surged into his speech.

He said bitterly:

"So much for my plans. Steve was right."

Peter cried:

"For heaven's sake! What happened?"

Lawrence muttered:

"You've a right to know. I should have told you before. Peter, we've discovered who killed your brother."

"Who, then?"

Querrin mouthed the words painfully.

Lawrence spoke a name.

Peter grew flushed and incredulous.

"What!"

The cry was mid way between a question and an exclamation.

He added sincerely:

"I can't believe it."

"Think, Peter. Think." Lawrence smacked his hand on the bedrail in emphasis. "Who was the man with no proper alibi—the man nobody saw for nearly an hour after Roger died? Who locked his bedroom door, and stayed in his room till the Sergeant and I roused him? Who said he heard nothing, though his room was near the head of the stairs?"

Querrin caught his breath.

"The scream—and the shots—."

"Yes." Algy was eager. "Audrey heard them, though her bedroom is farthest from the stairway."

Peter cried:

"I still can't believe it!"

Lawrence said grimly:

"This man was faced with the prospect of losing a comfortable home. He probably expected to stay here, once Audrey and Roger were married. But he

made a mistake when he fooled around with the servants, and your brother told him to leave."

"That's no motive—."

Lawrence cut in ruthlessly. "We've been told that Roger died intestate. But did he? Maybe he made the will he intended."

"You mean—bequeathing the money to Audrey?"

"Yes. Perhaps there *is* such a document in existence. Perhaps our man has possession of it."

Lawrence finished tiredly:

"He gave himself away."

Querrin asked:

"How?"

Algy grinned briefly. "Those crazy theories. He did his best to confuse me. But he made one mistake."

He paused.

"He told me that when I broke into Roger's room, the fire in the grate was nearly out. Only embers remained."

Peter was puzzled.

"That was the truth, surely."

"Certainly. *But how did he know?*"

"But I—." Peter gulped. "I—I mean. That is—."

Lawrence helped him out.

"He must have been in the room himself, without our knowledge."

"Then how did he escape?"

Lawrence shook his head. "That's too long a story." He scuffed a foot against the stick on the carpet, winced, and put up his fingers to his forehead. Then his hand dropped suddenly.

He whispered:

"No...."

"Lawrence! What is it?"

Algy pointed. Querrin stared at the dressing-table. The fair haired young man said grittily:

"That drawer has been forced."

He sprang forward, and wrenched it open.

Then he twisted round with a desperate face.

He said, with a quiet hopelessness:

"He's taken the gun."

... Downstairs in the room where a man had died, the pistol was held in a podgy hand.

"Please don't move," said Russell Craig, politely. "I wouldn't like to have your death on my conscience."

Lawrence's mouth set hard.

He said:

"That old rogue is a murderer. He won't hesitate to kill again."

"For God's sake!"

All Peter's bewilderment exploded into the cry. He felt sick and confused.

Lawrence clutched hard on the bedrail. His knuckles showed white.

He muttered:

"I have to think. Now, as never before, I've got to think."

His eyes closed. . . .

Querrin was muddled. "Should we call the police?"

Algy's lids snapped open. "Yes. Ring Hardinge—. No, damn it, wait... There isn't time enough to reach him."

He jerked into action.

"Come with me, Peter. We have to settle this ourselves."

They hurried out on the landing. Peter gazed round helplessly. Lawrence called:

"This way."

They went down the stairs. Algy took three steps towards the double doors at the entrance to the passage, then stopped.

He murmured:

"No. We can't reach him that way. Follow me."

The side door came open at his touch. The two men ran silently along the path, skirting the outside wall of the corridor. As they neared the turn of the pathway, Lawrence laid a restraining hand on Querrin's arm.

"Easy. We have to be careful."

He moved forward cautiously and looked towards the french windows. Then he sighed with relief.

He breathed:

"The curtains are drawn. Come on, Peter."

They stepped off the path and walked noiselessly across the soft brown soil. Their footprints sprang up in silent commentary.

As they neared the room in which Roger had died, the sound of voices came like a ghost to their ears.

The french windows were unfastened. Lawrence eased one side partially open.

The voices grew clear and distinct. Through a gap in the curtains, he could see Russell Craig.

Two people were talking in that room.

One was an innocent person.

The other was a ruthless killer.

Uncle Russ said mildly:

"I've never murdered anybody. Though Lawrence thinks I was responsible for two deaths at least. But then, he's not very bright, is he? You fooled him easily."

The other said hoarsely:

"What do you want of me?"

Craig responded benignly:

"You'll learn in due course. In the meantime,"—here the old rogue shifted the pistol slightly—"don't make any sudden movements. I shan't hesitate to fire. That," he ended courteously, "is a warning."

There was a short, uneasy laugh. "I suppose there's a reason for your actions."

"There is," agreed Uncle Russ. He settled his back against the mantel. "But please sit down. Make yourself comfortable."

A chair creaked.

Craig continued:

"A word of explanation. I don't want you to misconstrue my motives. I know my duty as a citizen. If I choose to neglect it, it's not because I have a sentimental distaste for putting you on trial. I could watch you die with equanimity." His voice was hard. "No, I have another reason for letting you go free."

His companion was torn between relief and apprehension; but made no reply.

Craig went on smoothly:

"In this harsh world I have to look after myself. I'm not," he coughed, "financially secure. So I lack the little comforts due to me."

The light of understanding showed in the other's eyes.

"Go on."

"I need—you'll pardon the expression—a meal ticket. I'm an old man," said Uncle Russ, wrapped in self-pity, "and I want to see out my life in comfort. So naturally, I require money. You, my dear—."

The other interrupted.

"Blackmail!"

The word was sharp and ugly.

"Exactly." Craig's manner was benevolent and avuncular. "You are going to provide me with a substantial annuity. You may regard me, if you wish, as a remittance man." He chuckled. "Or a dependent relative. Though I don't advise you to show me as such on your Income Tax returns."

"I have no money."

"Oh, come now." Craig was reproachful. "Though it doesn't at the moment appear to do so; you know, and I know, that Roger's death has made you a wealthy person. You can spare a little for me. In fact," he laughed, "you will have to spare a good deal."

The other's voice was soft.

"You're playing a dangerous game."

"I agree. But don't think you can scare me." Craig indicated the pistol in his hand.

"You won't always have a gun."

The old rascal eyed his companion thoughtfully.

He said:

"You're not wise to threaten me."

There was a silence.

Then Craig murmured: "It makes no difference. I shall strengthen my defences."

The reply was almost a sneer.

"How?"

"Ah." Craig placed one finger along his nose. "You'll see."

The other stirred.

"I've listened to you patiently. And you're talking nonsense. You can't keep me here for ever. When I leave, I shall go straight to the police station, and —."

"I don't think so." Craig was unruffled. "I've nothing to fear. I shall give my evidence at the inquest this afternoon."

"Your evidence?"

Unwilling fear showed in the question.

"Yes." Craig smiled. He looked like a cat playing with a mouse. "You see, I wasn't asleep—the night friend Roger died. I heard the scream, and then the shots—."

There was the sound of an indrawn breath.

"I got up hastily. My room is near the head of the stairs. I looked down over the banisters—."

He paused.

Something rasped in the other's throat.

"Well?"

Craig said gently:

"I saw you come out from the passage, through the double doors and into the hall."

"Querrin and Lawrence both swore—."

"That nobody passed them in the corridor. I know. Please don't quibble. I also know why they didn't see you." Craig was brisk. "Let's continue. I watched you leave. Then," he smiled broadly, "I went back to my room, locked the door, and climbed into bed. I needed time to think."

"That's your evidence?"

"Yes."

"And for a price, you'll suppress it?"

"Yes."

"All right. I agree."

The reply had over-tones of relief.

Uncle Russ seemed amused.

He said unexpectedly:

"You think you've beaten me, don't you?"

"What?" The other was caught off balance.

Craig continued:

"I'm not a fool. I've made false statements to the police, but not under oath. So far I haven't committed myself. But if I perjure myself this afternoon, I weaken my position. To-day, I can give you away. Next year, I can't. You're counting on that. Aren't you?"

"I—I don't understand."

"Come now." Craig grinned unsympathetically. "I can't make myself an accessory after the fact. I don't want my neck in a noose."

"So?"

The word held menace.

"You'll have to help me."

Craig slipped his free hand into the inside pocket of his coat and extracted a thin sheaf of folded papers.

He said:

"Read this."

He tossed the papers into the other's lap.

The pages rustled gently.

Craig watched his companion warily.

The reaction came swiftly. "This is a confession!"

"Yes," returned Uncle Russ, politely. "In your name. Read it, please. I had to use my imagination in places. But I think you'll find it essentially accurate."

There was a laugh.

"I'm to put my name to this? You must think I'm a fool."

"No," replied Craig equably. "But you will do as I wish."

There was another silence while the other read swiftly.

Then:

"So you know that, too?"

"Oh, yes," said Craig. "I've omitted nothing."

The papers rustled angrily.

"I can't sign this."

"You will sign," returned Craig gently, "every page."

There was menace in the room. It seeped round the shadows, and flared up with the lighted lamp. Lawrence, peering through the crack between the drawn curtains, watched the old rogue curiously. He noted, without surprise, that in spite of the tension betrayed by the beading of sweat at his hair-line, Uncle Russ was enjoying himself immensely.

Craig held the gun with unwavering steadiness.

He said:

"I need your confession, for obvious reasons. I don't intend to be your third victim. And I shan't allow my part in this affair to be known by the police. If at any time you fail to provide my—ah—allowance, those papers will be despatched—anonously—to New Scotland Yard."

"I could still name you an accessory."

"How," inquired Craig politely, "could you prove it? "

There was no reply.

Uncle Russ said smoothly:

"With those papers in my possession, I shall have nothing to fear. From you, or the Director of Public Prosecutions."

The other said flatly:

"I won't sign."

"The choice is yours." The old rogue shrugged delicately. "Either you put your name to that confession or I tell the Coroner everything." Craig chuckled. "The true story of this crime should make a bigger sensation than any fantasy I've advanced myself."

He added:

"I shall make an excellent witness."

"You—."

The other's arm jerked upwards.

Craig thrust the pistol forward. He snapped:

"No abuse, please." He relaxed. "And no violence." He finished benignly: "Though I could handle you well enough."

His voice hardened once more.

"Have you made your decision?"

There was a moment of terrible calm. Then a pen scratched furiously over the surface of the papers.

Craig chuckled wordlessly.

Outside in the garden, Lawrence looked at Peter. Querrin had heard every word. His face had gone white, and bloodless.

Lawrence swung back to the curtains. His body tensed.

Uncle Russ inquired:

"Have you finished?"

"Yes." The response was quiet and resigned, yet with strange undertones. "Here."

Somebody moved in the dusky room. Lawrence saw Craig's eyes flicker briefly as his companion stood up with the signed confession. The other said gently:

"Take it."

As Craig grasped the papers, his gaze shifted down involuntarily. In that brief moment, the killer was on him like a wildcat.

Two desperate hands clutched at the gun in his fist, seizing the pistol by muzzle and butt. Craig felt the automatic turn out, around, and in, trapping his finger in the trigger guard.

He shrieked with pain.

The pressure eased, then a blow crashed into his already contorted face. He lurched to the floor, only half conscious.

"Now!"

The other's eyes were steely. The gun swung up, reversed in a merciless hand.

It clubbed down viciously.

For a long second, Lawrence felt paralysed with fear and shock. Then as Uncle Russ went down, the young man wrenched aside the curtains and hurled himself at the old man's attacker.

He grabbed the killer's wrist, and wrenched with all his strength. The gun butt missed Craig's temple by a hair's-breadth.

The force of the onslaught carried Lawrence on to the other's back. They rolled over together, struggling wildly.

The pistol, jarred from the killer's hand, slid over the floor; and struck against Querrin's shoe as he came through the windows from the garden.

Lawrence's head crashed against the table leg. The lighted lamp rocked crazily.

His senses reeling, the young man pulled himself up.

His adversary, standing also, met him with a dead face.

Lawrence couldn't afford to be squeamish. He lifted his leg, stepping inside the other's crotch. The killer was thrown to the ground with Lawrence on top.

Algy tucked his opponent's toe under his own left arm, then turned the other over with his body, sitting in and locking the fallen one's leg over his own. He lay back and applied pressure.

He gasped: "For your own sake, keep still!"

The command was not obeyed. The killer struggled in a frenzied bid for escape. Lawrence gritted his teeth. He heard a choked cry of agony, then the other lay still.

Lawrence wiped the sweat from his forehead. He didn't feel happy: he hated violence.

He looked round for the gun.

It was in Peter's hand.

Querrin came forward slowly. One curtain had been swept fully aside, and the daylight streamed in behind him.

Lawrence said queery: "Give me the pistol."

Peter Querrin shook his head. An odd smile drifted over his mouth. He said:

"No."

His voice sharpened. "I'm warning you. Don't move."

Russell Craig stirred suddenly.

Querrin snapped:

"Get up. Stand over there, behind Lawrence."

The old rogue hesitated.

Algy called sharply: "Do as he says."

Craig levered himself up painfully. A thin smear of blood showed on his cheek, and the trigger finger of his right hand was red and swollen.

He tried, with pitiful ineffectiveness, to straighten his disordered silver-grey hair. He walked slowly across the room.

"That's right," breathed Peter Querrin.

Lawrence shifted position.

Peter jerked the gun.

"I said—don't move!"

Algy felt the body beneath him squirm. A voice squeezed, painfully:

"Make him—let me go... "

Querrin's mouth trembled.

He muttered:

"No. I don't trust you." His voice altered pitch. "You gave me away."

Lawrence stared at him, coolly. Then, with calm and lazy movements, he stood up and released his prisoner.

Peter's features contorted angrily.

"You swine! Do you want me to shoot?"

Algy Lawrence said mildly:

"You won't kill me, Peter. You haven't the guts."

The speech had the flick of contempt.

Querrin flushed. His crooked finger trembled against the trigger.

Lawrence leaned one hip against the table.

He said, conversationally:

"You'll always need another"—his glance went sideways and down—"to do your dirty work. And this time, Peter, you have no hired assassin."

He relaxed, and closed his eyes.

"Tell me, Peter. When did you decide"—he paused— "that your brother had to die?"

Something rasped in Querrin's throat.

He said:

"Give me that confession."

The papers were still clutched in Craig's hand. He had retrieved them when picking himself up from the floor.

Lawrence leaned over and wrenched them from his grasp.

Querrin's eyes went blank and deadly.

He whispered:

"Give me those papers."

Lawrence shook his head.

He said:

"You'll have to kill for them, Peter. There's no easy way."

"Shoot!"

The hoarse voice startled them both.

Querrin's accomplice struggled up, then sank back with a cry of pain, rubbing an injured leg.

Lawrence grinned without humour.

"That's good advice. Take it."

"I don't want to kill you—."

"But you'll have to kill me, Peter. You'll have to kill us all."

Querrin seemed on the verge of angry tears.

"Damn you!"

Lawrence shrugged.

"You're no gambler, Peter. And the stakes are a little too high. You should have stopped and considered before you plotted Roger's death."

Querrin's face had crumpled.

He whispered:

"I didn't want him to die." His tone was thin with hysteria. "It was this room—this room, I tell you. There's evil here... I hate you, old Tom Querrin! You made me do it all."

Lawrence said brutally:

"You're crazy."

Querrin's nostrils pinched.

He breathed:

"That night—when I told them the story—Audrey and Roger, here together, I felt evil seep into me... I saw— how easy it would be—."

"To murder your brother, and inherit his fortune."

Peter jerked back like a man from a whip lash.

He cried:

"It was his own fault! Audrey and I—we pleaded with him... He wouldn't change his mind. He insisted on keeping—his appointment... He wouldn't remove —the temptation."

Lawrence said:

"You hadn't the nerve to kill him yourself. So you called on—."

He gestured wordlessly.

Querrin's mouth hardened.

"You know, then?"

"Oh, yes." Lawrence was casual. "I knew within eighteen hours of Roger's death." He laughed. "You didn't believe that fairy story I spun upstairs?"

He grinned at Russell Craig. "Sorry, sir. I've been blackening your character dreadfully."

"Shut up, damn you." Querrin's face was white. "I've nothing to lose. I shall hang anyway, whether I kill you or not."

"You fool." His accomplice was bitter and scornful. "Get that confession, and don't waste time. It's enough to hang us both."

Querrin snarled.

"You signed it, blast your eyes."

"I hadn't any choice."

Lawrence smiled gently.

He said:

"You may as well give yourselves up."

Peter's mouth thinned.

"Give me those papers."

"Take them, you fool." His confederate cried out with rage and pain. "If I could only get up—aaah! My leg...."

"I'm sorry," said Lawrence, with an odd but genuine concern. "But you shouldn't have struggled. You crippled yourself."

Querrin shouted:

"Be quiet!"

The pistol shook wildly in his hand.

He backed towards the window.

His accomplice gasped madly:

"You poor fool! Don't give up now. Keep your head. Shoot him—get the papers—come back!"

Querrin seemed to shrink.

Lawrence said:

"It's no use. Querrin can't kill in cold blood."

He thought, with gratitude:

"I've won. Thank God."

Peter whispered:

"I have—to get away."

Lawrence said nothing, and Craig kept silent, but there was another and vicious reply.

"They'll hang you, Querrin."

"What?"

"You can't get away like this, leaving all the evidence. . . . They'll find you and they'll hang you. They'll come into your cell one morning, and bind your arms, and stand you on the trap—."

"You—."

Peter's voice was a shriek. He ran forward blindly, and lashed his tormentor's cheek with the muzzle of the gun.

"Stop that!"

Lawrence sprang towards him and grabbed his arm.

Querrin, with desperate strength, hurled him back.

He crouched like an animal.

Lawrence, sprawled back across the table, saw death in Peter's eyes.

His finger tightened on the trigger....

A new voice ordered:

"Drop that pistol."

Querrin's eyes lost focus.

Then he turned his head slowly, and stared at the uniformed man who had stepped in through the windows.

The policeman was holding a revolver.

Lawrence said quietly:

"I'm glad you arrived, Inspector."

Nobody moved.

A tear ran down Peter's cheek.

Then he twisted the gun in his hand, and they heard the sound as the muzzle smashed against his teeth.

Then his finger jerked hard on the trigger, and the shot blasted cruelly through the silence.

For one horrible second, Peter Querrin stood upright, his face a distortion in pulp and blood.

Then he crashed on the floor like a broken doll.

Lawrence straightened slowly.

He looked down with compassion.

He said:

"It's over now."

"Not quite," returned Hazlitt grimly. He stepped back to the heavy, shrouding curtain, and pushed it aside. Daylight flooded the room once more, driving out the shadows.

The Inspector called:

"Sergeant, call Doctor Tyssen. Then"—his gaze flicked back over his shoulder—"make arrangements. We have a prisoner."

He walked back, skirting the dead man with distaste.

He said:

"I have a warrant—."

Peter's accomplice said wearily:

"Let's skip the formalities. I want a word with Mr. Lawrence."

Hazlitt hesitated.

Lawrence nodded. "There's no more danger."

"Very well." The Inspector thrust the revolver in the young man's hands. "Take this."

He went out. Craig followed, a handkerchief over his mouth.

Lawrence asked:

"Does the leg still pain you?"

"No." The other said abruptly:

"Give me a smoke."

"Surely." Lawrence opened his case, and eased a cigarette between the other's lips. The revolver he slipped, carelessly enough, into the pocket of his coat.

His companion inquired:

"You aren't afraid I'll try to grab the gun?"

"No. You can't escape with the police outside. And you're not thinking of suicide."

"That's right." The conflict resolved, the two had dropped back to their old relationship. "I'm not such a fool as Querrin."

There was a moment of silence, then—.

"You haven't beaten me yet."

Lawrence shrugged. "I have your confession."

"Forced," said the other triumphantly. "I shall deny everything. I won't go down without a struggle."

Lawrence lifted one shoulder.

"Let's not wrangle. You'll have a fair trial. The rest is up to the jury."

"And the hangman." The other laughed bitterly. "What's the use. I'm too honest to fool myself. And Peter's left me to face things alone."

Lawrence asked, suddenly:

"Why did you do it?"

"Who can say? I was bored, and frustrated... I've never shirked—a calculated risk. And you said yourself, the stakes were high. It was a gamble, that's all. It might have paid me well."

Lawrence said softly:

"I'm sorry."

He looked curiously at the man for whom he still had a genuine liking.

"You needn't be," replied the other. "I challenged you, in effect, when I murdered Querrin and Turner. You were too clever for me. I've no grudge against you."

He grinned, briefly.

"Though I admit it's humiliating—."

He paused, then—.

"To be beaten by a damned amateur," finished Sergeant Hardinge.

"Peter Querrin," said Lawrence slowly, "wasn't a very efficient criminal. And he wasn't a good actor. You and I,"—he stared at the burly man opposite—"both knew he was nervous, tense, and scared."

"Yes." Stephen Castle scowled. "His emotions were genuine. We misinterpreted them, that's all."

His voice was bitter.

Lawrence felt, once more, the stirring of an old anger. After a moment's hesitation, he remarked sanely:

"We can't blame ourselves now. We were fooled, yes. But we couldn't know that by guarding Roger we were exposing him to danger."

The Chief Inspector seemed tired.

He said:

"You'd better explain from the beginning."

Lawrence nodded. The two men were sitting in the library. The young man swept his hands over his smooth blond hair and began.

"Peter was weak, and entirely dependent on his brother. He must have resented Roger's wealth and authority for a long time."

Steve commented:

"Roger was my friend, but he could be arrogant and overbearing. He wasn't an easy man to understand."

Lawrence went on:

"When his brother decided to marry, Peter saw a fortune going out of his reach. He might even have lost his home, since newly weds usually," Algy chuckled, "prefer to be alone."

"However, he didn't think of murder till Roger advanced his crazy plan of keeping the Querrins' traditional appointment. To do Peter justice, I'll admit he tried to dissuade his brother—he was scared of his own capacity for evil."

"Roger was obstinate, and Peter couldn't resist the temptation. He made up his mind that his brother had to die."

"He knew Roger had made no will, so the wealth would pass to him. That money was Hardinge's bait."

Algy was careful to avoid his old friend's eyes.

He continued:

We shall never know their exact relationship. It's safe to say Hardinge and Peter were fairly intimate. They must have known each other's characters."

Castle shrugged. "We can investigate. Not that it matters now."

Lawrence mused:

"The Sergeant knew Roger hardly at all. Their first informal meeting was on the night Hardinge came to kill."

Castle swore. His professional pride was hurt.

Lawrence said mildly: "Policemen are human beings, with human faults and vices. The Sergeant was bored and frustrated, with a dead end job in a tiny village. He had few hopes of promotion and no way of making money.

"When Peter suggested his crazy scheme—timidly enough, I imagine—John Hardinge seized his opportunity. From that moment, the Sergeant took charge. Young Querrin was only the pawn. There was no fear of a double cross. Hardinge was the stronger man. He knew that once Roger was dead, he could force from Peter as big a share of the Querrin fortune as he wished.

"He began to make plans. The first essential was to provide Peter with an unbreakable alibi.

"That's where you came in, Steve. You arrived here for a holiday, and they tagged you the perfect witness.

"Peter, plagued with doubts and indecision, yet determined to see things through to the bitter end, told you his colourful ghost story. You agreed to help, and what's more"—Algy grinned slightly—"Querrin managed to persuade you it was your own idea to call in Sergeant Hardinge."

Castle looked glum.

Lawrence smiled at him gently, and went on:

"They jockeyed you into position. In all good faith, you agreed to stand guard with Peter—at the end of the passage—while the Sergeant waited outside in the gardens.

"That was a necessity. The whole illusion was to depend on it.

"Right! Everything was settled, and then suddenly you were recalled to the Yard.

"That nearly wrecked their plans. The whole scheme required an irreproachable witness to swear to Peter's alibi. Querrin was, after all, the

obvious suspect. They had to establish his innocence.

"You dropped out. They looked round for a substitute. In all innocence, you told Peter to call on me."

Algy's eyes had lost their kindness.

"I was his last hope. Truly, his brother's life depended on my answer.

"If I refused to go with Peter, he would have to abandon his plans. ... I had only to stay in London."

He smacked his hands together angrily.

"But for me, Roger would still be alive."

Castle's mouth twisted.

He said:

"I made you go. I'm sorry."

Lawrence lifted one shoulder.

"I fell into the trap, as you did. Querrin couldn't hide his feelings. He was near collapse, through fright and worry... But it wasn't concern for his brother. It was fear of the hangman."

Even as he spoke, Algy realized that Peter had also been scared he would lose his only opportunity to bring about his brother's death.

He shivered, with sick reproach.

He said abruptly:

"I don't like to think of the dark conflicts in Querrin's mind. Let's say he fooled us, and leave it at that.

"I went with him to Bristley.

"As you had done before me, I smelled both security and danger. So, with relief, he handed me over to his accomplice.

"Hardinge was a very different man. He was cool and efficient. He was also, though I didn't know it then, completely ruthless."

Lawrence grinned. "Oddly enough, I liked him on sight. I still do, come to think of it."

He rubbed his cheek. "The Sergeant was a man without passion. The elder Querrin was to him no more than a cipher—an obstacle to be removed."

He went on quickly:

"Hardinge eased me gently into position. I had no suspicion—."

"Don't blame yourself for that," grunted the Chief Inspector. "He fooled me too. He had already persuaded me to stand guard inside the house. You simply took my place."

"Even so, I could still have wrecked their schemes, merely by altering the existing arrangements. But"— his face was grim—"I didn't. And Peter tricked me again.

"I let him help me test the window in the passage. He grabbed the opportunity of upturning an old wooden box directly beneath the sill."

Steve looked puzzled. Lawrence said:

"I'll explain later. That box had to be in position. Unwittingly, I gave him the chance of averting all suspicion."

"It was unlikely," supplied Steve, "that the police would ask questions about it anyway."

"So they believed." Lawrence closed his eyes. "Let's digress for a moment.

"I don't suppose they intended to direct my attention towards old Simon. But I rattled Peter in the train, and he decided the story of Turner's dismissal would serve as a useful red herring.

"Old Simon had, in fact, been prowling round Querrin House all day. He was the only man who believed in the ghost story—and he wanted to see Roger come to grief.

"Hardinge was puzzled when he heard I had been attacked, but judged the prowler would be too scared to return. That was a bad miscalculation.

"However, he had other things on his mind. He was wondering if Peter would lose his nerve. That could mean disaster for them both. Querrin's part in the murder was small enough, but it was vital—as you'll see.

"Peter nearly cracked up when Uncle Russ got drunk and tried to join the guard. That might have spoilt everything. Still, that crisis passed, and—."

Lawrence broke off and chuckled grimly.

"And Hardinge actually told Peter, in my presence, that he didn't have to go through with the killing if he wanted to cry off."

"What!"

"In guarded language. But that's what he meant. Querrin replied: 'I can do everything I have to,' and the die was cast.

"Well, now. Roger obviously would have no suspicion of the men who'd been set to guard him.

"It was raining heavily. Soon after the elder Querrin had been left alone Hardinge left his post on the path and crossed over the flower beds, back to the house. The rain washed out his footprints once more.

"Standing on the steps, he tapped lightly on the glass panes. Roger was surprised, but he had no reason to be suspicious. He pulled back the curtains,

saw who it was, and opened the french windows.

"The Sergeant, I imagine, had taken off his cape and left it under the trees. He had removed his goloshes after crossing the wet soil, so he brought no mud into the room from the gardens.

"He made some excuse to Querrin, and put the rubbers by the fire to dry.

"It wasn't long after eleven, so Roger raised no objection. It wasn't till later, when the time for his appointment drew nearer, that Querrin told the Sergeant to go.

"Hardinge stepped behind him, and stunned him with his truncheon—."

Castle pushed out a muffled curse.

"—catching him as he fell, so there would be no loud noise. He let him slip to the floor. Then he slid out the dagger from its sheath, and waited."

Lawrence settled himself more comfortably. "Much to the Sergeant's satisfaction, the rain stopped at twenty minutes to twelve. That was a stroke of luck. Previously he had intended his alibi to depend solely upon the windows which Roger had re-locked from the inside. Now he had the unmarked soil of the flower beds to back up his story.

"At ten minutes to twelve, he replaced the goloshes over his shoes—if there was any dried dirt on the soles he shook it into the embers of the fire—picked up the knife, and slid the blade into Roger's back.

"He polished the handle quickly. He didn't want to leave smudges of any kind on the hilt.

"He may have been wearing gloves—of rubber, or thin cotton—or he may have wrapped a handkerchief round his fingers. He turned out the lamp, so no light would escape into the corridor—."

Castle leaned forward attentively.

Lawrence said slowly:

"Using equal care not to obliterate Querrin's prints on the handle, he opened the door—."

"Now wait just a moment!" Steve was exasperated. "We know darn well that's impossible—."

Algy grinned sadly. He said:

"The trick's so simple I'm almost ashamed to explain it. Peter knew there was to be a new lock on that door, so when he came up to London with you, he went along to the manufacturers and bought a new key to the same type of lock—."

Castle swore.

"This key he gave to Hardinge when he arrived at the house that evening, and the Sergeant substituted it for the true key on Roger's chain after he'd knocked him senseless.

"Hardinge unlocked the door, slipped into the passage, then re-locked the door from outside.

"He went noiselessly along the corridor till he reached its solitary window. He climbed through, pulled down the sash once more, and squatted on the upturned box beneath the wide sill.

"Meanwhile, Peter and I had been waiting at the entrance to the passage. Peter had managed to manoeuvre himself into the commanding position, but even if I had looked into the corridor at the wrong moment, it's unlikely I would have seen anything in the blackness.

"Moreover, Querrin was there to divert my attention. The two conspirators were working to schedule, of course. At ten minutes to twelve, Peter began talking loudly, to cover any slight noise of movement.

"At four minutes to twelve, when he was sure his accomplice was out of the way—probably he'd caught the brief flicker of moonlight as Hardinge moved the window curtains—Peter made me go with him into the passage.

"I suggested we check the window. They had expected that.

"Peter pushed the candlestick he was carrying into my hand, turned his back, and put his own hands on the drapes. Pretending to draw them aside, he slipped the catch into position—a tiny movement which I didn't notice; his body shielded his fingers—then showed me the window securely fastened.

"Hardinge was crouched under the sill out of sight. And the candle turned the glass into a mirror, obscuring my vision still more. Besides, my attention was fixed on the catch... I hope that doesn't sound as if I'm making excuses."

"Go on," said the Chief Inspector gruffly.

Lawrence shrugged. "Then Querrin worked the same trick in reverse. I turned away. Under cover of replacing the curtains, Peter released the catch.

"We reached the door to Roger's room. It was twelve o'clock.

"The Sergeant straightened up, rested his hands on the sill, and pressed his face against the window. He screamed—."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes. Russell Craig, amidst all his nonsense, said a true thing. It's very difficult to locate the course of sound, especially in the dark ... I thought at the time there was something very wrong about that evil, strangled sound. As, of course, there was. It came from behind, not in front of us.

"But Peter gave me no time for reflection. He cried out his brother's name, and the misdirection was complete.

"We smashed open the door.

"Once more, they had the devil's own luck. Roger had regained consciousness. With his last reserves of strength, he was dragging himself towards the door. The effort was too much for him. He died without speaking.

"Peter's hysteria was genuine. The narrow escape, combined with the scene of slaughter, was almost too much for him."

Lawrence paused, remembering.

"Hardinge had been waiting patiently outside. He didn't expect me to shoot open the door, but he didn't lose his head. As soon as I forced my way in, he slid open the window and dropped into the corridor. Peter had stayed in the doorway to block my view of the passage.

"Hardinge locked the window, carefully leaving no prints on the catch. Then he ran quickly along the corridor—the carpet was thick, and muffled his footfalls— through the double doors into the main hall, and then up the short passage to the side door.

"He unbolted the door and hurried through. He ran along the path skirting the house, back to his original position under the trees. He had time to put on his cape, then—."

Lawrence paused.

"I can picture him standing there under the trees, his breath soughing gustily, tensely watching the house. One hand in his pocket, perhaps, nervously fingering the key he had to replace.

"His greatest fear was that I should detect the substitution. I did, in fact, examine the chain in Roger's pocket, but"—he shrugged—"one new key is much like another, and I didn't have time to try it in the lock."

Algy smiled ruefully. "I stepped over to the windows, and signalled the Sergeant. Peter at once offered to let him in. That was to make sure that nobody else examined the side door, which was, of course, no longer locked and bolted.

"Hardinge marched along the path. He was dry when he should have been wet but his cape had been left in the rain, and he brushed against the damp leaves as well."

Lawrence grinned again. He said, with self-reproach:

"Hazlitt noticed the Sergeant was dry enough. I didn't...."

"Hardinge had a nasty moment when he saw Roger's key chain spilled on the carpet. He knew I must have examined it, and promptly snapped at me for tampering with the evidence.

"That was a mistake, though I didn't spot it immediately."

"Eh?" Castle pondered. "Oh, I see. If Hardinge was the innocent man he pretended—."

"He couldn't have known I had pulled out the chain. It might have fallen from Querrin's pocket in a struggle. The Sergeant knew that wasn't the case, jumped to the correct conclusion I'd been examining the key, and gave himself away. He was quick witted, though. He saw his error and turned his remark at once. He implied he'd been referring to the curtains by the french windows.

"He had still to replace the key before we discovered that the one on the chain didn't fit. So he told me to wait in the hall, and switched keys before the Inspector arrived. The false one he slipped into his pocket to dispose of later. Any questions?"

"Yes. Where did old Simon fit into this?"

"Ah, Turner was unlucky. He couldn't keep away. Hardinge knew well enough no prowler would venture near the house while he stood guard, but once he was in the room with Roger—."

He shrugged. "Turner came closer, making those confused marks in the ground beyond the path. He heard the scream, and a little while later, saw the Sergeant hurrying back to the trees.

"Old Simon faded away discreetly. He didn't want more trouble. Unfortunately for him, he lingered too long and bumped into Hardinge as they were both leaving in the morning.

"There was a struggle, with no time for comment or explanations. Hardinge would never have arrested him if he had known what old Simon had seen. But Turner was knocked unconscious, and then we arrived, so he had no choice. He put him in a cell.

"They talked. The Sergeant couldn't afford to let the old man's story go any further. Once anybody suspected that Hardinge wasn't the impartial witness he appeared to be—."

Lawrence stopped. "Old Simon had to die."

Castle said nothing.

His friend continued:

"Hardinge found himself on dangerous ground. When Turner was killed in the police station, the Sergeant would inevitably be considered as a suspect. So he had to prove himself innocent."

"He did, too." Castle scowled. "God damn it! Argue how you like—Hardinge couldn't possibly have reached him."

"Impossibilities," replied Algy, "were the Sergeant's speciality. Once more, I was to be the dupe. He called me down to the station—."

"Wait a second. You interviewed old Simon at Hardinge's invitation. How could he risk that?"

"Don't confuse me, Steve. I'll explain in a minute. Before I analyse the second illusion, I'd better explain how I solved the first."

Castle nodded. "You weren't very explicit over the 'phone."

Lawrence linked his hands.

He said dully:

"Hardinge himself gave me the clue. It took me an hour and a half to realize its significance. In that time, another life was lost."

Castle studied his young friend sympathetically.

He said again:

"Don't blame yourself."

Lawrence looked up with a lopsided grin.

"I can only do my best... Oh, well." His tone altered. "Hardinge showed me the fingerprint analysis. Roger's prints had been found, overlying any others, on a number of objects in the room where he died—including *the bolts securing the windows.*"

He paused expectantly. Castle looked puzzled, then caught his breath.

Lawrence nodded. "Yes. I locked those windows myself. The prints you found ought to have been mine.

"Obviously then, Roger had first drawn, then re-shot the bolts after we had left him.

"Why? Clearly, to let somebody into the room from the gardens.

"That could not have been done without Hardinge's knowledge. Therefore his evidence was false.

"Now, Roger wasn't a fool. He knew we were guarding him. He would let nobody into the room, without raising the alarm, whom he didn't know and trust. Only three men besides himself had any business in that place, at that time.

"Peter and I were in the hall. That left only Hardinge. So it was reasonable to suppose the Sergeant was Querrin's visitor."

Castle nodded agreement. He murmured: "Hardinge probably made some excuse about the weather."

"Uh huh. Asked for shelter till the rain stopped. Something of the sort... To continue:

"Once inside, Hardinge could easily dispose of his victim." Lawrence was deliberately banal. He was trying to reduce the blood and the pain to the comfortable anonymity of a newspaper report. "But how could he escape? Through the windows? No. He couldn't hocus the bolts, and he couldn't get back to the path without leaving footprints.

"So—." Lawrence shrugged. "He must have gone through the door. There was only one key, so he must have removed it from Roger's body. Yet I had found it myself, still in the dead man's pocket.

"I saw my mistake. I had found a key. I had only assumed it was genuine... A fake, then. Yet the police must have tested it in the lock. Therefore the real key must have been replaced before they arrived.

"Only the Sergeant had a chance to do that. I had stayed in the room myself, till I left to meet Hazlitt. Nobody could have switched keys while I was watching.

"Next question: How had Hardinge vanished from the corridor? He didn't go through the double doors. He wasn't hiding in the passage. Therefore he must have gone out of the window.

"How could he, without leaving footprints? There was only one answer. He had stood on the box outside.

"That brought me up against another impossibility. The window had been locked... I had examined it myself.

"I reviewed the exact circumstances, and saw how Peter could have—must have—fooled me.

"It all fitted in. Once I was sure of the two men's guilt, every mystery was explained."

Lawrence rubbed his cheek. "There was another point. Put yourself in the Sergeant's place."

Steve looked surprised.

Lawrence went on:

"I set you to guard Roger Querrin. You're waiting in the gardens. You hear a scream, then three shots. The man in your charge is in danger. Quick, now!

What do you do?"

"I run forward to the windows, to see what's—."

Castle's voice died slowly. His mouth stayed open. Lawrence said with satisfaction:

"Exactly. You're there to save Roger from harm, not to preserve evidence...."

"Naturally, Hardinge wouldn't step on to the flower beds. He didn't want to spoil the illusion. But no innocent person would have had the superhuman control—or the callousness—to ignore an obvious cry for help.

"Only a guilty man could have any reason to stay where he was."

Castle mused: "The curtains were drawn, and he could see nothing. Or he might have been afraid—."

He stopped. "No, those objections are too flimsy. You're right, Algy. Any man's immediate reaction would have been to run forward."

Lawrence inclined his head. "I had just about reached this point in my reflections when I was faced with the news of Turner's death. Frankly, I was stymied.

"It seemed only reasonable to assume that Hardinge had killed him. Yet my own evidence proved it impossible.

"I span round in circles. And then I saw the truth.

"Between the hours of four and six there were only four men in the station: myself, Hardinge, Craig and Turner.

"We had accounted for the movements of three.

*"We knew nothing of the fourth."*

Castle smacked his knee, suddenly.

"Burn it! Old Simon himself—."

"Right. I knew he'd been in his cell at a quarter past four. I had also found him there at six o'clock. He had been a prisoner, so we automatically assumed he had stayed where he was. Yet who had locked him in? Sergeant Hardinge...."

Lawrence closed his eyes.

"The Sergeant told us he found Turner in his cell at seven minutes to six. There was nothing to prove it."

Castle muttered something.

Algy went on:

"Since two vital pieces of Hardinge's evidence were not confirmed, it was possible to suppose that old Simon had walked out of his cell.

"Now, the door from the passage opens into the Charge Room. Turner's only opportunity to slip through it was during the brief period when I stood on the porch outside the station."

The Chief Inspector groaned. "You don't have to go on. Obviously, old Simon hid himself in the Sergeant's living quarters."

Lawrence said:

"Let's go back to the beginning.

"Turner believed Roger died because he meddled with the supernatural. He didn't realize Hardinge was a murderer. He thought the Sergeant guilty only of neglecting his duty.

"So when he found himself under arrest, he told Hardinge he needed help. He threatened he'd tell the Inspector how the Sergeant had left his post—."

Castle interrupted. "Turner didn't see Hardinge go into the room, surely?"

"No. But he knew nobody was guarding the french windows at midnight. When he saw the Sergeant hurrying back a little while later, he probably assumed that he'd wandered off carelessly."

Lawrence cleared his throat. "Turner knew he'd almost certainly be convicted of assault, even if he persuaded Hardinge to drop one of the charges. So he decided to escape.

"He demanded the Sergeant's help. Hardinge pretended to agree.

"He said: Look here. I don't want my superiors to know I neglected my duty. But I shall get into worse trouble if it's known I let you escape. You'll have to protect me.

"So he told the prisoner his plan. Turner swallowed the bait.

"Hardinge 'phoned me, coolly suggesting I provide Peter with an alibi."

The Inspector balled his fist. He growled angrily.

Lawrence said:

"Querrin had to be protected. He was the Sergeant's meal ticket. And I don't imagine he knew then what new danger was threatening.

"I went down to the station. I talked to old Simon.

"Hardinge had warned him to be careful. Even so, he had to cue him twice during the interview.

"We left the old man in his cell. Hardinge pretended to lock the door, but did nothing more than rattle the key in the lock.

"We went back to the Charge Room. As soon as we left the corridor, Turner slipped out of his cell and waited behind the door, listening to our talk.

"As soon as he heard us go out on the porch—Hardinge was speaking rather loudly, as a signal—he hurried through the Charge Room and hid himself in the Sergeant's quarters.

"Then Hardinge 'remembered' my gun, and led me back into the station."

"Wait a minute." Castle was scowling horribly. "Suppose you'd made no move to leave?"

"Then the Sergeant would have taken me into his rooms while Turner slipped out from the corridor and hid himself behind the communicating door. Then the Sergeant would have accompanied me back to the Charge Room, talking still—to divert my attention—and while our backs were turned, old Simon would have slid round the open door into Hardinge's living quarters."

Castle thought for a moment, then nodded. "A dangerous plan. But it might have worked."

"Hardinge wasn't afraid of a calculated risk. And he coached his victim well."

Steve asked:

"How did he fool old Simon?"

"I imagine he told him something like this. Turner was to stay hidden in his rooms till after dark. Then the Sergeant would divert the constable's attention while old Simon slipped out of the station. Thus the prisoner would appear to have escaped while Shaw was on duty, absolving Hardinge from blame."

Castle nodded. "The old man, I'm told, was rather stupid. It wouldn't be hard to fool him with a plausible story."

"Uh huh. Hardinge filled out the yarn with circumstantial detail. Turner suspected nothing.

"He hid himself in the Sergeant's bedroom. Russell Craig arrived unexpectedly. Hardinge, a born opportunist, suggested making tea.

"He put a kettle on the stove. He also stepped into the bedroom and stunned Turner with his truncheon."

Lawrence interrupted himself. "Don't let me mislead you. The Sergeant did nothing he hadn't already planned. But Craig's presence was a help. It strengthened his alibi, and distracted my attention.

"Leaving old Simon stretched out on the floor, Hardinge came back to the Charge Room. When he left again a few minutes later, he went back to the bedroom, crouched over Turner, and choked him."

There was a tiny silence.

Lawrence mused:

"He'd already prepared some tea in a thermos flask. He poured it into three cups, washed the flask quickly, poured away the boiling water from the kettle, then rejoined Craig and me."

Algy grinned. "Uncle Russ was propounding his theories, and gave Hardinge a momentary scare. He thought we'd guessed the truth. Even then, he didn't lose his head. When, like a sap, I sympathized, he didn't lose the chance. His 'unhappy position' was to be his eventual excuse for resigning from the police force."

Castle growled again.

Lawrence continued:

"At a quarter to six, he got rid of me. As soon as I left, he carried the old man's body back to the cell. He turned to the door and wiped over the lock and handle quickly, to remove Turner's fingerprints."

"What about the scratches inside the lock?"

"I imagine he'd made those previously—and not necessarily with a picklock. An old piece of wire could have made those marks."

Castle frowned. "Why did he bother with the fake at all?"

"Because he was in charge of the keys. He preferred us to think the door was forced... He didn't want to puzzle us with a second sealed room. He didn't even want to confront us with another impossible crime. He simply wanted to provide himself with an alibi."

Lawrence shrugged. "He 'explained' the murder later. That was a mistake, since he had already told us he had found the cell door open. But he hadn't foreseen Shaw's evidence, and anyway—"

"He wanted to confuse you," supplied the Chief Inspector. "So he spun you his yarn about hands at the window. He didn't care whether you accepted the theory or not."

Lawrence nodded. "The point's not important... As things worked out, the killing was proved 'impossible'. But since Hazlitt was convinced of Hardinge's innocence, the Sergeant didn't mind much."

Algy sighed. "There's not a great deal more. Hardinge arranged old Simon's body in much the same position in which it had been lying on the bedroom floor. He didn't want his evidence contradicted by the condition we call 'post mortem lividity'."

The young man finished quickly:

"The stage was set. He straightened up with shaking hands—by this time the strain was telling—and rushed after me into the street.

"Since his alibi depended on the time of Turner's death, he wanted the old man's body examined immediately."

Lawrence gestured. "You know the rest."

Castle blew out his cheeks.

He commented inadequately:

"A complicated affair."

"Not really." Lawrence thumbed the angle of his jaw. "Hardinge had an eye for detail. For example, when he returned the key to Roger's chain, he remembered to press Querrin's fingers over the surface."

"Don't tell me how clever he was, burn it!" The Chief Inspector was irascible. "Tell me how you trapped him."

Lawrence looked unhappy.

He said, slowly:

"Unlike most hunters, I have no taste for the kill. In most cases, I tell you my theories, and leave the police to prove them."

His face set grimly.

"I'm not proud of myself. But this time, I was angry." He shaded his eyes.

"Two men had died. I should have saved them. Perhaps—." He laughed dryly. "Perhaps my pride was hurt. And it's so easy to confuse revenge with justice. For the first time, I wanted the killers to die."

Castle said sharply:

"You did no more than your duty." Lawrence lifted one shoulder.

He said abruptly:

"I took Russell Craig into my confidence. He agreed to help."

There was much that was left unsaid. Uncle Russ, dragged from his bed in the early hours of the morning, had been hard to convince.

Yet Craig soon realized he owed the conspirators a grudge. They had robbed him of a comfortable home, since he had hoped to stay with his niece when she married.

Besides, the old rogue was pleased at the thought of appearing as chief witness in a sensational murder trial. There were, he reflected, commercial possibilities in the situation....

Lawrence preferred not to analyse Craig's motives.

He went on:

"I talked to Colonel Johnson. I needed his co-operation. And, anyway, I wanted to save his face. Hardinge was a member of the County Police. It was only right that they should take the credit for his capture."

"Then I interviewed the Sergeant himself and told him to stay by the telephone.

"I went back to Querrin House. Uncle Russ was waiting. We went up to my room to talk over the final arrangements.

"Craig had already warned Audrey to keep out of the way. Peter, luckily for us, was also in his room.

"Craig 'phoned Hardinge—using my name—and asked him to come out to the house. He met him on the drive, and took him into the room where Roger died.

"I'd been watching from my window. I staged a little comedy for Querrin's benefit."

Lawrence smiled ruefully. "I coaxed open the wound on my forehead, then smeared some more blood over my temple from a cut finger."

Castle interjected: "You also smeared the ferrule of Craig's stick."

"Yes. When I saw Uncle Russ take charge of Sergeant Hardinge, I attracted Peter's attention by crashing backwards over a chair." He winced. "I was too damned enthusiastic... Oh, well.

"I told Querrin that Craig had killed his brother."

Seeing the question in the Chief Inspector's eye, the young man explained:

"My whole object was to confuse Peter and make him lose his head. He was the weaker partner. I thought he'd crack more readily.

"I gave him no time to think. He didn't realize my talk of wills and motives was absolute nonsense." Algy laughed, shortly. "He nearly called my bluff.

"I said that Craig could only have known the fire in the grate had been reduced to embers"—he drew breath—"by being in the room himself.

"That was silly. As Peter nearly admitted, he had told Craig that himself, while waiting to be interviewed by the police. Fortunately for me, Querrin thought he might as well leave me labouring under a delusion."

"Half a mo'," growled Castle. "Why did Peter go out of his way to tell Craig a minor point like that?"

"He didn't." Lawrence was patient. "But Hazlitt herded all his suspects together in the drawing-room. Naturally, they talked. Peter, besides myself, was the only eye-witness. I daresay Uncle Russ indulged in his incorrigible curiosity, and questioned Querrin thoroughly. That's how he found out about the fire."

"Skip it," Castle yawned. "It's a trivial matter."

"Uh huh. I showed Peter the drawer—which I'd forced myself—and told him my gun was missing. Then I rushed him down the stairs.

"Meanwhile, Craig was playing the part of a blackmailer with gusto."

"Was there any truth in the story he told Hardinge?"

"Not a scrap. I primed him with every detail. . . . The shots I fired might very well have roused Craig in time to catch sight of the Sergeant running out from the passage. Actually," Algy grinned, "Uncle Russ remained wrapped in his drunken slumbers."

He rubbed his cheek. "The story seemed convincing. Hardinge believed it. He signed the confession I'd typed myself."

Algy's voice died.

Castle was gentle. "Well?"

Lawrence sighed. "By this time, Peter was nearly off his head. I planned to confront him with his accomplice. Before I could move, Hardinge made a desperate attack on Uncle Russ. Craig was taken off guard. The pistol I'd given him was no protection.

"You know the rest. I defeated the Sergeant, but lost the gun to Querrin.

"Fortunately, Hazlitt and his men were waiting in the grounds. As I'd arranged with the Chief Constable: as soon as I went into the room with Peter, the police moved up to the windows.

"They heard Querrin's confession. And the Inspector saved my life."

He finished dully:

"He didn't save Peter's."

Castle grunted.

Lawrence stood up. He said, more cheerfully:

"That's all, Steve. You can send your man to trial. But," he warned, "Hardinge is tough. He'll fight you, Steve. He'll fight you like the devil."

The Chief Inspector scowled. "He's finished."

"No. He'll put all the blame on Querrin. He'll claim his own confession invalid, since he signed it at gunpoint."

Lawrence repeated:

"He'll fight you like the devil."

Castle's face was stern.

He said, grimly:

"He'll hang."

"Lawrence, my boy!"

Russell Craig hailed the young man as Algy strolled out of the library. Lawrence looked about him and saw the old rogue standing in the passage with one hand clasped round his niece's slim waist.

Lawrence smiled at them both.

"Hallo, Audrey. Hallo, sir. You're none the worse for your experiences this morning, I hope?"

"Indeed, no. I enjoyed them all," lied the old rascal unblushingly. "Though I confess I was relieved to see the Inspector's timely arrival with a revolver."

"You'd never believe," grinned Algy, "the trouble I had persuading the Chief Constable to arm his police."

The girl moved suddenly. She brushed aside their talk impatiently, and said with soft appeal:

"Algy. I'd like to talk to you."

"Of course." He took her arm, and they walked into the drawing-room. She sat down.

Lawrence straddled a chair and gazed at her with polite inquiry.

She said painfully:

"I suppose—I should thank you—for trapping the men who killed my—."

Lawrence shook his head. He said gently:

"No, Audrey. You can't thank me for sending two men to their deaths. We're not made that way, you and I."

He paused. "The man you loved was murdered. But you must think of the future. You can't let your life be corroded with bitterness and hate."

The girl's lips trembled. Then she hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

Lawrence watched her with distress in his lazy blue eyes.

Then he stood up, and gazed down at her shaking shoulders.

He dropped a hand on her sleek red-brown hair and stroked it gently. She looked up with tears streaking her cheeks.

She said:

"Roger died because I loved him."

She cut short his protest with bitter self-reproach.

"No, no. Don't lie to me. You warned me it might be better to continue believing my fiancé died because he challenged the powers of another world. I didn't know what you meant then. But I know now.

"Roger was killed because he wanted to marry me. It's as simple as that. I loved him. And I sent him to his death."

Lawrence replied quietly:

"You're wrong to blame yourself. Roger wouldn't wish it."

He hesitated.

He said, with sudden decision:

"I told you the truth might hurt you. It might also console you."

There was a question in her lovely grey-green eyes.

Algy went on quietly:

"I have something to tell you. It won't help you now, because the pain's too strong. But listen to me. Listen carefully.

"Hasn't it occurred to you, Audrey, that it's a queer brand of evil"—he paused uncertainly—"which makes a man so twisted he plots his brother's death?"

The girl's lips parted.

Lawrence said dully:

"Perhaps that was the curse of the Querrins. Perhaps that was why young Martin turned on old Tom with fury, all those years ago.

"Perhaps the old man told his son that their blood was tainted with madness. Perhaps that was the secret. A scarlet thread of insanity in the weave of a Querrin's soul.

"So one Querrin stabs his son, and another kills his brother.

"But remember. Killers or victims—the taint was in them all."

There was a long silence.

Then the girl said queerly:

"You're right. What you have told me—it doesn't help me now."

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"But I think—one day—it might help me, very much...."

Lawrence left her.

Craig was waiting outside. He caught the young man's arm, and asked eagerly: "Is she all right?"

Lawrence responded mildly:

"I think so."

Uncle Russ attempted to pass him. Algy laid a warning hand on the old rogue's sleeve.

He murmured:

"Don't speak to her now. She would rather be alone."

"Very well, my boy."

The two men walked away together.

Craig said suddenly:

"Audrey is very precious to me."

He spoke sincerely, then his instinct for self-dramatization came to the fore again. He said tragically:

"I'm an old man. There is no one else—to care for me. "

Lawrence laughed out loud.

He said rudely:

"Don't you believe it."

"Hey?" The old rogue was thrown off balance.

Algy pursued:

"You're a marked man, Uncle Russ. You may as well give up."

"My boy. I don't follow—"

Lawrence said, with amusement:

"Girls are often attracted to—older men. And one young lady has already demonstrated her affection for you."

Craig looked nonplussed.

"You don't mean—."

"Uhhuh. Susan York." Algy chuckled. "She tried to vamp me last night. And why? Because she wanted me to keep you out of trouble with the police."

He clapped a hand on the old rogue's shoulder.

Uncle Russ turned pink.

Lawrence grinned.

"Too bad," he sympathized. "It seems you're caught at last."

Craig squared his shoulders.

"My boy," he returned expansively, "I am a gentleman. I shall accept my destiny." And he strolled off, jauntily.

The blond-haired young man gazed out the window of his bedroom and let his thoughts wander idly. Then he sighed, and returned to his packing. He thought:

It's less than three days since the Querrins came into my life. And now they're both dead.

He tugged on the zipper viciously.

His mouth was dry with defeat. Hazlitt had told him that the police had discovered traces of Simon Turner's fingerprints in Hardinge's bedroom. Another nail in the Sergeant's coffin....

Lawrence shrugged into his raincoat, then jammed on his hat.

He didn't feel proud. He had brought a murderer to justice, yet blamed himself for failing to prevent his crimes.

He laughed wryly. He thought:

Audrey and I. We're a pair. Is it some sort of conceit which makes our consciences so tender?

He went on thinking about the girl.

Somewhere below him, a horn blasted shrilly. Lawrence picked up his bag and hurried out.

... He stood for a moment on the steps, looking down at the car parked in the drive.

Castle cranked down the window and stared out.

He called:

"Come on, Algy. I want to get back to London before nightfall. Burn it, I only hired this car for a day."

Lawrence nodded. He pulled open the rear door and pitched his bag on the seat.

He gazed back at Querrin House. The figure of a girl appeared at the open door.

The young man's jaw tightened. A thin flush crept up behind his cheeks.

It was as if he had seen her for the first time. He breathed:

"Audrey...."

Then he slammed the car door shut and ran towards her, up the steps. He seized her gently by the elbows.

He was very conscious of her loveliness.

"Audrey, my dear. I can't leave you like this. You're alone—and I'm lonely too."

He was clumsy and gauche, but he didn't care. He stumbled on: incoherent, but painfully sincere.

The girl said nothing in return, but emotion welled up round the grief in her grey-green eyes. She drew a deep breath; and there was exquisite beauty in the moulding of her firm young breasts.

"Algy—I—"

He pressed his mouth to hers.

Their heartbeats met and mingled. Lawrence's hands slid over the graceful contours of her hips. The warmth of their bodies was the languor and the sweetness of an innocent intimacy.

He felt her lips open under his. Their tongues met in a long French kiss. Then she pushed him away and cried out desperately:

"It's no use, Algy. It's no use!" She blinked back the tears.

She said, gently:

"Let's not be foolish. You don't love me, and I don't love you."

"Audrey—."

"No, my dear. I belong to Roger still, and you—." She hesitated. "You belong to the lady you've been seeking."

Algy smiled at her tenderly.

He put up his hand and smoothed back a soft tendril of hair which had wisped over her ear. Then he kissed her again, without passion.

He said, softly:

"Good-bye."

She watched him go.

Then, as she had done before, she whispered quickly:

"I hope you find her soon...."

The words were a sad farewell.

THE END

## **APPENDIX**

Letter from Derek Smith to Doug Greene  
Letter from Derek Smith to Tony Medawar (extract)

## Letter from Derek Smith to Doug Greene

In 1980, Douglas Greene wrote to Derek Smith, whom he had known for some years, regarding what he considered to be a weakness in the story

The author's entire reply is reproduced below, minus a list of British Carr books he had found for Doug (page numbers refer to the Thriller Book Club edition):

"14 Crescent Lane  
Clapham Park  
London SW49PU

1st. June 1980

Dear Doug,

Thanks for your letter, which came as a welcome distraction at a very worrying time. I'm glad you enjoyed WHISTLE UP THE DEVIL, which was intended as a light-hearted "homage" to both John Dickson Carr and Clayton Rawson, though in the event I was too diffident to send it to either of them.

You have put your finger on the one big mistake in the novel, which has given me inward qualms since I first saw the book in proof—and you are, incidentally, the first person to point it out! I am not quite so bad as Raymond Chandler who, when asked who killed the chauffeur in THE BIG SLEEP, is reputed to have replied, "Damned if I know!"

I have an explanation for the point about the unmarked ground and the rain, which is implied in chapter 10, quote one: "Previously he had intended his alibi to depend solely upon the windows which Roger had re-locked from the inside. Now he had the unmarked snow of the flower beds to back up his story." (Page 202)\*. Quote two: "But no innocent person would have had the superhuman control—or the callousness—to ignore an obvious cry

for help... Any man's immediate reaction would have been to run forward." (Page 209)\*.

Since I foolishly neglected to spell the explanation out, I'm glad of the opportunity to write it down now -- I think I'll pop a copy of this letter into my file copy for future reference. Here goes:

The rain provided an unplanned chance to pile on an extra impossibility.

Had the weather been dry, Hardinge would have (literally) covered his tracks in this fashion: He would have made his way across the unplanted flowerbeds as described on page 65\*, leaving a single line of footprints. When Lawrence had left the haunted room, leaving Roger Querrin alone, Harding would have crossed and re-crossed the flowerbeds a few times in the same line, messing up his own footprints—his excuse being that he was periodically getting to close quarters, watching and listening outside the French windows and making sure that Roger had come to no harm. Then he would have persuaded his victim to let him into the room, as described on page 201\*, and proceeded to kill as planned. After the crime (midnight) he would have made his way back to his official position under the trees and waited for Lawrence to break into the room. When he heard the noise of this happening, he would once again have crossed the flowerbeds and would have been waiting immediately outside the french windows for Lawrence to look. He would of course have claimed to have heard the scream, to say nothing of the noise of Lawrence's forced entry, and so he had naturally come up to the windows again to find out what was happening. There would be one less line of footprints than there would have been, but since he had effectively trampled the soil going backwards and forwards a few times, it's very unlikely that would be noticed. The locked french windows would have seemed to prove his story and his alibi.

Like the Sergeant, I was a bit too tricky here for my own good. Were I plotting the novel now, I would cut most of the "footprints in the flowerbed" stuff out and have a flagged pathway outside the french windows, which would be much more natural anyway, leading over to the trees.

I think that clears it up. I don't mind leaving psychological loose ends, but

hate matters of fact to go unexplained.

About Algy Lawrence himself you are, also, absolutely correct. He is a somewhat shadowy and unconvincing figure, I was in danger of ending up with exactly the sort of detective I don't like—what Nicholas Blake defined as: "as undistinguished as a piece of blotting-paper, absorbing the reaction of his subjects; a shallow mirror... a pure camera-eye." What I had intended was a developing portrait of a young idealist, highly intelligent, yet rather naive and slightly sentimental—a romantic who would eventually be caught in the trap of his own sensibilities.

Somewhere in my papers is a terrible handwritten piece of juvenilia (I was about seventeen at the time) which covers the end of what I had hoped would be a mini-series of three or four books (only the second got written). Since my own taste in detectives is much the same as Uncle Russ's—wayward, arrogant, eccentric and infallible—to which I would add "slightly comic," I think now my work would have been more of a commercial proposition if I'd abandoned my original intention and made Uncle Russ himself the detective in subsequent tales... though the line between blundering and genuine detection is very difficult to tread. Something between Darlington's Mr. Cronk and Webb's Mr. Pendlebury would be best I suppose.

I'm quite a fan of Judge Dee, so I'd certainly be interested in your van Gulik material. Back in the early days of ITV there was a dramatisation of the "murderess who died and believes herself in hell" episode from DEE GOON AN (with Donald Wolfitt as the Judge) but a later series with another actor was not nearly so successful.

I'm keeping my fingers crossed about your John Dickson Carr volume [The Door to Doom] to say nothing of the projected radio play collection [The Dead Sleep Lightly]. I'd like to comment at length, but am afraid I'll have to leave that for a later letter.

To get back to my personal affairs, I'm having a bad time at the moment as my poor old mother is ill in hospital and I'm spending most of my free time at her bedside to encourage her. So I haven't been able to make my usual

pilgrimages through the London bookshops.

Meanwhile, cheerio and very best wishes, Derek”

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## **Letter from Derek Smith to Tony Medawar (extract)**

Another friend of Derek's, Tony Medawar, was asked to make changes to his copy as follows, both to page 209\*.

Replace the following text :

Castle mused: "The curtains were drawn and he could see nothing. Or he might have been afraid—." He stopped. "No, those explanations are too flimsy. You're right, Algy. Any man's immediate reaction would have been to run forward." Lawrence inclined his head.

by

Castle asked: "What would he have done if there had been no rain to wash out his footprints?"

Lawrence shrugged. "My guess is this: Hardinge would have walked to and from the french windows three or four times, ostensibly to peer in through a crack in the curtains to check on Roger's safety, but really to churn up the ground in one straight line, preparing for his final dash across when the alarm was given. Of course, there would have been one less line of footprints returning than there should have been, but it's unlikely that would be noticed."

These changes have not been included in this current edition.

*\*Editor's note:* Pages 65, 201, 202 and 209 in the Thriller Book Club edition correspond to pp 63, 174, 175 and 180 respectively in the LRI edition.