

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

(1876-1958)

Mary Roberts Rinehart's early life, though painful, could hardly have been better devised to produce the sort of writer she turned out to be. When she was nine, her father killed himself after failing as a salesman. Her mother took boarders into their Pittsburgh home to make ends meet.

Young Rinehart began writing for her school paper and entering stories in *Pittsburgh Press* contests. She earned a nursing degree, worked on the hospital wards that dealt with the blue-collar and bar-fight traffic, married a doctor, bore three sons, and did not return to writing until she was thirty. Within three years, her second book, *The Man in Lower Ten*, became the first detective novel to become a national best-seller in the United States. In the wake of this phenomenal success, she accompanied her husband to Europe, where he studied his specialty. She applied her writing skills to articles about politics and medicine, became a war correspondent for the *Saturday Evening Post*, used her nursing credentials to avoid the military ban on reporters at the front, and won herself a second national reputation.

Home again after the war, she wrote ten more best-sellers, numerous other books, articles and short stories for the big-circulation "slicks," and two smash-hit plays. In addition, she found time to take part in the woman-suffrage movement and to spread public awareness of breast cancer.

Rinehart changed the course of American detective fiction by infusing into the puzzle the personal details that produce in readers a strong identification with the heroine, thereby causing them to share her fear, bafflement, and final triumph.

Despite its brevity, "The Lipstick" provides a look at the usual characteristics of Rinehart's stories. The narrator is a self-reliant young woman whose eye for domestic detail (the lipstick) leads to the solution of the crime. Rinehart uses a bit of romance, a touch of humor, about as much development of minor characters as was typical of the genre in her day, and an adversarial relationship between the heroine and the police. This short form doesn't sustain a device that Rinehart popularized in her novels—maintaining suspense by keeping the plucky heroine in constant jeopardy. Critics called this the "Had I But Known" tactic, and scoffed at it. But it worked.

1942

The Lipstick

I walked home after the coroner's inquest. Mother had gone on in the car, looking rather sick, as she had ever since Elinor's death. Not that she had particularly cared for Elinor. She has a pattern of life which divides people into conformers and nonconformers. The conformers pay their bills the first of the month, go to church, never by any chance get into anything but the society columns of the newspapers, and regard marriage as the *sine qua non* of every female over twenty.

My cousin Elinor Hammond had flouted all this. She had gone gaily through life, as if she wakened each morning wondering what would be the most fun that day; stretching her long lovely body between her silk sheets—how Mother resented those sheets—and calling to poor tired old Fred in his dressing room.

"Let's have some people in for cocktails, Fred."

"Anything you say, darling."

It was always like that. Anything Elinor said was all right with Fred. He worshiped her. As I walked home that day I was remembering his face at the inquest. He had looked dazed.

"You know of no reason why your—why Mrs. Hammond should take her own life?"

"None whatever."

"There was nothing in her state of health to cause her anxiety?"

"Nothing. She had always seemed to be in perfect health."

"She was consulting Dr. Barclay."

"She was tired. She was doing too much," he said unhappily.

Yet there it was. Elinor had either fallen or jumped from that tenth-floor window of Dr. Barclay's waiting room, and the coroner plainly believed she had jumped. The doctor had not seen her at all that day. Only the nurse.

"There was no one else in the reception room," she testified. "The doctor was busy with a patient. Mrs. Hammond sat down and took off her hat. Then she picked up a magazine. I went back to my office to copy some records. I didn't see her again until . . ."

The nurse was a pretty little thing. She looked pale.

"Tell us what happened next," said the coroner gently.

"I heard the other patient leave about five minutes later. She went out from the consulting room. There's a door there into the hall. When the doctor buzzed for the next case I went in to get Mrs. Hammond.

She wasn't there. I saw her hat, but her bag was gone. Then—then I heard people shouting in the street, and I looked out the window."

"What would you say was her mental condition that morning, Miss Comings?" the coroner asked. "Was she depressed?"

"I thought she seemed very cheerful," the nurse said.

"The window was open beside her?"

"Yes. I couldn't believe it until I . . ."

The coroner excused her then. It was clear that she had told all she knew.

When Dr. Barclay was called, I was surprised. I had expected an elderly man, but he was only in the late thirties and good-looking. Knowing Elinor, I wondered. Except for Fred, who had no looks whatever, she had had a passion for handsome men.

Beside me, I heard Mother give a ladylike snort. "So that's it!" she said. "She had as much need for a psychiatrist as I have for a third leg."

But the doctor added little to what we already knew. He had not seen Elinor at all that morning. When he rang the buzzer and nobody came, he had gone into the reception room. Miss Comings was leaning out the window. All at once she began to scream. Fortunately, a Mrs. Thompson arrived at that time and took charge of her. The doctor had gone down to the street, but the ambulance had already arrived.

He was frank enough up to that time. Queried about the reason for Elinor's consulting him, he lightened. "I have many patients like Mrs. Hammond," he said. "Women who live on their nerves. Mrs. Hammond had been doing that for years."

"That is all? She mentioned no particular trouble?"

He smiled faintly. "We all have troubles," he said. "Some we imagine; some we magnify; some are real. But I would say that Mrs. Hammond was an unusually normal person. I had recommended that she go away for a rest. I believe she meant to do so."

His voice was clipped and professional. If Elinor had been attracted to him, it had been apparently a one-sided affair.

"You did not gather that she contemplated suicide?"

"No. Not at any time."

That is all they got out of him. He evaded them on anything Elinor had imagined or magnified. His relations with his patients, he said, were confidential. If he knew anything of value he would tell it, but he did not.

Mother nudged me as he finished. "Probably in love with her. He's had a shock. That's certain."

He sat down near us, and I watched him. I saw him come to attention when the next witness was called. It was the Mrs. Thompson who had looked after the nurse, a large motherly-looking woman.

She stated at once that she was not a patient. "I clean the doctor's apartment once a week," she said. "That day I needed a little money in advance, so I went to see him."

She had not entered the office at once. She had looked in and seen Elinor, so she had waited in the hall. She had seen the last patient, a woman, leave by the consulting-room door and go down in the elevator. A minute or so later she heard the nurse scream.

"She was leaning out the window yelling her head off. Then the doctor ran in and I got her on a couch. She said somebody had fallen out, but she didn't say who it was."

Asked how long she had been in the hall, she thought about a quarter of an hour. She was certain no other patients had entered during that time. She would have seen them if they had.

"You found something belonging to Mrs. Hammond in the office, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir. I found her bag."

The bag, it seemed, had been behind the radiator in front of the window.

So that was that. Elinor, having put her hat on the table, had dropped her bag behind the radiator before she jumped. Somehow, it didn't make sense to me.

The verdict was suicide while of unsound mind. The window had been examined, but there was the radiator in front of it, and the general opinion seemed to be that a fall would have to be ruled out. Nobody mentioned murder. In the face of Mrs. Thompson's testimony, it looked impossible.

Fred listened to the verdict with blank eyes. His sister Margaret, sitting beside him dressed in mourning, rose. And Dr. Barclay stared straight ahead of him as though he did not hear it. Then he got up and went out, and while I put Mother in the car I saw him driving away, still with that queer fixed look on his face.

I was in a fine state of fury as I walked home. I had always liked Elinor, even when she had snatched Fred from under my nose, as Mother rather inelegantly said. As a matter of cold fact, Fred Hammond never saw me after he met her. He had worshiped her from the start, and his white stunned face at the inquest only added to the mystery.

The fools! I thought. As though Elinor would ever have jumped out of that window, even if she had been in trouble. She had never cared

what people thought. I remembered almost the last time I had seen her. Somebody had given a suppressed-desire party, and Elinor had gone with a huge red A on the front of her white-satin dress.

Mother nearly had a fit when she saw it. "I trust, Elinor," she said, "that your scarlet letter does not mean what it appears to mean."

Elinor had laughed "What do you think, Aunt Emma? Would you swear that never in your life—"

"That will do, Elinor," Mother said.

Elinor had been very gay that night, and she had enjoyed the little run-in with Mother. Perhaps that was one of the reasons I had liked her. She could cope with Mother. She wasn't an only daughter, living at home on an allowance which was threatened every now and then. And she had brought laughter and gaiety into my small world.

Mother was having tea when I got home. She sat stiffly behind the tea tray and inspected me. "I can't see why you worry about this, Louise. What's done is done. After all, she led Fred a miserable life."

"She made him happy, and now she's dead," I said. "Also, I don't believe she threw herself out that window."

"Then she fell."

"I don't believe that, either."

"Nonsense! What do you believe?"

But I had had enough. I went upstairs to my room. My mind was running in circles. Somebody had killed Elinor and had got away with it. Yet who could have hated her enough for that? A jealous wife? That was possible.

I could see the Hammond place from my window, and the thought of Fred sitting there alone was more than I could bear. Not that I had ever been in love with him, in spite of Mother's hopes. I dressed and went down to dinner, but I couldn't eat. Luckily it was Mother's bridge night, and after she and her three cronies were settled at the table I slipped out through the kitchen.

Annie, the cook, was making sandwiches and cutting cake. I told her to say I had gone to bed if I was asked for, and went out.

Fred's house was only two blocks away, set in its own grounds like ours, and as I entered the driveway I saw a man standing there looking at the place. I must have surprised him, for he turned around and looked at me. It was Dr. Barclay.

He didn't recognize me. He touched his hat and went out to the street, and a moment later I heard his car start. But if he had been in the house Fred did not mention it. I rang, and he opened the door. He seemed relieved when he saw me. "Thought you were the damned police again," he said. "Come in. I've sent the servants to bed."

We went into the library. It looked as if it hadn't been dusted for a month. Elinor's house had always looked that way: full of people and cigarette smoke and used highball glasses. But at least it had looked alive. Now—well, now it didn't. So it was a surprise to see her bag lying on the table. Fred saw me looking at it. "Police returned it today," he said.

"May I look inside it, Fred?"

"Go to it," he said dully. "There's no note there, if that's what you're thinking."

I opened the bag. It was crammed as usual: compact, rouge, coin purse, a zipper compartment with some bills in it, a memorandum book, a handkerchief smeared with lipstick, a tiny perfume vial, and some samples of dress material with a card pinned to them: *Match slips to these.*

Fred was watching me, his eyes red and sunken. "I told you. Nothing."

I searched the bag again, but I could not find the one thing which should have been there. I closed the bag and put it back on the table.

Fred was staring at a photograph of Elinor in a silver frame. "All this police stuff," he said. "Why can't they just let her rest? She was beautiful, wasn't she, Lou?"

"She was indeed," I said.

"People said things. Margaret thought she was foolish and extravagant." He glanced at the desk, piled high with what looked like unopened bills. "Maybe she was, but what the hell did I care?"

He seemed to expect some comment, so I said, "You didn't have to buy her, Fred. You had her. She was devoted to you."

He gave me a faint smile, like a frightened small boy who has been reassured. "She was, Lou," he said. "I wasn't only her husband. I was her father too. She told me everything. Why she had to go to that damned doctor—"

"Didn't you know she was going, Fred?"

"Not until I found a bill from him," he said grimly. "I told her I could prescribe a rest for her, instead of her sitting for hours with that young puppy. But she only laughed."

He talked on, as if he were glad of an audience. He had made her happy. She went her own way sometimes, but she always came back to him. He considered the coroner's verdict an outrage. "She fell. She was always reckless about heights." And he had made no plans, except that Margaret was coming to stay until he closed the place. And as if the mere mention of her had summoned her, at that minute Margaret walked in.

I had never liked Margaret Hammond. She was a tall angular woman, older than Fred, and she merely nodded to me.

"I decided to come tonight," she said. "I don't like your being alone. And tomorrow I want to inventory the house. I'd like to have Father's portrait, Fred."

He winced at that. There had been a long quarrel about old Joe Hammond's portrait ever since Fred's marriage. Not that Elinor had cared about it, but because Margaret had wanted it she had held on to it. I looked at Margaret. Perhaps she was the nearest to a real enemy Elinor had ever had. She had hated the marriage; had resented Elinor's easy-going extravagant life. Even now, she could not help looking at the desk, piled with bills.

"I'd better straighten that for you, Fred," she said. "We'll have to find out how you stand."

"I know how I stand." He got up and they confronted each other, Fred with his back to the desk, as if even then he were trying to protect Elinor from Margaret's prying eyes.

Fred's sister shrugged and let it go.

It was warm that night. I walked slowly home. I had gone nearly half the way when I realized I was being followed. I stopped and turned. But it was only a girl. She spoke my name. "You're Miss Baring, aren't you?"

"Yes. You scared me half to death."

"I'm sorry. I saw you at the inquest today, and a reporter told me your name. Were you a friend of Mrs. Hammond's?"

"She was my cousin. Why?"

The girl seemed to make a decision. "Because I think she was pushed out that window," she said. "I'm in an office across the street, and I was looking out. I didn't know who she was, of course."

"Do you mean you saw it happen?"

"No. But I saw her at the window hardly a minute before it happened, and she was using a lipstick. When I looked out again she was—she was on the pavement." The girl shivered. "I don't think a woman would use a lipstick just before she did a thing like that, do you?"

"No," I said. "You're sure it was Mrs. Hammond you saw?"

"Yes. She had on a green dress, and I had noticed her hair. She didn't have a hat on. I—well, I went back tonight to see if the lipstick was on the pavement. I couldn't find it. But I'm pretty sure she still had it when she fell."

That was what I had not told Fred—that Elinor's gold lipstick was missing from her bag. "We might go and look again," I said. "Do you mind?"

The girl didn't mind, but she would not tell me her name. "Just call me Smith," she said.

I never saw her again, and unless she reads this she will probably never know that she took the first step that solved the case. Because we found the lipstick in the gutter. A dozen cars must have run over it. It was crushed flat, but Elinor's monogram was perfectly readable.

Miss Smith saw it and gasped. "So I was right," she said. The next minute she had hailed a bus and got on it.

It was late when I got to Dr. Barclay's office the next morning. The reception room was empty, so I went to the window and looked down. I tried to think that I was going to jump, and whether I would use a lipstick or not if I were.

The nurse came in. I gave her my name, and after a short wait she took me to the consulting room.

The doctor got up when he saw me, and I merely put Elinor's lipstick on the desk in front of him and sat down.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Mrs. Hammond was at the window in your reception room using that lipstick only a minute before she fell."

"I suppose you mean it fell with her."

"I mean that she never killed herself. Do you think a woman would rouge her mouth just before she meant to do—what we're supposed to think she did?"

He smiled wryly. "My dear girl, if you saw as much of human nature as I do, that wouldn't surprise you."

"So Elinor Hammond jumped out your window with a lipstick in her hand, and you watch the Hammond house last night and then make a bolt for it when I appear! If that makes sense—"

That shocked him. He hadn't recognized me before. "So it was you in the driveway. Well, I suppose I'd better tell you and trust you to keep it to yourself. I hadn't liked the way Mr. Hammond looked at the inquest. I was afraid he might—well, put a bullet in his head."

"You couldn't stop it standing in the driveway," I said skeptically.

He laughed at that. Then he sobered. "I see," he said. "Well, Miss Baring, whatever happened to Mrs. Hammond, I assure you I didn't do it. As for being outside the house, I've told you the truth. I was wondering how to get in when you came along. His sister had called me up. She was worried."

"I wouldn't rely on what Margaret Hammond says. She hated Elinor."

I got up and retrieved the lipstick. He got up too and surveyed me unsmilingly.

"You're a very young and attractive woman, Miss Baring. Why not let this drop? After all, you can't bring her back."

"I know she never killed herself," I said stubbornly, and went out.

I was less surprised than I might have been to find Margaret in the reception room when I reached it. She was standing close to the open window from which Elinor had fallen, and for a minute I thought she was going to jump herself.

"Margaret!" I said sharply.

She looked terrified when she saw me. "Oh, it's you, Louise," she said. "You frightened me." She sat down abruptly. "She must have slipped, Lou. It would be easy. Try it yourself."

But I shook my head. I had no intention of leaning out that window, not with Margaret behind me. She said she had come to pay Fred's bill for Elinor, and I let it go at that. Nevertheless, I felt shivery as I went down in the elevator.

I had trouble starting my car, which is how I happened to see her when she came out of the building. She looked over the pavement and in the gutter. So she either knew Elinor's lipstick had fallen with her or she had missed it out of the bag.

She didn't see me. She hailed a taxi and got into it. To this day, I don't know why I followed her.

I did follow her, however. The taxi went on into the residential part of town. On a thinly settled street it stopped and Margaret got out. She did not see me or my car. She was looking at a frame house with a narrow front porch, and as I watched, she went up and rang the bell.

She was inside the house for almost an hour. I began to feel idiotic. There were so many possible reasons for her being there; reasons which had nothing to do with Elinor. But when she finally came out I sat up in amazement.

The woman seeing her off on the porch was the Mrs. Thompson of the inquest.

I stooped to fix my shoe as the taxi passed me, but I don't believe Margaret even saw the car. Nor did Mrs. Thompson. She sat down on the porch and was still there when I went up the steps.

She looked surprised rather than apprehensive. "I hope you're not selling anything," she said, not unpleasantly.

"I'm not selling anything," I said. "May I talk to you?"

"What about?" She was suspicious now.

"It's about a murder," I said. "There's such a thing as being accessory after the fact, and I think you know something you didn't tell at the Hammond inquest."

Her florid color faded. "It wasn't a murder," she said. "The verdict—"

"I know all about that. Nevertheless, I think it was a murder. What was Miss Hammond doing here if it wasn't?"

Mrs. Thompson looked startled, but she recovered quickly. "I never saw her before," she said. "She came to thank me for my testimony, because it showed the poor thing did it herself."

"And to pay you for it, I suppose?"

She flushed angrily. "Nobody paid me anything. And now you'd better go. If you think anybody can bribe me to lie, you're wrong. That's all."

She went in and slammed the door, and I drove back to town, puzzled over the whole business. Was she telling the truth, or had there been something she had not told at the inquest? Certainly I believed that the doctor had known more than he had told.

I was late for lunch that day, and Mother was indignant. "I can't imagine why, with nothing to do, you are always late for meals," she said.

"I've had plenty to do, Mother," I said. "I've been working on Elinor's murder."

She gave a ladylike squeal. "Murder? Who would do such a thing?"

"Well, Margaret for one. She always loathed her."

"Women in Margaret's position in life do not commit crimes," Mother said pontifically. "Really, I don't know what has happened to you, Louise. The idea of suspecting your friends—"

"She's no friend of mine. Elinor was."

"So you'll stir up all sorts of scandal. Murder indeed! I warn you, Louise, if you keep on with this idiotic idea you'll find yourself spread all over the newspapers. And I'll stop your allowance."

With this dire threat she departed, and I spent the afternoon wondering what Dr. Barclay and the Thompson woman knew or suspected, and in getting a wave at Elinor's hairdresser's.

The girl who set my hair told me something I hadn't known. "Here I was, waiting for her," she said. "She was always prompt. Of course she never came, and—"

"You mean you expected her here, the day it happened?"

"That's right," she agreed. "She had an appointment for four o'clock. When I got the paper on my way home I simply couldn't believe it. She'd always been so gay. Of course the last few weeks she hadn't been quite the same, but—"

"How long since you noticed a change in her?" I asked.

"Well, let me see. About Easter, I think. I remember I liked a new hat she had, and she gave it to me then and there! She said a funny thing, too. She said sometimes new hats were dangerous!"

I may have looked better when I left the shop, but my mind was doing pinwheels. Why were new hats dangerous? And why had Elinor changed since Easter?

Fred had dinner with us that evening. At last, he sat at the table and pushed his food around with a fork. Margaret hadn't come. He said she was in bed with a headache, and he spent most of the time talking about Elinor.

It was ghastly, of course. Even Mother looked unhappy. "I wish you'd eat something, Fred," she said. "Try to forget the whole thing. You made her very happy. Always remember that."

I asked him if anything had upset Elinor since Easter. He stared at me.

"I don't remember anything, Lou. Except that she started going to that damned psychiatrist then."

"Why did she go to him, Fred?" Mother inquired. "If she had any inhibitions I never noticed them."

If there was a barb in this, he wasn't aware of it. "You saw him," he said. "He is a good-looking devil. Maybe she liked to look at him. It would be a change from looking at me."

He went home soon after that. In spite of his previous protests, I thought he had resented the doctor's good looks and Elinor's visits to him. And I wondered if he was trying to build up a defense against her in his own mind; to remember her as less than perfect in order to ease his tragic sense of loss.

I slept badly, so I was late for breakfast the next morning. Mother had finished the paper, and I took it.

Tucked away on a back page was an item reporting that Mrs. Thompson had been shot the night before!

I read and reread it. She was not dead, but her condition was critical. All the police had been able to learn from the family was that she had been sitting alone on the front porch when it happened. Nobody had even heard the shot. She had been found by her husband when he came home from a lodge meeting at eleven o'clock. She was unconscious, and the hospital reported her as being still too low to make a statement.

So she had known something, poor thing. Something that made her dangerous. And again I remembered Margaret going up the steps of the little house on Charles Street; Margaret searching for Elinor's lipstick in the street. Margaret, who had hated Elinor and who was now in posses-

sion of Fred, of old Joe Hammond's portrait, of Elinor's silk sheets, and—I suddenly remembered—of Fred's automatic, which had lain in his desk drawer for years.

I think it was the automatic which finally decided me.

Anyhow, I went to our local precinct stationhouse that afternoon and told a man behind a high desk that I wanted to see the person in charge. "He's busy," the man said, eying me indifferently.

"All right," I said. "If he's too busy to look into a murder, then I'll go downtown to Headquarters."

"Who's been murdered?"

"I'll tell him that."

There was an officer passing, and the man called him. "Young lady here's got a murder on her mind," he said. "Might see if the captain's busy."

The captain was not busy, but he wasn't interested either. When I told him it was about Elinor Hammond, he said he understood the case was closed, and anyhow, it hadn't happened in his district. As Mrs. Thompson was not in his district either, and as he plainly thought I was either out of my mind or looking for publicity, I finally gave up.

The man behind the desk grinned at me as I went out. "Want us to call for the corpse?" he inquired.

"I wouldn't ask you to call for a dead dog," I told him bitterly.

But there was a result, after all. I drove around the rest of the afternoon trying to decide what to do. When I got home I found Mother in the hall.

"There's a policeman here to see you," she hissed. "What have you done?"

I said, "I haven't done anything. It's about Elinor. I want to see this man alone, Mother."

"I think you're crazy," she said furiously. "It's all over. She got into trouble and killed herself. She was always headed for trouble. The first thing you know you'll be arrested yourself."

She followed me into the living room, and before I could speak to the detective there she told him I had been acting strangely for days and she was going to call a doctor and put me to bed.

"Suppose we let her talk for herself," he said. "Now, Miss Baring, what's all this about a murder?"

So I told him: about Elinor and the lipstick; about her appointment at the hairdresser's for shortly after the time she was lying dead on the pavement; about my conviction that Mrs. Thompson knew something she hadn't told.

"I gather you think Mrs. Hammond didn't kill herself. Is that it?"

"Does it look like it?" I demanded.

"Then who did it?"

"I think it was her sister-in-law."

Mother almost had a fit at that. She got up saying that I was hysterical.

But the detective did not move. "Let her alone," he said gruffly. "What about this sister-in-law?"

"I found her in Dr. Barclay's office yesterday," I said. "She insisted that Elinor had fallen out the window. Maybe it sounds silly, but she knew about the lipstick. She tried to find it in the street. I think she was in the office the day Elinor was killed. I think the Thompson woman knew it. And I think Margaret Hammond shot her."

"Shot her?" he said sharply. "Is that the woman out on Charles Street?"

"Yes."

He eyed me steadily. "Why do you think Miss Hammond shot her?" "Because she went there yesterday morning to talk to her. I followed her."

Mother started again. She couldn't understand my behavior. Margaret had been in bed last night with a headache. It would be easy to verify that. The servants . . .

The detective waited patiently and then got up. "I have a little advice for you, Miss Baring," he said. "Leave this to us. If you're right and there's a murder and a try at another one, that's our job."

It was Mother who went to bed that afternoon, while I waited at the telephone. And when the detective finally called me, the news left me exactly where I had been before. Mrs. Thompson had recovered consciousness and made a statement. She did not know who shot her or why, but she insisted that Margaret had visited her merely to thank her for her testimony, which had shown definitely that Elinor had either fallen or jumped out the window. She had neither been offered nor given any money.

There was more to it, however. It appeared that Mrs. Thompson had been worried since the inquest and had telephoned Margaret to ask her if what bothered her was important. As a matter of fact, someone had entered the doctor's office while she was in the hall.

"But it was natural enough," the detective said. "It was the one individual nobody ever really notices. The postman."

"The postman?" I said weakly.

"Exactly. I've talked to him. He saw Mrs. Hammond in the office that morning. He remembers her. She had her hat off, and she was reading a magazine."

"Did he see Mrs. Thompson?"

"He didn't notice her, but she saw him."

"So he shot her last night!"

The detective laughed. "He took his family to the movies last night. And remember this, Miss Baring: that shot may have been an accident. Plenty of people carry guns now who never did before."

It was all very cheerio. Elinor had committed suicide, and Mrs. Thompson had been shot by someone who was practicing for Hitler. Only I just didn't believe it. I believed it even less after I had a visit from Dr. Barclay that night.

Mother was still in bed refusing to see me, and I was listening to the radio when the maid showed him in.

"I'm sorry to butt in like this," he said. "I won't take much of your time."

"Then it's not a professional call?"

He looked surprised. "Certainly not. Why?"

"Because my mother thinks I'm losing my mind," I said rather wildly. "Elinor Hammond is dead, so let her lie. Mrs. Thompson is shot, but why worry? Remember the papers! Remember the family name! No scandal, please!"

"You're in bad shape, aren't you? How about going to bed? I'll talk to you later."

"So I'm to go to bed?" I said nastily. "That would be nice and easy, wouldn't it? Somebody is getting away with murder. Maybe two murders. And everybody tries to hush me up. Even the police!"

That jolted him. "You've been to the police?"

"Why not? Why shouldn't the police be told? Just because you don't want it known that someone was pushed out of your office window—"

He was angry, but he tried to control himself. "See here," he said. "You're dealing with things you don't understand. Why can't you stay out of this case?"

"There wasn't any case until I made one," I said furiously. "Why is everybody warning me off? How do I know you didn't do it yourself? You could have. Either you or the postman. And he was at the movies!"

"The postman!" he said, staring. "What do you mean, the postman?"

I suppose it was his astonished face which made me laugh. I laughed and laughed. I couldn't stop. Then I was crying too. I couldn't stop that either. Without warning he slapped my face.

It jerked my head back, but it stopped me. "That's the girl," he said. "You'd have had the neighbors in in another minute. You'd better go up to bed, and I'll send you some sleeping stuff from the drugstore."

"I wouldn't take anything you sent me on a bet."

He ignored that. "Believe it or not," he said, "I didn't come here to attack you! I came to ask you not to go out alone at night until I tell you that you may. I mean what I'm saying," he added. "Don't go out of this house alone at night, Miss Baring—any night."

"Don't be ridiculous!" I said, still raging. "Why shouldn't I go out at night?"

"Because it may be dangerous," he said shortly. "I particularly want you to keep away from the Hammond house."

He banged the front door when he went out, and I spent the next half hour hating him like poison. I was still angry when the phone rang. It was Margaret!

"I suppose we have you to thank for the police coming here tonight," she said. "Why can't you leave us alone? We're in trouble enough, without you making things worse."

"All right," I said recklessly. "Now I'll ask you one. Why did you visit Mrs. Thompson yesterday morning? And who shot her last night?" She gasped and hung up the receiver.

It was a half hour later when the druggist's boy brought the sleeping tablets. I took them to the kitchen and dropped them in the coal range, while Annie watched me with amazement. She was fixing Mother's hot milk, I remember, and she told me that Clara, the Hammonds' cook, had been over.

"She says things are queer over there," she reported. "Somebody started the furnace last night, and the house was so hot this morning you couldn't live in it."

I didn't pay much attention. I was still shaken. Then I saw Annie look up, and Fred was standing on the kitchen porch.

"May I come in?" he asked. "I was taking a walk and I saw the light."

He looked better, I thought. He said Margaret was in bed, and the house was lonely. Then he asked if Annie would make him a cup of coffee.

"I don't sleep much, anyhow," he said. "It's hard to get adjusted. And the house is hot. I've been getting rid of a lot of stuff. Burning it." So that explained the furnace.

I walked out with him when he left and watched him as he started home. Then I turned up the driveway again. I was near the house when it happened. I remember the shrubby rustling, but I never heard the shot. Something hit me on the head. I fell, and after that there was a complete blackout until I heard Mother's voice. I was in my own bed with a bandage around my head and an ache in it that made me dizzy.

"The idea of her going out when you told her not to!" Mother was saying.

"I did my best," said a masculine voice. "But you have a very stubborn daughter."

It was Dr. Barclay. He was standing beside the bed when I opened my eyes. I remember saying, "You slapped me."

"And a lot of good it did," he retorted. "Now look where you are!" I could see him better by that time. He looked very queer. One of his eyes was almost shut, and his collar was a wilted mess. I stared at him. "What happened?" I asked. "You've been in a fight."

"More or less."

"And what's this thing on my head?"

"That is what you get for disobeying orders."

I began to remember then—the scuffling in the bushes, and something knocking me down. He reached over and took my pulse.

"You've got a very pretty bullet graze on the side of your head," he said. "Also, I've had to shave off quite a bit of your hair." I suppose I wailed at that, for he shifted from my pulse to my hand. "Don't worry about that. It was very pretty hair, but it will grow again. At least, thank God, you're here!"

"Who did it? Who shot at me?"

"The postman, of course," he said, and to my fury went out of the room.

I slept after that. I suppose he had given me something. Anyhow, it was the next morning before I heard the rest of the story. Mother had fallen for Dr. Barclay completely, and she wouldn't let him see me until my best silk blanket cover was on the bed. Even then in a hand mirror I looked dreadful, with my head bandaged and my skin yellowish-gray. The doctor didn't seem to mind, however. He came in, big and smiling, with his right eye completely closed, and told me I looked like the wrath of heaven.

"You're not looking your best yourself," I said.

"Oh, that!" he observed, touching his eye gingerly. "Your mother put a silver knife smeared with butter on it last night. Quite a person, Mother."

He said I was to excuse his appearance, because he had been busy all night with the police. He'd go and clean up.

"You're not moving out of this room until I know what's been going on," I stormed. "I'm running a fever right now, out of pure excitement."

He put a big hand on my forehead. "No fever," he said. "Just your detective mind running in circles. All right. Where do I start?"

"With the postman."

So then he told me. Along in the spring, Elinor had come to him with a queer story. She said she was being followed. It made her nervous. In fact, she was frightened. It seemed that the man who was watching her wore a postman's uniform. She would be having lunch at a restaurant—perhaps with what she called a man friend—and he would be outside a window. He would turn up in all sorts of places. It sounded fantastic, but she swore it was true.

Some faint ray of intelligence came to me. "Do you mean it was this man Mrs. Thompson saw going into your office?"

"She's already identified him. The real letter carrier had been there earlier. He had seen Mrs. Hammond reading a magazine. But he had gone before the Thompson woman arrived. The one she saw was the one who—killed Elinor."

I knew before he told me. I felt sick. "It was Fred, wasn't it?"

"It was Fred Hammond. Yes." Dr. Barclay reached over and took my hand. "Tough luck, my dear. I was worried about it. I tried to get her to go away, but she wouldn't do it. And then she wore a dress at a party with a scarlet A on it, and I suppose that finished him."

"It's crazy!" I gasped. "He adored her."

"He had an obsession about her. He loved her, yes. But he was afraid he might lose her. And he was wildly jealous."

"But if he really loved her—"

"The line between love and hate is pretty fine. And it's just possible too that he felt she was never really his until—well, until no one else could have her."

"So he killed her!"

"He killed her," Dr. Barclay said slowly. "He knew that nobody notices the postman, so he walked into my office and—"

"But he was insane," I said. "You can't send him to the chair."

"Nobody will send him to the chair." The doctor hesitated. "I was too late last night. I caught him just as he fired at you, but he put up a real battle. He got loose somehow, and shot himself."

He went on quietly. There was no question of Fred's guilt, he said. Mrs. Thompson had identified his photograph as that of the postman she had seen going into the office and coming out shortly before she heard the nurse screaming. The bullet with which she had been shot had come from Fred's gun. And Margaret—poor Margaret—had been suspicious of his sanity for a long time.

"She came to see me yesterday after she learned the Thompson woman had been shot. She wanted her brother committed to an institu-

tion, but she got hysterical when I mentioned the police. I suppose there wasn't much of a case, anyhow. With Mrs. Thompson apparently dying and the uniform gone—"

"Gone? Gone how?"

"He'd burned it in the furnace. We found some charred buttons last night."

"Why did he try to kill Mrs. Thompson?" I asked. "What did she know?"

"She remembered seeing a postman going in and out of my office. She even described him. And Margaret found the uniform in the attic. She knew then."

"She collapsed. She couldn't face Fred. She locked herself in her room, trying to think what to do. But she had told Fred she was going to see Mrs. Thompson that day, and she thinks perhaps he knew she had found the uniform. She doesn't know, nor do I. All we do know is that he left this house that night, got out his car and tried to kill the only witness against him. Except you, of course."

"Except me!" I said.

"Except you," the doctor repeatedly dryly. "I tried to warn you, you may remember!"

"But why me? He had always liked me. Why would he try to kill me?"

"Because you wouldn't leave things alone. Because you were a danger from the minute you insisted Elinor had been murdered. And because you asked Margaret on the phone why she had visited Mrs. Thompson, and who had shot her."

"You think he was listening in?"

"I know he was listening in. He wasn't afraid of his sister. She would have died to protect him, and he knew it. But here you were, a child with a stick of dynamite, and you come out with a thing like that! That was when Margaret sent me to warn you."

"I'm sorry. I've been a fool all along."

The doctor's good eye twinkled. "I wouldn't go so far as that," he said. "That stubbornness of yours really broke the case. Not that I like stubborn women."

I had difficulty in getting him back to the night before. But he finally admitted that he had been watching the Hammond house all evening, and that when Fred came to our kitchen door he had been just outside. Fred had seemed quiet, drinking his coffee. Then I had walked out to the street with him.

It had looked all right at first. Fred had started down the street to-

ward home, and he followed behind the hedge. But he lost him, and he knew he was on his way back. Fred had his revolver lifted to shoot me when he grabbed him.

Suddenly I was crying. It was all horrible: Elinor at the window, and Fred behind her; Mrs. Thompson resting after a hard day's work, and Fred shooting her. And I myself—

Dr. Barclay got out a grimy handkerchief and dried my eyes. "Stop it," he said. "It's all over now, and you're a plucky young woman, Louise Baring. Don't spoil the record." He rose abruptly. "I'm giving up your case. There'll be someone in to dress that head of yours."

"Why can't you do it?"

"I'm not that sort of doctor."

I looked up at him. He was haggard with strain. He was dirty, he needed a shave, and that eye of his was getting blacker by the minute. But he was big and strong and sane. A woman would be safe with him, I thought. Although she could never tell him her dreams.

"I don't see why you can't look after me," I said. "If I'm to look bald I'd prefer you to see it. After all, you did it."

He grinned. Then to my surprise he leaned down and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "I've wanted to do that ever since you slammed that lipstick down in front of me," he said. "And now will you please stop being a detective and concentrate on growing some hair on the side of your head? Because I'm going to be around for a considerable time."

When I looked up Mother was in the doorway, beaming.