

A DOCTOR WESTLAKE MYSTERY

The

SCARLET

CIRCLE

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I

Dawn and I started homeward that night at an hour when all good Cape Talisman fishermen should have been thinking about bed. My young daughter and I had been detained by a fish—one of those monsters that are the subject of all angling stories and which I was destined never to see. It had taken the lure intended for an innocent bluefish and, after straining my unexercised muscles for close on an hour, had proved itself more than a match for a country doctor on vacation.

Even our taciturn fishing captain had been carried away by the excitement of the fray. None of us had realized how the night had crept up on us until cold, misty darkness had shrouded land and sea like a dreary miasma. It was quite late when we nosed into the silted harbor of Cape Talisman.

The captain grunted:

“Night, Dr. Westlake. Night, miss.”

We replied in kind. Dawn strung her own particular bluefish on a piece of line to take back to the inn for breakfast... With the fish swinging clammily before us we started along the wet sands away from the winking lights of the village towards the Talisman Inn.

As we walked Dawn babbled with enthusiasm about the delights of a hot supper. “Do you think Mr. Mitchell will let me have ham and eggs *and* bacon, Daddy? And maybe sausages, too, and hot cakes and ...”

September is a wild, unaccountable month on that particular part of the New England coast. Wild and unaccountable, too, was the shore line of Cape Talisman. It was one of those spots against which the elements seem to have a perpetual grudge. Inch by inch the waves were encroaching upon the crumbling dunes, and the older section of the town, which was once a flourishing community, was now almost deserted.

Even to the south, where there was a scattered bulwark of protective rocks, nothing was really safe. The Talisman Inn, so secure, so prim when I first stayed there fifteen years ago, now had the beach for a front garden. Soon it would have to be moved back or abandoned, just as the old church had been abandoned a couple of years ago when the hurricane had induced the Atlantic Ocean to surge into the churchyard and threaten the last resting place of Cape Talisman's stalwart forebears.

Except to fishermen, Cape Talisman must have seemed a bleak and dreary spot. The summer flock of visitors which used to be thick as locusts on the Talisman Inn's private beach had dwindled to a mere handful. Mr. Mitchell, the owner-manager, with his impeccable New York clothes and his impeccable New York manners, had yearly become more and more incongruous as his means of livelihood and his hotel disintegrated about him. That particular September's Labor Day had come and gone, taking all but eight of the holiday makers. And those eight, with the possible exception of Dawn and myself, were definitely of the eccentric type which is apt to cling to lost causes and forgotten places.

The Talisman Inn was hardly the warm, cheerful hearth to which fishermen are supposed to repair. But Dawn and I were happy there. We had long ago developed the habit of being contented with each other's company.

The pall of mist that lay over the dunes seemed to be thicker as we rounded the promontory which marked the extreme edge of the old abandoned churchyard. The tide was out and the faint sibilance of the waves was broken now and then by the distant booming of a fog siren out at sea.

Dawn was whistling as if she were a little in awe of the ominous elements and trying to keep up her spirits. The blue fish still flopped damply against her leg. Suddenly her whistling stopped.

"Look, Daddy!" she exclaimed, pointing forward toward the ambling silhouette of the dunes. "Look at that pink light."

"Pink what?" I asked absently.

"See? It looks like one of those Chinese lanterns you take on picnics at night. Daddy, do you think someone is having a picnic in the churchyard?"

“It’s hardly a spot I would choose,” I said, but I followed the direction of her pointing finger.

My daughter has a vivid imagination, but she also has very keen eyesight. Through the enshrouding mist I was able to make out a vague pink light, perched on the edge of the dunes some yards ahead of us. Dimly, very dimly behind it, I could distinguish the dark outline of the old church.

As we moved nearer I saw that Dawn had been right. The light obviously came from one of those decorated paper lanterns which can be bought, complete with candle, for a few cents and which are often used for beach parties at night. There was something eerie about its cheap, garish colors shining incongruously against the dreariness of the old churchyard.

“It looks rather spooky, doesn’t it?” I felt Dawn’s hand slip into mine. “Daddy, you don’t suppose it’s—it’s something wrong?”

“Probably someone left it there by accident,” I said. “Wait here and I’ll look into it.”

I handed her the fishing rod and, leaving her alone on the beach, started to ramble up the sandy earth of the dunes. It was quite difficult going, my shoes slithering and slipping in the loose sand. I grabbed at some spiky grasses to retrain my balance. Ahead of me the pink lantern winked.

I pushed myself up and had almost reached the top. It was near enough to make out the childish decoration on the pink paper.

And then suddenly the lantern moved.

As I stared it glided away, leaving behind only a faint rosy opalescence in the mist. “Is anybody there?” I called. My voice echoed booming.

There was no reply.

As if the lantern had been a will-o’-the-wisp, I followed, swinging up onto the crest of the dune and hurrying through the dark graveyard. The lantern was more clearly visible now at the foot of a stunted fir tree which stood some feet back from the shore line. By its light I could make out the little mounds which marked the surrounding graves—mounds which had long since lost their tombstones, owing either to the encroachment of the sea or the crumbling of the soil.

Then as I peered forward I made out something else—a strange, shapeless figure which at first seemed to be compounded of the very mists

which enveloped it. It stood or crouched near the lantern in a bizarre attitude. And then suddenly it vanished behind the fir tree and was swallowed up in the fog.

The lantern lay where it had been, casting a soft, pearly radiance among the graves.

I called again, and again there was no answer. I moved forward to the tree. The light from the lantern spread fanwise across the stubbly crab grass. It gleamed dully on the blade of a heavy iron spade. I called once more, but there was no sound except the distant booming of the fog siren far out to sea.

I picked up the frail paper lantern and examined the spade. It was caked with damp soil. Then, turned back toward the beach I felt that the ground beneath my feet, so dry and sandy, was damp too. I took a step forward and stumbled on a mound of loose dirt.

Lowering the lantern, I saw that I was standing on the brink of a freshly dug grave.

At first I told myself that this must be a grave destined for one of the villagers who had died recently. But no sooner had the thought come to me than I dismissed it as absurd. Who would be likely to bury their dead in a spot where, any day now, the September tides might wash away what was left of that wind-swept promontory and carry the coffin out to sea? And who would be doing it so furtively alone at night?

For an instant I stood there, wondering. The mist seemed to be seeping through my damp oilskins, and I was conscious of being very much alone in that little patch of pinkly illuminated darkness—alone with the dead of past generations. Then I lifted the lantern and bent closer over the yawning hole. I saw what I might have expected to see.

Half exposed in the earth beneath me was the top of a nail-studded coffin.

It was a worn, old coffin which had obviously lain there in the storm-racked earth for years. And at its head the soil had been rubbed away, revealing an eroded brass name plate, as if someone had been feverishly anxious to read the inscription.

A few lumps of soil slipped into the open grave with a little *plop*. I started at the sound and, as I did so, the lantern fell from my hand onto the coffin below me. For the fraction of a second it lighted up the depth of the grave with pink, guttering illumination.

Then it went out.

As a doctor I am neither superstitious nor prone to imaginary terrors, but as I stood there in the misty obscurity of the churchyard I felt my mind invaded by strange images: vampires—ghouls—despoilers of the dead.

Then common sense asserted itself and I saw another solution, one which was more reasonable and far less fantastic. The inhabitants of Cape Talisman were poor and might not be able to afford reburial for their departed. Perhaps one of the villagers had been trying to rescue the body of some dead friend or relative from the predatory approach of the sea.

And yet why that weird pink Chinese lantern? Why the scurried departure at the sound of my voice? Why the absence of companions? A God-fearing New England fisherman, intent upon preserving the remains of some long-dead forebear, would surely not behave in this secret midnight fashion.

No, there had been something furtive about the wraith-like figure I had seen in the mist—something which had given me the fleeting impression that its mission in the graveyard had been one of sacrilege rather than of piety.

There was every indication that Dawn's prognostication was correct and that something was distinctly—wrong.

"Daddy!" Dawn's voice rang out anxiously from the beach behind me.

For a moment I stood there hesitant in the darkness. Then with a reassuring shout I hurried back to the edge of the dune, scrambled down, and rejoined my daughter.

It was good to see her compact little figure standing there, enveloped in oilskins that were far too large. It was good to feel her hand warm in mine and to know that, despite the sea mist and the cold, dreary night, I had left the dead behind me and was back again in the land of the very much alive.

"You were an awful long time, Daddy," she said reprovingly. "I'm hungrier than ever, and where's the lantern?"

“It blew out,” I said. “I left it up there.”

“What was it there for?” she murmured as we hurried on toward the inn.

“Was it a picnic?”

“Yes, Dawn,” I replied guardedly. “I suppose it was a sort of picnic.”

My daughter is as smart as she is curious. I didn’t expect her to be satisfied with that thin explanation. But I had counted without her stomach. The word “picnic” had been sufficient to crowd her head with ecstatically culinary images.

“And maybe hot cakes and maple syrup, too,” she crooned. “And ice cream and cake and ...”

II

Soon the lights of the Talisman Inn were dimly visible through the fog. With a frenzied whoop Dawn started dashing ahead.

“I’m going to order supper, Daddy, and see about my bluefish being cooked for my breakfast and ...”

I followed at a more seemly gait, thinking about the pink lantern and the other things which should not have been, and yet had been, in the graveyard.

Between the inn and the ocean was a wooden buttress which was supposed to protect the meager garden from the encroaching sand. It had long since been buried to the top of the posts, and now the sands rolled right up to the porch.

I shuffled over the low dunes and reached the screen door on the side of the porch.

Although the September evenings were chilly, the porch remained the center of what little social activity the Talisman Inn could still provide. That night as I entered three people, each studiously ignoring the other, were spaced among the green-painted wicker chairs and tables. I recognized them as Buck Valentine, Mrs. Fanshawe, and the unpleasant Mr. Usher.

Buck Valentine lounged nearest the door. Clad in a white sports shirt and a pair of white shorts, the hotel lifeguard was morosely studying a series of scantily clad females in a back copy of *Esquire*. He glanced up at me, his rugged, blond young face twisting in a desultory smile.

“Geez, but this is a gay spot nights, Dr. Westlake.” He snorted. “I’ve finished my knitting and I’m just going to settle down to a hell of a game of solitaire.”

I sympathized with Buck Valentine’s predicament. He was a red-blooded young he-man with a very roving eye. At this desolate resort there was nowhere for his eye to rove unless it was toward the inn’s two

indeterminate waitress-housemaids or toward Nellie Wood, the Fanshawes' statuesque nurse-governess. And Nellie Wood was too expensive for a mere lifeguard. Her own eye, unless I was mistaken, was fixed more ambitiously upon Virgil Fanshawe, her mistress's husband.

Buck Valentine was not the type to relish Cape Talisman's decayed charms. I think it galled him, too, that his job was virtually a sinecure. The clientele at the Talisman Inn had not for several years been large enough to justify the hiring of a lifeguard, but Mr. Mitchell, determined to keep up a pretense of fashionable prosperity, was willing to pay Buck's salary for the illusion of elegance that the boy's presence gave to the beach.

The salary apparently must have been satisfactory enough to Buck to compensate for the lack of accessible femininity.

As I passed the lifeguard he let the magazine drop from his strong fingers and glanced sidewise at the girl who was sitting beyond him on a stiff wicker couch. It was hopeless from Buck's point of view to look at Marion Fanshawe. He knew it, and so did everyone else. And yet she made very good looking. A tiny little thing, she had a figure to dream of, and her face, beneath the cascade of ash-blond hair, was fragile and pretty as a spring flower. Her eyes, a cool, sober gray, had a way of staring at nothing quietly and, in some subtle manner, mysteriously too.

But then Marion Fanshawe was a complete mystery. She seldom spoke to anyone except her successful commercial-artist husband and her own little five-year-old son. She didn't speak much to them either. She seemed to live in a strange vacuum of personal silence. I often wondered whether she loved her husband, whether she suspected that there was a cheap affair between him and the governess, and whether, if she knew, she cared.

So far I was absolutely in the dark.

I had to move by her to reach the door which would lead me to the dining room and Dawn's supper. I smiled at her because it was impossible not to smile at Marion Fanshawe, impossible for a man not to want to make some clumsy attempt to break through that blank wall of silence.

"Husband still working?" I asked.

I don't think that was the right thing to say. She looked up sharply, her solemn gray eyes staring without the trace of an answering smile.

“Virgil’s working still,” she said suddenly, “still painting up in his studio.”

I knew that Virgil was using the Dianalike Nellie Wood for a model, and I guessed what “work” at this hour probably implied.

“And Bobby?” I inquired with some embarrassment, thinking that the little kid at least would prove a noncontroversial topic. “He’s in bed, I suppose?”

“Yes,” said Marion Fanshawe, “he’s in bed.”

“Well, Dawn Will be soon. She’s up too late as it is.”

I went on past Marion Fanshawe. I was hoping to avoid the gaze of the third occupant of the porch, Mr. Usher. But, as usual, I was unsuccessful.

I don’t know exactly why I disliked Mr. Usher so much. I knew absolutely nothing about or against him. I suppose it was just his appearance. He was of an indeterminate age, tall, thin, with red hair and red, hairy wrists which protruded from the sleeves of his invariably black jacket. These wrists supported the least attractive hands I have ever seen on a man—large and white and flabby and sprinkled around the joints with warts.

His face was white, too, with a waxy, inhuman pallor which even the sea winds of Cape Talisman could do nothing to counteract. Out of this white face peered small ginger-brown eyes fringed with straggly, rufous lashes.

That evening he was reading his customary bedtime book—the Bible. To read the Bible is a laudable pursuit. But in Mr. Usher’s case it was different. Obscurely, the sight of him leafing through Deuteronomy conjured up obscene images of sacrilege and Black Masses.

“Ah, Dr. Westlake,” he remarked in his throaty, sanctimonious voice, “out late fishing today, eh?”

“Late enough,” I grunted.

“And there is quite a fog tonight. You might well have missed the harbor, Dr. Westlake. We may thank the Lord for your safe delivery.”

That was typical of Mr. Usher. He was always suggesting that the slightest mishap was a catastrophe only just averted by God’s mercy

Inwardly I was convinced that if he, rather than the Lord, had had his way, the catastrophes would inevitably have been fatal.

I had turned from him and was moving to step through the door when suddenly the quiet, almost sulky porch became charged with drama. It was extraordinary how one could sense the sharp change in the atmosphere.

It happened because Nellie Wood, coming from the hallway, had stepped out onto the porch.

The Fanshawes' anomalous governess was attractive if you like that type—big, with the goddesslike beauty so favored by some artists and all burlesque goers. Her yellow hair was swept up the back and somehow contrived to remain tidy however gusty the elements. Her classical chiseled features would have been more appealing to me if her eyes had not also a hard, chiseled quality of their own. And on the left cheek there was a large mole. It might have been attractive, but it wasn't. In some way it managed to coarsen her whole face.

Nellie Wood gave the impression, true or false, of being a passionately animal woman with a shrewd mind which knew exactly how to make that animal passion pay the highest dividends.

Now, as she clicked on tall, unsuitable heels onto the porch, she wore a red slicker over her dress and a white scarf knotted loosely around her golden hair.

It was hard to define just where the seat of tension lay, whether it was with Nellie Wood or Marion Fanshawe or Buck Valentine—or even with Mr. Usher, who was watching the girl slit-eyed in a manner which his own Bible would have described and excoriated as covetous. Maybe all four of them were involved in that sensation of nerves stretched elastic-tight.

The first verbal symptom came, surprisingly, from little Marion Fanshawe. She said very quietly: "My husband has finished his work for tonight then?"

The words were innocent enough. It was the vague overtones which gave the sentence an almost naked shrillness.

Nellie Wood threw her one indifferent glance.

"He's through with me for tonight, Mrs. Fanshawe. But he's still got more painting to do."

That, too, should have been a trite statement of fact. But by implication it became a stabbing wound in the unadmitted duel between the two women.

“You’re going out for a breath of fresh air, Miss Wood?” The words dropped unctuously from the pale pink lips of Mr. Usher.

“Why—er—yes, Mr. Usher. Just a breath of air.”

Nellie Wood seemed to have hesitated for the fraction of a second before answering, and it seemed to me that in that second her calculating eyes slid to the bored, smoldering face of Buck Valentine in a glance that was charged with meaning.

Without another word she strolled to the porch door and through it toward the dark beach beyond.

I must have been right about her glance at Buck Valentine, although I had no idea what it portended. For as I stepped into the hall in search of Dawn and food I just had the time to see the great bulk of the lifeguard rise and follow Nellie Wood’s vanishing figure out onto the dunes.

III

In the dining room the diminutive figure of my daughter was seated at our table. Her blond hair was disheveled, and a black smudge of obscure origin decorated her nose. Her appearance broke every known law of table etiquette.

“I ordered bacon and eggs and ham. And the chef’s promised to fix my bluefish for breakfast.” She looked winsome. “Daddy, do you suppose I’ve got to give Bobby Fanshawe some of my fish? Couldn’t I get up early and eat it before he’s down?”

Dawn had developed a passionate maternal attitude toward the five-year-old Bobby Fanshawe, but even love dwindled before her appetite.

“You’ll certainly give him some of your fish if he wants it,” I said sternly.

The less comely of the two waitress-housemaids staggered in with our supper. We were still eating voraciously when Mr. Mitchell, the manager, drifted into the dining room. It was Mr. Mitchell’s habit to drift into the dining room whenever a guest should be eating. Although the inn no longer boasted a head waiter, he believed firmly in the idea of one and understudied for that missing dignitary in his own immaculately clad person.

That night he hovered at my side, presiding at our repast like some respectable spinster who had invited the Sunday-school class in for ice cream and cake.

“I trust everything is all right, Dr. Westlake?”

His mincing words obviously referred to the food. I suppressed a desire to startle him out of his elegant wits by retorting: “*Everything’s far from all right. There’s enough tension accumulating on your porch to blow up the inn. And someone’s been creeping around the old graveyard with a Chinese lantern, digging up coffins. Why?*”

Instead I murmured: "Everything's fine, Mr. Mitchell."

It was not difficult to get Dawn to bed. She was half asleep before she had finished her third glass of milk. I waited with her in her room, watching her small tawny head reclining against the pillows until her dreamy babbling about bluefish and Bobby Fanshawe faded into the steady purr of a child's sleep.

Shorn of parental responsibility, I started down the broad stairs with their faded carpeting. As I reached the vestibule there was a rustling from the little writing room, and a woman's figure appeared. It was the last of the eight "hangovers" at the Talisman Inn—Miss Heywood.

Miss Heywood was the only inhabitant of the inn who used the stuffy writing room, and she was essentially the type that does use writing rooms at small hotels. Tall, willowy, and of uncertain years, she had a distinct handsomeness, but it was the type of good looks which flourished in the early days of the silent movies and has long since passed out of style. She wore her uncut brown hair in an "artistic" Grecian knot at the nape of a swanlike neck. She dressed also in an "artistic," smockish sort of way which suggested tearooms and teacup readings. She was, I understood, a painter. She had a gracious word for everyone but otherwise kept herself to her ladylike self.

She, too, had her mysterious elements. There was an occasional gleam in her eyes which belied the general lavender-water effect of her personality, and her complexion had a curious masklike quality. When she smiled, as she did now, the smile was exclusively of the mouth and caused no ripple on the surrounding skin.

"Good evening, Dr. Westlake. Our little group seems to have broken up early tonight."

She swished past me in a cloud of batik. I went onto the porch. It was entirely deserted. Marion Fanshawe, presumably, had joined her painting and possibly adulterous husband, while Mr. Usher had retired with his Testament.

I wondered what, if anything, was passing between Nellie Wood and Buck Valentine on the beach, or whether their two simultaneous exits had,

after all, been only fortuitous.

I stared out through the porch screen into the foggy darkness of the beach. There was nothing to see but the rolling mists, nothing to hear but the sucking of the waves. Once again the image of that Chinese lantern by the freshly dug grave rose up to haunt me. Was it my responsibility to inform someone official of what I had seen? And if so, whom?

I was too tired for further speculation. I left the deserted porch, went to my room, undressed, and flopped into a deep, untroubled sleep.

It could not have been much later when I was awakened by a persistent tapping. I shook myself sleepily. The tapping resolved itself into a knocking on my door. I heard Mr. Mitchell's precise voice:

"Dr. Westlake, Dr. Westlake. Are you awake?"

I grunted and switched on the light by my bed. Mitchell, still fully and neatly dressed, scurried in.

"Oh, Dr. Westlake, I'm sorry to disturb you, but you're wanted on the telephone downstairs."

"On the telephone?" I had no friend in the neighborhood. Alarming visions stirred of a long-distance call reporting some major mishap to my practice.

"Yes, yes. It's Dr. Gilchrist. He says it is most urgent. Otherwise I would not have awakened you."

"Gilchrist!" I exclaimed.

Dr. Harold Gilchrist was the local doctor who divided his time between his minuscule practice at Cape Talisman and the large female penitentiary at Haling, some miles down the shore, where he acted as consulting physician. An ambitious and shrewd man whom circumstances had stuck in a small town, he had taken a shine to me as a symbol of the outside world. I knew he had just returned from a protracted stay in Boston, where he had tried unsuccessfully for an appointment at one of the big hospitals. It occurred to me that perhaps some unexpected good news had turned failure to success and that he wanted to share it with someone.

Stumbling into a bathrobe, I followed Mitchell downstairs to the bleak, deserted hall. The telephone was off to the left in a booth. I went into it,

sliding the door shut to frustrate any intentions of eavesdropping Mr. Mitchell might possibly entertain.

The receiver was hanging limply on its cord. I picked it up.

“Westlake, is that you?” Dr. Gilchrist’s voice, usually hearty and rather jocular, was hoarse. “You’ve got to come at once. Something ghastly’s happened. I need another doctor, another opinion.”

“Listen,” I began. “I’m on vacation. I don’t want to drag myself out in the middle of the night to look at other people’s patients unless—”

“Patients! This isn’t a patient, Westlake. This is—It’s crazy. It’s murder!”

“Murder?” I echoed that dreadful word with parrotlike vacuity.

“Murder. And the most fantastic, horrible murder I’ve ever seen. You’ve got to come at once.”

“But—”

“I’m calling from the Coast Guard Station. The corpse—it’s right near here, down by the rock they call the Monk’s Head. Know it?”

“Sure.” The Monk’s Head was a huge, freakish rock which loomed in solitary splendor like some eerie piece of devil’s sculpture about half a mile up the beach from the inn.

“Barnes is down there—Sergeant Barnes, the village cop. He’s the one who called me. I’ll be back there, too, by the time you arrive. Make it snappy, Westlake.”

“But—”

“And don’t let anyone at the inn know yet,” Gilchrist’s agitated voice broke in once again before I could speak. “We don’t want everyone fussing around until we have to.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll come over immediately. But, Gilchrist—who is it? Who’s been murdered?”

But I got no answer to that all-important question—nothing but the distinct click of the receiver at the other end dropping back onto its stand.

Wide awake now, I hurried out of the booth. Mr. Mitchell was waiting expectantly.

“Dr. Westlake, I trust nothing serious is—”

“Just Gilchrist,” I cut in vaguely. “There’s some trouble.”

I ran past the manager up the stairs to my room. I tumbled into an old jersey and a pair of pants and slipped over them my oilskins which were still quite wet from the fishing expedition.

Luckily I had a flashlight. It was lying on the dressing table. I grabbed it and ran downstairs again, past the solitary figure of Mr. Mitchell, and through the screen door of the porch out over the dark dunes to the beach.

The mist was thicker than ever. It seemed almost solid, as if it were some huge gray fungus that had sprouted umbrella-like out of the sands. As I groped my way toward the Monk's Head behind the weak flicker of light from my torch there was nothing to guide me except the sound of the breakers crashing heavily against the shore ahead.

Somehow, in this foul and eerie night and on this desolate beach, the fact of murder did not seem as outlandish as it had back in the dingy respectability of the inn. My mind played speculatively with many fancies. Who had been murdered? Was it someone I knew? Someone, perhaps, from the inn? Those taut faces which I had watched on the porch rose up in pallid sequence in my mind.

Buck Valentine ... Marion Fanshawe ... Mr. Usher ... Nellie Wood ...

A larger, fiercer wave hurled itself farther than its fellows and splintered around me in a cascade of invisible water that sent me skittering sideways. When I had recovered my balance I veered to the left away from the water's edge.

In the first second, while my eyes were still smarting, I noticed nothing unusual about the foggy darkness. It was only with the deliberate, terrifying slowness of a thing in a nightmare that I became conscious of the light ahead of me.

At first I couldn't believe it. This surely must be a figment of my mind, some trick of memory which created in mirage the sight Dawn and I had witnessed earlier back in the churchyard.

I blinked. I blinked again. But the light was still there, and I knew that it had to be real.

Breaking the oppressive pall of grayish darkness ahead, breaking it in one small, solitary area, was a diffused pink light.

It was a light I knew only too well—a weak, fluttering glow such as is thrown by a cheap, decorated Chinese lantern....

I could feel the wet hair at the back of my neck prickling. The mists wreathing around me seemed like bodiless fingers groping out to envelop me.

Then dimly above the roar of the breakers I caught the rough sound of male voices. I shouted out Gilchrist's name and started running across the sands toward that quivering, roseate pinprick of light.

In a few seconds I stumbled against the wet, slippery figure of another human being in oilskins, and Gilchrist's voice was saying:

"Westlake. Thank God you've come. We've called Inspector Sweeney at Haling. But he hasn't arrived yet. Come on. We've touched nothing, and you're only just in time to see it the way we found it. The tide's rising, and pretty soon we'll have to move her."

Her...!

Gilchrist grabbed my arm and started dragging me toward the light.

"Who is it?" I shouted against the roar of the sea. "Who has been murdered?"

Gilchrist did not seem to hear me. He just quickened his pace.

Another male voice shouted from the darkness ahead, and Gilchrist called back:

"It's Dr. Westlake, Barnes, staying up in the Talisman Inn. I asked him to come for a second opinion."

Barnes—he was the local policeman. I had seen him around the village and noticed him vaguely—a solemn man with dark hair and melancholy dark eyes.

We reached Barnes. His tall silhouette stood between us and the Chinese lantern, blocking from view the thing, whatever it was, that the lantern illuminated.

Gilchrist muttered: "Barnes, this is Dr. Westlake." Barnes grunted: "Evening, Doctor. This is pretty bad, this is. Ain't nothing like this happened around these parts, not since I was a youngster."

I still didn't know anything. The suspense the two of them had unconsciously built up was unendurable.

I pushed past the policeman and stepped beyond him, throwing the beam of my flashlight forward into the murk.

The huge bulk of the Monk's Head rock loomed a deeper black in the surrounding blackness. I noticed it instinctively only as a background for the pink, radiant Chinese lantern which was propped against its damp seaweed-covered base.

I looked at the decorations on the lantern. They were identical with the decorations on the lantern I had seen in the churchyard. It was the same pink too. That strawberry-ice-cream pink which glowed from within where the little sputtering candle burned in its socket.

That lantern, so sinisterly reminiscent of the other lantern, threw me into the mood for horror.

And so, in a way, the thing that lay beneath the rock, bathed in the lantern's radiance, did not seem too violently out of place.

And yet, heaven knew, it was horrible enough—and insane enough. Gilchrist had been right about that. In my time I had been associated with the police in murder cases. But I had never seen anything to match this.

A girl was lying there on the sand, tranquil as if in sleep. In spite of the beam from my flashlight the lantern's glow threw a pink opalescence over the prone figure, so that it suggested a corpse in a church illuminated by a stained-glass window.

The pose, too, was grotesquely pious. The girl's hands were folded prayerwise across her breast. And her eyes were closed.

Her skirt was neatly smoothed to cover as much as possible of her legs. She wore a red slicker over her dress, and a white scarf was knotted over her gleaming golden hair.

The whole effect was horribly grim.

And she was dead.

That fact was obvious to me as I stared down at the face, beautiful as a classic mask—the face which only a few hours before I had seen so arrogantly alive.

“Nellie Wood.” I said it out loud. Nellie Wood—the Fanshawes' governess.

“Her cheek!” Gilchrist’s rattled voice sounded close to my ear. “Look at the cheek, Westlake.”

I had seen it, of course, and it was the dead girl’s cheek which gave the whole scene its insane quality.

The mole which in life had marred the perfection of Nellie Wood’s features glowed livid in the queer light on her left cheek. But it wasn’t the mole itself—it was the thing which had been done to that mole.

Around it, blazing against the waxy skin, there had been scrawled, as if by a madman’s hand, a crude scarlet circle.

IV

I bent to examine that garish circle. It had quite definitely been drawn by a human hand using some such material as lipstick or red paint.

Hazy memories came back from books. Hester Prynne with the scarlet letter *A* branded on her breast. Scarlet—the color which the rabid Puritan associates with vice.

“Ever see anything to beat it?” Gilchrist’s voice sounded again. “Look, he even shielded the lantern in that crack in the rock so that the wind wouldn’t blow it out! He put it there because he *wanted* the body discovered before the tide washed it away.”

“How was she killed?”

Barnes was shining his flashlight downward too. At a first glance Nellie Wood’s face had seemed as serene as a sleeping girl’s. I saw now that the effect had been caused only by the pink radiance of the lantern. The skin, in fact, was bluish. I rolled back the eyelids and saw that the eyes too stared with a glazed protuberance.

I pushed around the collar of the red slicker. A thin length of sash cord had been tied viciously tight around the girl’s throat.

“Strangled,” I said.

I lifted the golden head. At the back of the neck the cord was twisted into a rough knot.

Gilchrist said: “He must have crept up behind her in the dark, thrown the cord over her head, and strangled her before she had a chance to struggle.”

“She had her pocketbook with her.” It was the husky local voice of Sergeant Barnes. “There’s still a couple of dollars in it. And she’s wearing a kind of valuable ring, I’d say. Looks pretty plain it wasn’t no kind of holdup.”

“There’s no sign of attempted assault either,” said Gilchrist. “Westlake, this is more than just a murder. We’ve got a maniac on our hands.”

It certainly looked that way.

But I, who knew more than Gilchrist about Nellie Wood, thought of the possible triangular tension between the governess and the Fanshawes. I thought, also, of the red-blooded Buck Valentine, who had followed Nellie Wood off the porch on what had turned out to be her final exit from the Talisman Inn and life. I thought, too, of Mr. Usher and his ginger-brown eyes sliding from his Bible to the shapely form of the governess.

It was not impossible that the “maniac” was someone who, like myself, paid Mr. Mitchell his weekly bill for accommodation (American plan).

After that my thoughts started drifting to the churchyard and that other lantern—or was it the same one?—by the open grave. There I bogged down.

“How long do you think she’s been dead?” I asked Gilchrist.

“It’s almost impossible to tell with all this mist and sea air.”

“What time is it now?”

“Close on one o’clock, Dr. Westlake,” said Sergeant Barnes.

I counted back. “Then it can’t have happened much more than two hours ago. I saw her leave the inn around ten-thirty.”

“You saw her?” grunted Gilchrist.

“Yes. She said she was just going out for a breath of fresh air before bed.” I turned to Barnes. “I’ve got a couple of things to tell that may give you a line, Sergeant. But you say the inspector should be here from Haling any minute, I guess they can wait till then.”

“I guess so, sir.” Barnes’s voice sounded lost. “My job’s never been much more than to see they don’t speed on the short road and that the village kids don’t swim bare-ass too near the hotel.” He gave an awkward laugh. “I ain’t really trained up to be one of them big-shot detectives.”

After that no one said anything. It seemed to me that through the din of the elements there trailed a woman’s voice whimpering thinly.

I said, “Is there a woman around?”

“Sure,” muttered Barnes. “It’s that Maggie Hillman from up to the inn. One of the waitresses. She’s the one found the body in the first place. She

called me from the Coast Guard Station, and now she's scared to go home alone. I guess we best keep her here now till Sweeney arrives."

It had never occurred to me in the confusion to ask who had discovered the body. I knew Maggie Hillman, of course. She was the more memorable of the two waitresses, the one who had not brought Dawn and me our supper that night. A pretty wisp of a thing, with mousy hair and a cute nose that always shone in a crisis.

My earlier experiences with murder had given me a desire to be thorough in investigation. Even though this was a case in which I had no responsibility I asked the sergeant:

"Mind if I have a talk with her, Barnes?"

"Go ahead. Maybe you can get something out of her. More'n I could. Guess she's scared of me because I'm a cop. Even Doc Gilchrist, who treated her when she was that bad with poison ivy all over her leg this July and who she ain't afraid of, couldn't get her to say much of anything."

Maggie Hillman sounded like a distinctly nervous subject. I called her name and moved out of the circle of light toward the sound of muffled sobbing.

The girl was only a few feet away in the darkness, huddled in a vague heap on the sand. My flashlight fell on her white, cute little face. Her tiptilted nose was shinier than I had ever seen it.

"Don't be afraid, Maggie," I said. "It's only Dr. Westlake."

I squatted at her side and took her cold hand.

"Listen, Maggie, the inspector will be coming any minute now from Haling. Perhaps if you talk to me now you won't have to talk to him. You'd rather have me question you than the police inspector."

She dabbed at her eyes with a scrap of a handkerchief. "Oh, Dr. Westlake, I couldn't talk to the police." She started to sob again. "That poor Miss Wood. It was a fiend that did it, laying her out that way—like an undertaker. One of those fiends you read about who murder young girls. He'll get us all. I know he will. He'll get us all."

I saw in her a prelude to the wave of terror which would sweep over the whole little community when the truth was generally known.

A sex fiend ... A maniac loose in Cape Talisman ... No girl safe ...

By another reference to Inspector Sweeney I managed to extract from her a version of what had happened. She had been for a walk, she said, after having helped set the breakfast tables for tomorrow. She had seen the pink lantern by the Monk's Head and become curious.

"I—I went down, Dr. Westlake. And I saw that dreadful thing lying on the sand." Her voice faltered. "I was going to run back to the inn, but there was a light at the Coast Guard's. So I ran there and they called Sergeant Barnes. That's all." She clung to my hand. "I swear that's all I know, Dr. Westlake. I've never done anything wrong. Please tell the inspector that. Please don't make me have to talk to him—not tonight."

I promised her I would do my best. But I wondered about that "walk" she had taken.

Maggie Hillman, I was pretty sure, was not the athletic type who went for solitary walks on foggy, unwholesome nights just for the fun of it.

She had started to sob again. The sound echoed drearily, mingling with the thump of the breakers against the sand. I patted her shoulder and rejoined Barnes and Gilchrist at the base of the Monk's Head.

Gilchrist muttered impatiently: "What the hell's keeping Sweeney?"

"He'd best get here soon," said Barnes. "The tide's all but up to the Head. Come twenty, minutes or so and we'll have to move the body unless we want it washed away."

The three of us stood there. Gilchrist had a pack of cigarettes. We each lighted one, shielding matches behind our oilskins.

The burning tips cut three red holes in the foggy darkness. They seemed the only light on the whole barren shore—the only lights except for that pink Chinese lantern which still flickered and sputtered on the sand at our feet.

V

The candle flame in the lantern trembled and went out. We waited in complete darkness for what seemed like hours, though, in fact, no more than ten minutes can have elapsed before we heard voices through the curtain of fog and saw the dimmed beams of flashlights.

Inspector Sweeney and a flock of attendants bore down upon us. The inspector's dynamic presence made itself felt instantly, although in the dark he was little more than a crisp voice. While his men moved to their appointed tasks he extracted the bare facts from Barnes and, together with the medical examiner, shot questions at Gilchrist, with whom he seemed on intimate terms.

He shone his flashlight onto the corpse, stooped to peer more closely, and gave a grunt.

"Guess you're right, Gilchrist. Looks a pretty crazy setup to me."

He switched the flashlight full onto my face.

"Who's this?"

Gilchrist introduced me and gave his reasons for having called me to the scene.

"Westlake," mused the inspector. "Westlake. You're not that Dr. Westlake who helped break those murders over Groves-town way? Worked with Inspector Cobb?"

I had not realized that my very local reputation as a detective had stretched so far.

"I don't know that I did much to help break the case," I said, "but I'm the man you mean."

"Lucky for us. I'm shorthanded, and Barnes here hasn't much experience in this kind of work, have you, Barnes?"

"Guess that's right, sir," said the sergeant.

“Okay, then. We can use you, Westlake. I can swear you in as a deputy sheriff or something if you like. But who cares about that? Only red tape. I need you. That’s all there is to it, and I guess you—”

I said reluctantly: “I’m here on vacation, you know. And I’ve got my young daughter along. I don’t—”

“Nonsense. I know you amateurs. All the same. You’re itching to get in on this thing. Can’t fool me. How about it? Can I count you in?”

He was right. There is something about murder that does things to my nerve ends. I guess it’s the way a hound feels when the huntsman yells, “View halloo,” or whatever a huntsman yells when he sights a fox.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll do what I can.”

The inspector grunted and disappeared for a few seconds while he rapped out orders to his men. He was back again, barking:

“Who discovered the body?”

I told him about Maggie Hillman and, true to my promise, suggested that, since she was in an overemotional state, she might be spared from official questioning until the next day. It worked.

Gilchrist had completed his conference with the medical examiner and joined us now. Sweeney said suddenly: “Well, Westlake, you’re staying up at the inn. You must have known this Nellie Wood. Anybody around there that wanted to murder her?”

The inspector was nothing if not direct. I told him what I knew.

He gave a sharp whistle. “Sol That’s a right expensive sapphire on her finger. Maybe Fanshawe gave it her. Anything else?”

I told them then about my adventure earlier in the evening with the Chinese lantern in the churchyard. That created a minor sensation.

“Another Chinese lantern—in the churchyard?” exclaimed Gilchrist.

“I don’t know that it was another lantern,” I said. “It may have been the same one. I don’t even know whether it has anything to do with the murder.”

“Two Chinese lanterns make one too many coincidences,” said Sweeney. “And you say a coffin had been half dug up. What was the point?”

“At the time I thought someone might have been trying to move one of the coffins before the sea washed it away.”

“That was a hell of a furtive way to set about it. Anyone who wants to can have dead relatives moved to the new churchyard. All the village knows that. All they have to do is to put in a legitimate claim to Gilchrist and the health authorities and get a signed release. They passed a local ordinance about it a year or so ago when the hurricane made them abandon the church. Isn’t that right, Gilchrist?”

“Yes,” said the doctor.

Barnes, who had been carrying out some order of Sweeney’s, was back at our side. He had been listening to the conversation without speaking. Now he said:

“Guess this thing in the churchyard Dr. Westlake saw ain’t just something that happened once, Inspector.”

“You mean you know something about it too?” snapped Sweeney.

“This morning one of the women down to the village stopped me on the street. She was all het up and excited. Seems she had to go through the churchyard last night and she swore she’d seen something, a gray figure or something, prowling around the graves. A ghost, she reckoned it was, and she was in a state. I didn’t pay it too much mind, because you know how women get—see a ghost at the drop of a hat, they will, if they feel in a spooky mood. But now—”

He broke off. None of us spoke. There was nothing much to say.

Sweeney said abruptly:

“Any one broken the news to the Fanshawes yet?”

“No sir,” said Barnes.

“You’d better take care of that, Barnes. Gilchrist and I have got to get the body back to the morgue for an autopsy. Take Westlake along with you. He knows the people. Let him handle them.” He turned to me. “See what you can get out of them, Westlake. Try and find out whether there was anything in this rumor of an affair between Fanshawe and Nellie Wood. Try and find out how the wife felt about it. And try and find out what they were all doing around the time of the crime. Don’t let them think they’re under

suspicion. That Valentine boy too. See what you can do with him. I'll be around early tomorrow and will take over where you leave off."

"All right." I had been sleepy once, but I seemed to have forgotten all about that now. "Don't you want someone to go to the churchyard and see whether that other lantern's still there?"

"Sure." Sweeney gave a little chuckle. "That's another job for you and Barnes. Do it after you've interviewed the people at the inn. There's no hurry. If it does have anything to do with the murder you can be sure the murderer's removed it by now and filled in the grave. And if it's only ghosts—I guess they'll still be haunting any time you feel like getting there."

He turned away and forgot us. Barnes and I picked up Maggie Hillman, who was standing, a frightened shadow, on the fringe of the circle of light.

The three of us started back along the dark beach to the inn.

The lights were still burning on the porch of the Talisman Inn. Barnes and I guided the shaken Maggie through the screen door out of the fog.

I had grown so used to the invisibility of my fellows that it came as quite a shock to be able to see them. Maggie was wearing a blue raincoat and under it a pretty blue dress which was obviously her "best." It struck me as odd that she should have put on her best dress to go for a solitary walk on the beach.

I noticed that her little face was streaked with make-up which had been rendered grotesquely amateurish by tears and the salt spray. That was odd, too, since Mr. Mitchell was fanatically puritanical where the help were concerned. He rigorously discouraged "boy friends" for the girls and forbade the use of cosmetics, perfume, and everything else that smacked of carnal desirability.

Sergeant Barnes loomed large and bony, his dark, rather sad face framed in a shiny sou'wester. He was even taller than my recollection of him from chance encounters in the village. I liked the look of him—weather-beaten and kindly. His eyes were kind too.

He patted the girl's shoulder. "Now, Maggie, you'd best be running along to bed and get some sleep. See you dry yourself off good or you'll be catching your death."

Maggie glanced helplessly from Barnes to me. "I'm all right. I am really."

At that moment Mr. Mitchell scurried out onto the porch. His fussy gaze moved from Barnes to me and then fell on Maggie, his eyes gleaming with disapproval. He had obviously seen the straggly make-up. He had obviously, too, jumped to the wrong conclusion as to why his waitress had been brought home in so disheveled a condition by a doctor and the village cop.

"So it's you, Maggie," he snapped. "You're the one who's been causing all this trouble, getting Dr. Westlake out of bed, keeping me up. What is it, Barnes? Been out with some drunk, I'll be bound. I never trust them—those little sly ones."

Maggie's hand had gone pathetically to her cheek, as if she had only just remembered the guilty lipstick and eyebrow pencil.

"Go up to your room and take that disgusting stuff off your face."

I don't like little men who make themselves feel big by bullying defenseless girls.

"You've got things mixed up, Mitchell. We brought Maggie home because she found the corpse." I deliberately made that like a sock on the jaw. "Nellie Wood, the Fanshawes' governess, has been murdered. Maggie found the body down by the Monk's Head—strangled."

"Strangled!" Mitchell's eyes popped out of their sockets. "Miss Wood murdered? Staying here at my hotel and murdered?"

"Yes." I said. "Lucky the season's over, isn't it?"

Mr. Mitchell took that straight. "Yes, yes. A blessing, indeed! But, mercy, how terrible. I suppose the Fanshawes will leave, and Miss Heywood. And Mr. Usher too. What a terrible—"

I cut in: "I suppose the Fanshawes are both upstairs in their room? We have to break the news to them."

"Why, yes, yes. Mrs. Fanshawe retired quite early, and I saw Mr. Fanshawe come in just a few moments ago."

"Come in? Where from?"

Mr. Mitchell was his prim self again. "I never ask my guests where they have been. Presumably he had been working late at his painting and wanted

a breath of fresh air.”

Here was someone else who had taken one of those remarkable “breaths of fresh air.”

Barnes and I started away from Mitchell toward the stairs. Maggie Hillman, very subdued, followed us. I turned back. “By the way, Mitchell, where’s Buck Valentine’s room?”

Maggie swung round.

“Buck!” Mitchell echoed sharply. “It’s the first room at the head of the stairs on the third floor. But why? Why do you want to know?”

“We’ve got to talk to him too.”

For some reason or other that seemed to rout the composure of Mr. Mitchell. He just stood there gaping.

As we went up the stairs I glanced back at him over my shoulder. He was standing in the hall staring after us and gnawing at his nails.

It was news, indeed, when the immaculate manager of the Talisman Inn did anything so inelegant as to bite his nails.

VI

On the first landing Maggie Hillman left us and hurried up the next flight of stairs. I caught a last glimpse of her cute little face with its bizarre smudge of make-up and its shiny tiptilted nose. It was white and tense as if all the miseries of the world were on her shoulders.

And I guess they were.

We reached the Fanshawes' apartment. Barnes's gnarled hand went out to knock. But I checked him.

"Listen," I breathed.

Someone in the Fanshawe apartment was sobbing with the deep, racking persistence of heartbreak. I thought, of course, of five-year-old Bobby. Children cry at night. But this, I was sure, was not a child.

"A woman!" muttered Barnes.

A woman—Marion Fanshawe. Mrs. Fanshawe sobbing in her room before we had brought the news of the murder to her or her husband.

Barnes rapped on the door. It was opened by Virgil Fanshawe in an old white shirt and a pair of paint-stained blue jeans.

Virgil Fanshawe was somewhere in his thirties. Husky and boyish, with intelligent eyes and a humorous mouth, he looked more like an engineer than an artist.

His eyes were dark and tired, with a hint of some sadness behind them. But he greeted us with a cheerful disregard for the lateness of the hour.

"Hello, Joe. Hello, Westlake. Come in. I was just about to have a nightcap."

"H'ya, Virgil." Barnes patted his shoulder. They were obviously on good terms. I was surprised that they had even met. Fanshawe led us into the largest of the rooms, which he used as a studio.

There was no sign of Marion Fanshawe and, by some trick of acoustics, the sobbing which had sounded so clearly in the corridor was almost

inaudible here. I would not have noticed it if I hadn't been listening intently. It came from behind the door to the Fanshawes' bedroom.

Fanshawe was humming as he fussed with the drinks at the side table. Neither Barnes nor I seemed to find the right thing to say.

In spite of the canvases stacked against the walls, the palette and paints thrown on a table, and the huge easel in front of the window, the "studio" managed to retain that air of shabby respectability which was the hallmark of the Talisman Inn.

Although I knew Virgil Fanshawe to be a successful book-and-magazine illustrator in New York, I had never seen any of his work. I moved over to the easel on which a canvas was propped.

What confronted me was startling. The picture showed the spirits of the dead enduring all varieties of torment in a crazy, tenebrous hell. Naked figures of men and women writhed and twisted in bizarre attitudes. The figures themselves were drawn with great power and an accuracy of draftsmanship worthy of the old masters.

The canvas was still unfinished and, from the wet surface of the paint, I saw that Fanshawe had been recently working on one of the female figures—a young blond girl lying in chains beneath the thrusting trident of a devil. I looked more closely. The girl's face, shown in detail, was familiar—horribly so in the light of what had happened tonight.

I had known, of course, that Nellie Wood had been posing for Fanshawe. Even so, it came as a shock to realize that she had been posing for this particularly gruesome canvas.

Virgil Fanshawe had joined me, carrying my drink. He grinned.

"Quite a grisly little number, isn't it? Don't get any ideas though. I'm not a secret sadist. It's just an order. A special edition of Dante. This is the Inferno. Like it?"

He handed me the drink. I took it awkwardly. Barnes moved to our side.

I murmured: "It's most convincing."

Fanshawe patted Barnes's arm. "How does it look to a good old Cape Talisman eye?" He turned back to me. "Joe and I are pals from way back. I was a Cape Talisman boy, you know. Before I went to the big city Joe and I used to go fishing together."

“Well, Virgil,” said Barnes, “I reckon pictures and painting are kind of out of my line, but it looks right pretty to me.”

Fanshawe laughed. “I’ve been in luck, Westlake. It’s impossible to get models around these parts. Just for that very reason I didn’t think we’d be able to come here this year, although I was keen for Marion and Bobby to get some quiet and sea air. But it all turned out swell. I’ve been using the young lifeguard for the male figures, and for the women Nellie—that’s Bobby’s governess—is a cinch.” He ran a hand over his untidy brown hair. “She’s got a beautiful body, that girl, and she’s been swell about posing.”

Barnes cleared his throat. Fanshawe lifted his drink. I noticed that his blunt-fingered hand was not entirely steady.

“Here’s to Dante and the Inferno. It ought to be finished soon. I’ll only need Nellie for a couple more figures.”

That was obviously the moment. I said: “I’m afraid you won’t be able to finish that picture—unless you find another model.”

“Another model?”

“You weren’t worried about Nellie Wood when she didn’t come in?”

“Why, isn’t she in? She sleeps with Bobby down the corridor. I hadn’t any idea—” The pupils of Fanshawe’s dark eyes contracted. “What is it, Joe? Has something happened to Nellie?”

“’Fraid it’s something pretty bad, Virgil.” Barnes stared at his drink. “She’s dead. She was found down the beach a piece, strangled and all fixed up with a fancy Chinese lantern throwing light all over her and a crazy kind of red circle painted right around the mole on her cheek. Some crazy man done it—the inspector from Haling thinks.”

Fanshawe stood absolutely still. Through the open neck of his shirt I could see the veins on his throat pulsing.

“This isn’t true. You’re making it up.”

“It’s absolutely true.”

“Nellie murdered.” He gestured dazedly. “And a lantern! What’s this about a lantern and a scarlet circle?”

I gave him an exact description of the body as we had discovered it. I could not help reflecting how that dreadful tableau might almost have sprung from Fanshawe’s own Inferno canvas. The artist listened without

speaking. I also told him of my semi-official connection with the police. When I was finished he murmured:

“Poor Nellie. What a way to have to die.” He passed a hand across his forehead. “The whole thing sounds crazy, as crazy as can be. Of course it was some madman. That’s what the inspector thinks, you say?”

“I guess so,” I said guardedly. “We’ve got to cover all possibilities though. And you could help us on that as the girl’s employer. Know anything about her? Any reason why anyone might have wanted to kill her?”

A faint flush spread over his cheeks. “Good heavens, no. I don’t think she had much of anything to do with the village people or even the people here at the inn. We kept her very busy, you know. When she wasn’t taking care of Bobby she was posing for me most of the time.”

“You know anything about her past?”

“Nothing at all. We needed someone to take care of Bobby while we were up here. We just hired her, that’s all.”

“In New York?”

“Yes. She came through some perfectly respectable agency with a lot of imposing-looking references. Perhaps they could tell you something about her. Never concerned myself with her private life. I just hired her because she seemed what we wanted. I must confess her figure had something to do with it. I had it in mind to use her as a model from the start.”

“So it was you who hired her,” I said, “not your wife?”

“Why—why, yes. Marion hasn’t been at all well for some time. I try and take all those things off her shoulders.”

There was no point in asking him outright what his own relations with the girl had been.

I said quite casually: “The inspector wanted me to ask about the ring—a sapphire she was wearing on her finger.”

“You mean it’s been stolen?”

“No. The inspector just wondered where she got it. Do you happen to know?”

Fanshawe’s lashes flickered. “Probably some heirloom—or maybe even an engagement ring. For all I know, she had a fiancé somewhere.”

He stopped speaking. Barnes and I stood watching him. The silence was curiously keyed up.

“Then—” I began.

But I broke off. Because suddenly the silence had been splintered by a laugh coming from behind me. It was an extraordinary laugh—flat, dry, and short, with absolutely no intonations.

I spun around, and so did Barnes.

Marion Fanshawe was standing at the open door of the bedroom. She was staring straight at us and, although the laugh was finished, her lips were still parted in a fixed smile.

It was a terrifying smile because it seemed to have no connection with her, as if it had been put on her mouth just the way an earring is put on an ear.

Her beautiful little figure was sheathed in a white house coat. Her face was fragile and flowerlike as ever. All sign of tears had been removed from the gray eyes.

And she just stood there, her hands hanging at her sides, staring with that wrong, awful smile.

Virgil Fanshawe’s face was as startlingly changed as his wife’s. All the light had left it. He looked crushed and haunted as a figure from his own picture.

“Marion dear—” He started toward her. “You’re tired. You must go back to bed.”

His hand went out to her in clumsy tenderness. Marion Fanshawe stared at it as if it were some poisonous snake, and then, before it could touch her, she shuddered away.

“I heard what they said.” She spoke quietly. “I was listening from the bedroom. Nellie Wood has been murdered.”

“Marion darling—please.”

I said something like: “I hate having to break in like this with such bad news. Mrs. Fanshawe.”

She gave me one of her sweet, half-shy glances while the lashes almost hid her eyes. “It was better for us to hear the truth as soon as possible.”

She ran a hand over her cascading ash-blond hair.

“Marion darling, please go back to bed. You know you mustn’t upset yourself.”

The agony of tenderness in Fanshawe’s voice was painfully genuine.

Marion had still not spoken a word to her husband. She pulled a chair from the wall and sat down on it, folding her hands in her lap.

“Please go on asking my husband whatever you have to ask, Dr. Westlake.”

“Yes, Westlake,” said Fanshawe huskily. “Is there anything else you want to know?”

I glanced at Barnes. He was shuffling uneasily.

“Just as a matter of course,” I said, “I have to check up on everyone’s movements. Mr. Mitchell told me you only came back a few moments before we arrived. Is that true?”

Fanshawe shrugged. “Yes.”

“And where had you been?”

The inevitable came.

“Oh, just for a walk. I’d done a lot of painting. I felt stuffy. Needed a breath of air.”

“How long were you out?”

“Oh, I don’t know, really. I lost count of time.”

“Where did you go?”

“Just down the beach. Down past the churchyard. That way.”

Nellie Wood must have been murdered around eleven. The time at which Mr. Fanshawe had left the inn was obviously of crucial importance.

“You can’t remember what time you left?”

Fanshawe shrugged.

“Sorry, I can’t.”

“I can.” It was Marion Fanshawe’s voice which broke in. “I know exactly when it was because I was on the porch. Nellie came down first and went out. I asked if you were finished with your work, and she said you still had a lot of painting to do. But even so, you came down very soon afterward and went straight out. About ten minutes after Nellie. About twenty minutes to eleven. And, Virgil, you didn’t go in the direction of the

churchyard, did you? I saw you turn in the other direction—the direction Nellie took.”

Her voice as she spoke those deadly words was soft, almost childlike. When she had finished she just sat there on the chair with her hands folded on her lap, pretty and still as a snowdrop.

She looked at Fanshawe. Then she turned to look at Barnes and me. I saw her lips part. They started to smile.

Then suddenly she laughed again—that short, senseless, almost barking laugh.

VII

A few moments later Barnes and I moved down the corridor from that extraordinary interview.

Barnes broke the silence: “Mighty queer women can be, Dr. Westlake—coming out with that after her husband had told us quite a different story, almost like she wanted us to suspect him. She always seemed like such a quiet, sweet little thing too—so kind and pleasant always.”

“Mighty queer” seemed as good a way as any to describe the most unwifely behavior of Marion Fanshawe.

Barnes scratched his ear with a bony finger. “Maybe Virgil is mixed up in this business, but to be frank, Dr. Westlake, it kind of ain’t believable to me. Virgil’s always been such a good sort of a guy. Of course he was crazy when he was a kid. Always off on his own, painting, painting all the time. His father, old Bob Fanshawe, was a fisherman around here, and he was raising Virgil up to take the boat over when he got too old. Virgil didn’t go for that at all. He couldn’t think of nothing but his painting, and one morning he up and quit and left a note saying he was off to New York to be an artist. We all thought he was tetchèd, of course. And his dad, he never forgave him, he didn’t. Wouldn’t ever speak to him again, and he didn’t, not till the day he died.”

Barnes shook his head. “But Virgil made good all right, and it didn’t go to his head neither. When he came back here he was just the same as he’d been when he left—democratic, joshing around with us about old times and all. No, Virgil’s a good guy, Westlake. Not like that Johnny Mitchell.” He snorted. “Anyone’d think the way he snoots around this dump of an inn and has everyone call him *Mister* Mitchell that he was one of them princes from the other side or something instead of a plain Cape Talisman boy like the rest of us.”

Barnes's local ramblings would, not doubt, have exasperated the efficient Sweeney. They interested me.

"Mr. Mitchell's a local boy too?" I asked. That was surprising.

"Sure. Johnny Mitchell went off to New York, too, and worked himself up in the hotel business. But when he came back—well, you wouldn't have known him. No sir. And him having the nerve to act like he was something from off Park Avenue when all of us knew about them Mitchells, knew his sister was nothing more'n a common—"

The shortcomings of Mitchell's sister struck me as a little too irrelevant. Barnes, it seemed, as a source of local information had to be firmly blue-penciled. Before he had a chance to launch into a denunciation of that unknown woman I veered him off by saying:

"Well, we'd better be getting up to Buck Valentine's room and find out what he has to say. Time's precious since we've got to go to the churchyard too."

Sergeant Barnes shook his head darkly. "Tell you the truth, I'm kind of worried about that churchyard business. Spooks and lanterns and dug-up graves ... Now I remember when I was a kid ..."

I guided him firmly up the second flight of stairs.

Buck's door was closed. Barnes knocked. Nothing happened. He knocked again. From inside the room came a series of low, complaining grunts. Then Buck's voice sounded sulkily:

"Who is it?"

"It's Dr. Westlake," I called. "And Sergeant Barnes."

I heard a scuffling, followed by another sequence of grunts and the pad of footsteps. Then the door opened.

Buck Valentine stood on the threshold, staring at us from vivid blue eyes that blinked sleepily. The boy had thrown a light blue bathrobe around the huge body which had posed for Fanshawe's pictures. The robe was open at the neck, and its color heightened the near ebony of his tan.

"What the hell's the matter," he asked, "barging in at this hour of the night?"

The bathrobe cord was only loosely knotted, and I noticed that this gigantic young man did not wear anything as effeminate as pajamas. We

moved into the room. Barnes pushed the door shut behind us. Buck stretched, thrusting out a naked leg that rippled with muscles.

“Been asleep for hours,” he volunteered. “What time is it, anyway?”

“About two-thirty,” I said.

Buck’s small box of a room was decorated much as I had expected it to be. At eye level the walls were circled with photographs of luscious girls. Some of them were obviously girls of his acquaintance who had scribbled an affectionate greeting and a signature in the corner. Others were less accessible beauties, torn from movie magazines.

I noticed that the chain of photographs stretched unbrokenly around the whole room except for one gap just above the bed. I wondered about that gap.

I also wondered about the bed itself. Buck Valentine had told us he had been asleep for hours. He must have been an extraordinarily undisturbed sleeper. Except for the impression of his head on the pillow and of his body between the sheets, the bed was as if he had slipped into it only a few moments before we arrived.

The young lifeguard dropped into a chair and grabbed a cigarette from a pack on the table. He stared impatiently.

“What’s on your mind?”

Barnes just stood there silently waiting for me to begin.

I said: “We’ve come about Nellie Wood, Buck.”

“Nellie Wood?” Behind the smoke Buck’s blue eyes widened. “Why the hell come to me about Nellie Wood?”

“She’s been murdered,” I said. “We’ve just found her body down the beach—strangled.”

His great thumb and forefinger held the cigarette in midair. Their pressure crushed it, sending tobacco splaying out of its sides. “Nellie Wood—murdered! My God!” His young face, massive as something sculptured by Michelangelo, showed dazed horror. “What’s the idea? Why come to me?”

I liked Buck. He was a great favorite of Dawn’s, and he had been wonderful with her, accepting her rather oozy hero worship good-naturedly and listening in long-suffering patience to her ceaseless prattle on the beach.

The hard-boiled Sweeney would doubtless have tried some fancy ruse to trick a damning admission out of him.

I merely said: "It's obvious why we've come to you, Buck. She must have been murdered quite a short time after she left the porch this evening. I was there. And I saw you follow her out onto the dunes."

"Follow her?" Buck rose, the bathrobe swirling around his titanesque torso. "Doc, that's crazy. I didn't follow her."

I remembered that cryptic but significant glance which had passed between him and the governess.

"You didn't?"

"For Christ's sake, no!" He started to fiddle with the bathrobe cord. "I was just bored sitting around on the porch with nothing to do. She came down and went out. Seeing her go just—just gave me the idea to go out too. I—You don't imagine I had a date with her, do you?"

"So you went out," I said dryly, "just for a breath of fresh air?"

His blue, blazing eyes stared back. "Sure. That's it. Just for a breath of fresh air."

Nellie—Maggie—Virgil Fanshawe—and now Buck.

That made four breaths of fresh air that night.

"And you didn't see Nellie out on the beach?"

"Not since she left the porch. Not a sigh of her. I swear it. Forgot all about her. I went in the other direction anyway—up toward the village."

"Other direction?" I said quickly. "If you didn't see Nellie after she left the porch how did you know what direction she took?"

He flushed. "Well, she—she must have gone in the other direction. Otherwise I'd have seen her, wouldn't I?"

"What time did you get back?"

"Oh, I didn't pay any attention to the time." Buck glanced uneasily at Barnes and turned back to me. "You—The police don't think I had anything to do with this? That's crazy. Why would I want to murder the girl? I—I didn't even know her."

"You didn't know her?"

"Of course I knew her—the way everyone at the inn knew her. But"—his eyes moved along the photographs on the wall—"but I never had

anything to do with her. Never. She wouldn't have had any time for me anyway."

I glanced at the photographs too. "Plenty of other girls seemed to have time for you, Buck."

He grinned. It wasn't a successful grin.

"Not Nellie." Then even the ghost of the grin went. He blurted: "Why should she have bothered with me? She was all set with Fanshawe."

"With Fanshawe?" put in Barnes sharply. "You mean she *was* carrying on with Fanshawe?"

Buck stared down at his huge hands. "Of course. Didn't you know that? I thought everyone did. That ring, for example. That big sapphire or whatever it is—where d'you suppose she got that?"

"Listen, Buck," I said. "This is important. You'd better tell the truth. Did Fanshawe give her that ring?"

"That's what Nellie told me. She should know."

"Nellie told you?"

"Sure." He was floundering. "Not—not that we had anything to do with each other, you understand. Just one evening we were alone on the porch and started talking—and she told me about it. Fanshawe was crazy for her, she said. He was rich and she was sitting pretty; that's what she said."

I grunted. "So Nellie Wood confided in you to that extent—although you were almost strangers."

"Yes. You know the way you get in these little lonely dumps."

"I see," I said. "Then you haven't anything to offer, Buck—nothing that might help us?"

"Nothing more than I said." The boy gave a forced laugh and said with an unsuccessful attempt at cynicism: "Getting herself murdered in this two-cent town—that's going some. Don't know how she managed it."

I doubted whether there was much more to be gotten out of Buck Valentine that night.

"Well," I remarked, "Inspector Sweeney will be around tomorrow, Buck. He's the one you'll have to talk to."

I rose. Barnes shuffled forward, patently relieved at the prospect of our departure.

Buck came with us to the door. As he did so I noticed that his gaze shot to a scrap basket in the corner and then flashed swiftly away.

Without saying anything I crossed to the scrap basket. Inside it were the four pieces of a torn photograph. As I bent to pick them out Buck plunged across the room toward me.

“Let that alone. Let—”

The sentence was never finished. He realized it was too late. I took the four pieces of the photograph to a table and fitted them together.

Staring back at me in a very voluptuous pose was a striking likeness of Nellie Wood.

And at the right-hand bottom corner, in a round feminine hand, had been written:

BUCK DARLING,
This is for memories,
NELLIE.

There was no need now for an explanation of that gap in the gallery of scalps on the wall.

The lifeguard stood at my side, his face a grayish yellow under the tan. I turned. I stared at him.

“So there was nothing between you and Nellie Wood,” I said “She didn’t have any time for a lifeguard. You didn’t have a date with her on the beach tonight. You know nothing about this thing. Okay, Buck.”

He didn’t say a word. Of course he didn’t. There was absolutely nothing for him to say.

I picked up the pieces of photograph, slipped them into my pocket, and joined Barnes at the door.

Buck did not move. The bathrobe had become unknotted again and was hanging loose, revealing his great sun-tanned body. He was standing very erect and yet he gave the impression of a bowed, broken man.

As I followed Barnes out into the drab corridor I was thinking of the many things which that torn photograph implied. It proved very definitely that Buck had lied about his own relations with the dead girl. Did it prove,

also, that he had lied about Fanshawe's in a shameless attempt to shift the suspicion onto the other man?

In any case, I felt it was virtually certain that Nellie had been playing a clever double game, using Fanshawe for the pickings, Buck for—the memories.

A double game can be a dangerous game. It can also lead to murder—without benefit of a motiveless maniac.

But as we left the lifeguard's room I was thinking in particular of the simple fact that the photograph had been torn and thrown away.

Buck Valentine must have deliberately destroyed his “memory picture” of Nellie Wood because he knew we would be coming and would be trying to find out his relationship with the dead girl.

That torn photograph could only mean that, somehow or other, he had known about the murder before Barnes and I arrived to break the news.

And that, of course, opened up a great many vistas.

I made no comment upon that second embarrassing interview.

“Well,” I said, “I guess we go to the churchyard next.”

We reached the hall. All the lights had been extinguished except one shaded reading lamp. Some of the mist had crept in from outside. It curled in vague tendrils through the musty air, lending a rather unearthly atmosphere to the dull and respectable lobby.

We had neither of us taken off our oilskins and we were still holding our flashlights.

“Come on, Barnes,” I began.

I broke off as a cold gust of damp air struck the back of my neck. I turned. So did the sergeant.

Just outside the half-open front door, almost invisible through the gray obscurity, stood a figure.

Gradually I made out the tall, willowy silhouette of a woman. She was carrying something gray in her arms.

For a moment she seemed undecided whether or not to enter. Then she swung the door back and glided into the hall.

I recognized Miss Heywood. Her handsome, unfashionable face was as serene as ever. Her Grecian, artistic coiffure was slightly disarranged by the

wind and dampened by the sea air.

In her arms she was carrying a large bunch of bayberry.

She moved toward us, her mouth forming itself into a charming smile. I was reminded of the manageress of a teashop proceeding toward would-be partakers of the blue-plate special.

“Good evening, Dr. Westlake.” She gave Barnes a nod too. “Such a lovely night—so wild, so romantic.”

“Yes,” I gulped.

“And this beautiful bayberry. I found it down on the dunes and I couldn’t resist it.” Her laughter tinkled. “Such pretty stuff. So artistic. I plan to paint some tomorrow. I feel so well always here at Cape Talisman. And so refreshed after my—”

I knew what was coming. I had an almost overwhelming desire to shout it in unison with Miss Heywood.

It came.

“—after my breath of fresh air,” said Miss Heywood.

With another charming smile she drifted past us and up the stairs out of sight.

VIII

With Miss Heywood's ladylike disappearance Barnes and I headed out once again into the foggy darkness. The sergeant seemed to have been refreshed by our confusing interviews. As we groped our way across the dunes toward the beach he regaled me with a rambling discussion upon crime and Cape Talisman.

"Yes sir, Dr. Westlake, ain't nothing like this happened in Talisman—ain't been nothing so exciting since my first year in the force twenty years ago, when the whole Cora Mitchell business broke."

Barnes was a dogged man. I might have known I was doomed to hear about Mitchell's sister sooner or later. Out of politeness I said: "That's Mitchell's sister you were telling me about?"

"Sure." Barnes snorted. "Not that he likes being reminded of it. No sir. He won't have her name mentioned when he's around. Wouldn't even pay a nickel to give her a decent burial when she died a couple of weeks back at the Haling Penitentiary."

"Indeed?" I said, stumbling over one of Miss Heywood's bayberry bushes. I was faintly curious now. Mr. Mitchell wasn't the type to have criminal sisters.

"You must remember Cora Mitchell," said the sergeant. "Her picture was in all the papers—even the New York papers. Jewel thief. Real big-time jewel thief she was. And it was here she was finally caught—right here in Talisman." Barnes's voice registered pride. "And it was me that arrested her. Right down to the village in her dad's home. Got my picture in the paper too. Yes sir, them were days all right."

The tide was still rising. The crash of the breakers on the sand boomed around us. We slithered off the dunes down onto the beach, which made for easier walking. We hurried through the murk in the opposite direction from

Monk's Head toward the crumbling promontory which marked what was left of the old churchyard.

Barnes knew the shore line like the palm of his hand. At one point which seemed no different to me than any other he said:

"This is where the churchyard begins—just up above the dunes."

We headed to the left up the beach and, sure enough, reached the sloping, grass-scattered dunes which fringed the promontory. Slipping about in the loose sand, we managed to climb until we were standing only a few feet from the spot where Dawn and I had first seen the lantern.

There was something about that churchyard. The darkness, the fog, the distant boom of the waves was exactly the same here as anywhere else. And yet there was a difference—some subtle chilling emanation of death and desolation.

Our flashlights revealed the small, uniform mounds which marked all that was left of the once respectable resting places of the village forefathers.

"Well, Dr. Westlake, where was it you saw this grave?"

I tried to get my bearings. "The lantern was right about here when we first saw it, and then it moved—over toward the church. The place where it stopped, the place where I saw the grave was under a stunted fir tree. It should be easy enough to find."

We started gingerly forward over the mounds, our flashlights cutting a meager swath in the murk. I found myself half expecting to see once again that pink, tantalizing radiance seeping through the mists.

There was no light, of course. Everything was bleak and dark and dead.

"It must have been somewhere very near here," I murmured.

And as I spoke my flashlight caught the dim silhouette of the fir tree only a few yards ahead.

Beyond it, even dimmer, loomed the slanting shadows of tombstones which had still resisted the assault of the elements. Even farther off, just visible, reared the dark bulk of the church itself.

I led the way over the shapeless mounds toward the tree.

"I left the lantern there—right there in the open grave. And the spade was lying on the grass by the side."

We reached the spot. I was sure it was the spot. Our flashlights focused downward.

I gave a little grunt of surprise. Because there was no lantern, no spade, no hole.

Sweeney's words came back to me: *If what you saw had anything to do with the murder you can be sure it will all have been removed by now.*

Sweeney had been a good prophet.

For one second as I stared down at that smooth, sandy dirt I thought that I might have imagined the whole episode. Then as my flashlight played on the row of huddled, stoneless graves I noticed the earth at the foot of one of the little mounds. It was dark, loose—newly turned.

Barnes was stooping over the grave. "Someone's been digging here all right. And since you was here they've gone and shoveled all the earth back. You said you'd seen the little brass-plate thing that gives the name on the coffin. Did you read the name?"

"No, I didn't—like a fool."

"Well, that don't matter none." Barnes unbent. "Doc Gilchrist, as health officer, knows all about these graves. Up at his office they've got a kind of chart. They made it when the ocean washed the tombstones away. He'll know which grave it is."

He stopped speaking. The silence which settled around us was heavy and oppressive as the fog itself.

A grave dug up and then filled in again—a girl murdered. Two Chinese lanterns. What the hell?

"Guess we'd better look around a piece—see whether they left the lantern or the spade. But I guess they didn't."

Barnes started moving around the mounds, following his flashlight's beam. I joined him—rather desultorily. I agreed with him. I was sure we wouldn't find anything.

I was right.

Apart from the loose earth and that particular grave, there was not the slightest sign that any live human being had been in the churchyard—tonight or ever.

We went back to the inn. Barnes left me. I was just staggering toward the stairs and bed when the telephone at the desk rang. I went to answer it. It was Sweeney, wanting to know what we'd found out. I told him everything. Wearily I dragged myself upstairs and tumbled into bed.

As I sank into an exhausted sleep vague images trailed through my mind—Marion Fanshawe's pretty, flowerlike face distorted in a meaningless smile; Virgil Fanshawe's dark, tormented eyes; Buck Valentine, grayish yellow as he stared down at the torn pieces of photograph.

I thought of Maggie Hillman, too, in her best dress with her nose shining and her cheeks streaked with make-up. I thought of Mr. Usher's ginger-brown eyes sliding from the Bible to Nellie Wood's legs.

The last image of all was that of Miss Heywood—handsome, artistic, toothily smiling as she glided through the lobby with the bayberry in her arms.

So pretty! So artistic! I think I shall paint some tomorrow....

I had dreams of Miss Heywood wielding a sprig of bayberry as a brush, painting an exquisite little water color of Nellie Wood's corpse....

IX

When I awoke next morning the sunshine was splashing over my bed. September had come across with one of those beautiful crisp blue days which can turn Cape Talisman into a paradise. I blinked sleepily out at the placid ocean and felt enthusiastic about the prospect of fishing and laziness on the beach.

Then I remembered last night and all that last night would have brought over into today.

I stopped feeling enthusiastic.

I was stretching drearily and collecting my thoughts about murder and grave digging when the door burst open upon my radiantly euphoric daughter.

She was wearing a grimy old pair of blue jeans and a boy's plaid shirt which she had stolen the year before from a visiting cousin. Her blond hair was flying around and, for some mystic reason, she was clutching a long, unwholesome-looking feather.

"Good morning, Daddy darling." She hurled herself onto the bed and submitted me to a gooey kiss. "Oh, Daddy, so many things have happened. I found this feather on the beach." She wagged the unpleasant object under my nose. "Isn't it beautiful? I think it's a tail feather. I'm going to use it for a pen."

The feather was tickling my nose. I sneezed and pushed it and my daughter away. She remained unruffled, however, and perched herself on the edge of the bed, her legs folded under her, her eyes shining.

"It isn't only the feather," she said importantly. "The whole inn's gone crazy or something. I went down to the chef to make sure about my bluefish, to make sure about its being cooked for breakfast, and he'd almost forgotten. Can you imagine? And he acted awful funny, and then Maggie Hillman came in and her nose was shiny and she looked as if she'd been

crying, and Mr. Mitchell was running around looking like a hen, and then Miss Heywood came down and Mr. Usher and they both said they were going to leave, and that funny tall policeman, Sergeant Barnes, was there and he said no one was to leave the inn, and they argued and got mad and Mr. Mitchell argued, too, and they all said something about it not being safe to stay here and then they stopped talking when they saw me, and I asked what was the matter and they just looked funny, and I showed them my feather and they didn't seem to like it very much...."

That mammoth sentence collapsed through sheer lack of breath. Dawn paused and then added: "Daddy, what's the matter? Why do they all want to leave? We don't want to leave, do we? At least I don't. And we couldn't if we wanted to, which is lovely, because Sergeant Barnes says so. Daddy, do you know what it's all about?"

There is a school of parents who believe in keeping their children ignorant of the unseemlier side of life. I have never belonged to it—partly, perhaps, because it has always been impossible to keep Dawn from finding out anything she sets her mind to investigate.

"Yes," I said, "I know what's the matter. You know Bobby's governess—Nellie Wood? Well, last night something happened to her. She died. And people don't want to stay on because people don't like being around when someone's died."

Dawn blinked. "That pretty governess with the blond hair? She used to pinch Bobby to keep him from picking his nose. I saw her." After this slanderous remark my daughter tickled her own nose with the feather and then commented quite unconcernedly: "Isn't it funny the way people die? She was an awfully silly swimmer. Buck always had to be saving her. She probably drowned—I mean drowned."

I had long since given up any attempt to plumb my daughter's psychological depths. For some reason best known to herself Dawn didn't want to brood about the tragedy of Nellie Wood. So far as I was concerned, that was dandy.

"She probably did," I murmured.

Dawn sat for a few more moments scrutinizing the horrible feather. Then she groped into the pocket of her blue jeans and produced a mangled-

looking letter.

“I’d forgotten all about it. Mr. Fanshawe just stopped me on the stairs and said please to give this to you.” She shook back her hair. “It’s probably just saying about Nellie Wood having passed away and saying please to come to the funeral which will be held at the church at 6 P.M. or something—like that wedding invitation we received just before we left home.”

My daughter’s face was as seraphic as ever. Little girls are weird and terrifying things.

I opened the crumpled envelope and brought out a note written in the blunt, unartistic fist of Virgil Fanshawe.

I read:

DEAR WESTLAKE:

Would you do me a big favor? Marion’s quite sick today and I have to stay with her. We’re going to leave right away if the inspector lets us. But until we do, Bobby presents a problem. He seems to be fond of your daughter. Could you be kind enough to take him under your wing for the morning? If it’s all right send Dawn for him. He knows nothing about Nellie’s death, of course. We have just told him that she’s been called away.

Gratefully yours in advance,

VIRGIL FANSHAWE.

I folded the letter back into its envelope.

Dawn stared at me with keen interest. “Is it an invitation, Daddy?”

“No, brat. Mr. Fanshawe wants you to look after Bobby this morning. Go get him, will you? And for heaven’s sake, don’t tell him anything about Nellie Wood.”

“Look after Bobby!” Dawn’s face became ecstatic. She clapped her hands. “Oh, goody! That will be wonderful.” Then her face fell.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“The bluefish,” she said. “Daddy, couldn’t we please not look after Bobby till *after* breakfast, so’s I needn’t share the—”

“Get Bobby,” I said. I lifted a pillow and brandished it threateningly.

My daughter scurried out of the room.

Within a very few moments she walked in, leading little Bobby Fanshawe by the hand.

It was a most unfortunate moment, because I had gotten out of bed and was struggling with my pajama top which had become twisted around me during the night. Bobby Fanshawe was very small for five years. He had very black hair cut in a flat oriental bang, and very black sooty eyes which stared with archiepiscopal solemnity.

He just stood there with his hand tightly clasped in Dawn's and gave me one of those long disquieting Bobby stares.

Suddenly, in a voice deep and husky as a truck driver's, he said: "Who's that man?"

"It's my daddy," said Dawn. "You know that perfectly. You've seen him every day for two weeks."

Bobby's expression showed no fractional alteration.

"I don't like him," he said. "He looks silly. He's a silly man."

That was more than I could bear. I bawled at them both to get the heck out.

They got.

Dawn had not painted an exaggerated picture of the confusion which reigned that morning at the Talisman Inn. The first thing that met my gaze as I went downstairs was Barnes and Mitchell in an agitated whispered conversation. When they saw me they stared as if they expected me to join them.

I was hungry, however, and in no mood to start being a detective at that early hour. I merely nodded and went out onto the porch to pick up Dawn and Bobby.

I found confusion there too. Large tears were dripping solemnly from Bobby's eyes, and he was wiping his nose on the back of his hand. Dawn was clutching her feather and looking thunderous.

"He tried to eat my feather," she said. "I pinched him, Daddy, the way Nellie—"

She broke off.

I grabbed one of them in each hand and dragged them into the dining room.

There, seated at their respective solo tables, were the unctuous Mr. Usher and the ladylike Miss Heywood. Both of them looked flushed and indignant, like people who had engaged in verbal battle with the authorities and come off worst.

Both of them, when they saw me, stirred as though they were about to leap upon me and pour out their fears and theories. But I suppressed them with one of those not-before-the-children glances.

Soon after we had seated ourselves poor little Maggie Hillman came hurrying in with our breakfast. The tray was shaking so that I expected an imminent dish catastrophe.

None of this was unexpected. I had realized that the inn would be in an uproar. By now probably Cape Talisman, too, was seething with unrest.

A maniac was at large! No girl would be safe. Terror had come....

That's what they would be saying. And of course they were saying it.

Because it was the truth.

It was only after Maggie had served us and left that I noticed what Dawn was doing. My daughter had shoveled the whole bluefish onto her own plate and was greedily devouring it even before she had touched her orange juice. The tear-stained Bobby, silent and rapt in some high thought of his own, sat opposite her, staring at nothing from his sooty eyes.

"Dawn," I said sternly.

She looked up, her fork piled with bluefish poised in mid-air.

"What is it, Daddy?"

"You know what it is." I picked up the clean plate intended for Bobby. "Half," I said, "exactly half."

My daughter's lower lip swelled in indignation, but under my eagle eye she cut the fish in half and flopped the slightly smaller half onto Bobby's plate.

"That's better," I said.

Dawn scowled.

I held out the plate to Bobby. "Look, Bobby, what Dawn's given you. She caught this lovely fish yesterday, and she wants you to have half of it."

Bobby's remote eyes settled on the dish. Two little clutching hands went up and grabbed it. He put it down in front of him. He stared at the fish.

Then, very solemnly, he picked the plate up and dropped it on the floor.

There was a splintering sound as the china broke.

"I hate fish," he murmured. "It's silly. Fish is silly."

With one savage movement my daughter leaned forward and pinched his arm in unbridled fury.

He started to cry again.

To my amazement I heard myself say: "Good for you, Dawn. Pinch him again."

Even the most hellish breakfasts come to an end. And such are the mental processes of children, that with the final gulp of milk Dawn and Bobby were bosom friends again. They left the dining room, their arms twined around each other with sickening sentimentality.

Barnes was still in the hall.

"Inspector Sweeney will be over any second, Doc," he said.

"Fine," I grunted. "I'll be back as soon as I've got these children out of my hair. I'm going to park them on the beach."

I sent the children upstairs for their swimming suits. They obeyed with alacrity. And in almost no time flat they were downstairs again. Bobby, minute and dark and solemn in a tiny pair of blue drawers, stared at Dawn. "I'm a bear," he said. "I bite."

He plunged at her and, to prove his point, bit her arm. They both of them laughed. They thought it was funny.

It had been my intention to take them down to the beach and leave them with Buck Valentine. Since the hotel was virtually empty, looking after children was about the only job the lifeguard had left for him.

After the night before I might have been considered ill advised to entrust Bobby and Dawn to so dubious a character. But I had no fears. Between them, Dawn and Bobby were more than a match for anyone—even a maniacal murderer.

Buck was on the beach, a tired and sulky Titan in a pair of white swimming trunks which made his skin seem almost dark as a Negro's. He told me that he would not be able to take care of the children for about

thirty minutes as he had to go down the shore to make some minor repairs to the rowboat which the hotel provided to assist him in his lifesaving.

Since almost anything would happen if I left them alone, I decided to sit with the children myself until Buck returned. As his huge figure disappeared down the beach toward the Monk's Head I dropped onto the warm sand and lay back, enjoying the sunshine.

Dawn was initiating Bobby into some obscure game of her own devising.

"You're a black diamond," I heard her say, "and I bury you. Then I dig you up and find you."

Bobby sat down soberly and did not move as my daughter piled sand over him.

"The black diamond," she kept murmuring. "I hereby, in this heretofore appointed place, bury the black diamond."

"What's the black diamond?" I asked absently.

"Didn't you know there was a black diamond buried around here?" My daughter's voice was patronizing. "The fishermen down in the village told me all about it. And I'm going to find it. That's why I'm practicing on Bobby."

"Don't let them fool you," I said. "Black diamonds are only coal."

I went on to give an instructive explanation of the properties of carbon. Dawn showed no signs of listening. She had buried all of Bobby except his head. Now, quite calmly, she started pouring sand over his hair.

"Watch out," I said, "you'll blind him."

She stopped then. And the instant she stopped Bobby started to whimper.

"You've stopped. I want to be blinded. I want to be blinded."

They were still alive and still burying each other when Buck strode up and dropped at my side.

"Okay, Doctor," he said, "I'll take over now."

"Thanks, Buck."

The lifeguard moistened his lips. "That inspector—he'll really be coming this morning?"

"Any minute now."

Buck stared down at his hands and then shot me a quick glance. "I did fool around with Nellie for a while. I admit that, Doctor. Last night I was scared. That's why I tried to lie. But all that was over weeks ago. I got disgusted with her stringing Fanshawe along and sneaking out to me on the side. But I hadn't anything to do with the murder." He flushed. "I never saw her last night. And, say, do you have to tell Sweeney about that picture and everything? It'll only get me in wrong with everybody."

"I'm sorry, Buck," I said. "The inspector asked me to help him on this case. I can't keep anything back. Matter of fact, I told him last night about the picture." I stared at his magnificently sculptured face, wondering exactly what was in his mind. "I also told him that you had torn the photograph up before we even arrived to tell you about the murder. Think that out so you'll be ready to give Sweeney a plausible explanation."

He opened his mouth as if to say something and then broke off. I looked up and saw the black-coated figure of Mr. Usher standing staring down at Dawn and the half-interred Bobby.

"Burying each other," he said in his low, breathless voice. "That's a nice game for a little boy and a little girl to be playing."

There was a horrid smile on his full red mouth—a smile, too, in the ginger-brown eyes. He wore no hat, and his red hair gleamed in the sunlight above the waxy pallor of his cheeks. Under his arm was a black leather book, probably the Bible, and his hands, with their spray of warts, were kneading each other in a Uriah Heep fashion. He glanced rather furtively at Buck and then more steadily at me.

"Ah, good morning, Dr. Westlake. A shocking tragedy—but a beautiful morning. The Lord's compensation." He hesitated. "I was wondering if you would care to take a little stroll with me."

There was nothing I would care to take less. I was about to say so when he added:

"There is something—ah—quite important. I would be grateful to have your advice."

I interpreted this statement as implying that Mr. Usher had some information concerning the murder. If that was the case I had to humor him.

"Of course," I said.

I jumped up and, with a nod to Valentine, left him in charge of the children.

Mr. Usher hovered around me and then set off down the beach at my side. Although he had the whole expanse of sand at his disposal he chose to walk so close to me that his arm brushed intimately against mine.

Since it was only my own conjecture that he had something to tell me about the murder, I could ask him no questions until he himself broached the subject. And he took his time about that.

As we walked down the sunny beach in the direction of the now-sinister Monk's Head his soft, ingratiating voice concerned itself with banalities—the healthful air of Cape Talisman, the pleasures of change from his work (whatever that was) in Haling, the kindness of the Lord in making it financially possible for him to take this brief vacation. There were a great many quotations from the Scriptures emphasized by gestures of his white, flabby hands. There was, however, a queer overtone to everything he said which made me certain that he was leading up to some matter of great importance to himself.

A sea gull, large and clumsy, rose from the sand at our feet and curved squawking into the air. Mr. Usher followed its flight with his little ginger eyes as if it were a blessed spirit being lifted up to heaven. Then he dropped his reddish lashes and turned to me with an expression which was at once reverent and inquisitive.

“Oh—oh—Dr. Westlake, it was a terrible thing that happened last night. How it shattered the peace of this quaint little spot! As soon as I heard the news I decided to leave for some more tranquil place. My vacation is precious to me, and I hate to have it disturbed. The policeman, however, seemed to wish that we should all remain here for a while.”

“Yes, we'll all have to stick around for a few days. It's always that way when a murder's been committed.”

“Even in a murder of this type, Dr. Westlake, a shocking, distorted murder which can only have been committed by someone of no education or breeding? I cannot conceive, for example, that the police could suspect me.”

He gave a laugh as if to stress the ludicrousness of such a fancy.

It didn't necessarily seem ludicrous to me.

He moved, if possible, a little closer. His voice came even lower:

"I understand from the talk at the inn that you were called in when they found the—ah—remains."

"Yes—why—yes," I said guardedly, "Dr. Gilchrist wanted an outside medical opinion."

"From what I've heard," went on the whisper, "the poor girl must have been shockingly defaced. But modern morticians can do wonders, you know—wonders."

"She wasn't defaced," I said with little attempt to conceal the distaste I felt. "A red circle was painted around the mole on her cheek. It should not be hard to remove."

"A red circle around a mole?" He obviously intended to make his voice sound horrified. "How bizarre, Doctor. How most bizarre. Such a pretty girl too."

Remembering the furtively covetous glance I had seen him cast at Nellie Wood the night before on the porch, I asked: "Had you had much to do with her, Mr. Usher?"

"Oh no, no. Only the barest possible acquaintance. But she was a pretty girl, Dr. Westlake. A very pretty girl." He lowered his eyes modestly. "She must have made a lovely corpse."

I didn't know whether to be revolted or amused by that impossible remark.

For a few moments we walked together in silence with the waves breaking gently at our side. The Monk's Head was plainly visible now, rearing ahead of us. I could also see the busy figures of several of the inspector's men scouring the beach, presumably for any clue that the tide might either have brought or left.

It seemed to me that Mr. Usher was longing to join in the fun. I wasn't going to give him that satisfaction.

"Let's turn back, shall we?" I said. "Sweeney's due any moment, and he wants me to be there."

"Oh yes—Inspector Sweeney, yes." Usher turned with some reluctance. He put the tips of his warty fingers together in a gesture grotesquely

approximating prayer. “A fine man. In Haling he is very well considered.”

He scratched his red head. “I suppose you were not connected with Miss Wood at all? I mean, you didn’t attend her professionally? You didn’t know her parents?”

“No,” I said shortly. “I had hardly ever spoken to her.”

“I see. I see.” Mr. Usher seemed to go into a sort of pious coma. Suddenly he said:

“Perhaps you wonder why I ask.” He gave a little teeter. “It is not mere idle curiosity.”

“It isn’t?”

“You see,” said Mr. Usher, “I always say it is so important into whose hands one places one’s dear ones—after they have passed away. I’m sure I can be relied upon for taste and delicacy.” One waxy hand went into his breast pocket and came out with a black-rimmed card. “I thought, Dr. Westlake, that if a man in your official position, a doctor who naturally is close to people at the time of their bereavement—I thought that if you could recommend me I’m sure I would give every satisfaction.”

My eyes were fixed in astonished understanding upon the black-rimmed card. It read:

<p>BENJAMIN G. USHER</p> <p>Mortician and Funeral Adviser</p> <p>Special Cosmetic Treatments Haling</p>

“Yes—yes.” The half-whispered words came through to me. “I do a great deal for the women’s prison at Haling. But of course I have a high-class clientele also. I feel it would be a beautiful gesture, one that my future clients would appreciate, if I were to perform those last services for this unfortunate girl.”

He gave a small cough. “They tell me I am quite an artist as an undertaker—an artist especially with females.”

So this was the profession which gave Mr. Usher his air of perpetual sanctity. And this was the reason for his interest in the murder.

We had descended to the very depths of macabre farce.

Mr. Usher wanted to get the mortician rights on the murdered girl as a publicity stunt to promote his funeral parlor.

Ahead of us I could make out now the huge, sprawling figure of Buck Valentine and two small, animated blobs which were Dawn and Bobby.

As we moved toward them I saw three other figures approaching him from the dunes in front of the inn.

Mr. Usher peered ahead. His eyesight must have been keen, for he exclaimed:

“Ah, Dr. Westlake, I believe that is Inspector Sweeney and Dr. Gilchrist and Sergeant Barnes coming down from the inn, is it not?”

Once he had identified them I, too, recognized the brisk figure of the inspector, the thin form of Barnes, and the more cumbersome one of Gilchrist.

“They seem to be going to speak to young Valentine,” breathed Mr. Usher.

I quickened my pace. Since it had been I who had given the inspector the suspicious evidence against Buck, I felt I should at least attend his cross-examination.

The three men had reached Buck now. The lifeguard had jumped up. I saw him gesture toward the inn, and Dawn and Bobby started hurrying up the beach away from the group.

Mr. Usher said:

“It’ll be interesting to hear what explanation young Valentine will give the inspector for his behavior last night.”

I pricked up my ears. “What behavior?”

Mr. Usher rubbed his palms together with what seemed like relish.

“Well, Dr. Westlake, I understand Miss Wood was murdered a short time after she left the porch last night. You were there at the time. So was I. Surely you saw young Valentine follow her out to the dunes?”

“He says he didn’t follow her,” I said. I felt a paradoxical desire to champion Buck against Usher’s sly insinuations—even though I had made the same ones myself the evening before. “He just happened to go out after her. He never saw her on the beach.”

“He said that?” Usher gave another titter. “Dear me, I’m afraid he was not speaking the truth—no, not at all.”

I stared at him. “You mean you know?”

“I know what I saw, Dr. Westlake. As it happened”—he coughed—“shortly after they left the porch I stepped out, too, for a breath of fresh air before turning in.”

There was that breath of fresh air again.

“Go on,” I said.

“I happened to run into young Valentine and Miss Wood right down at the foot of the dunes. There was no doubt as to their identity because I had a flashlight with me. I always take a flashlight when I stroll at night. Its beam happened to play right on them.”

I went on staring.

“Yes, Dr. Westlake,” murmured the artist-as-an-undertaker, “I saw them right there. Young Valentine and Miss Wood.” He winked an awful, intimate wink.

“She was in his arms, Dr. Westlake, and he was kissing her.”

X

I stared at Mr. Usher, then at the group ahead of us on the beach. That Buck had been seen kissing Nellie Wood less than half an hour before her death did not of necessity imply that he had murdered her. The lifeguard's silence on this point, however, did prove that he made a habit of lying where Nellie Wood was concerned.

Mr. Usher had walked some steps in silence, doubtless to give the impact of his-words sufficient time to make its effect upon me. Now he said:

"I—ah—decided to pass this information on to you, Dr. Westlake, because I know you to be connected with the police. It may have some bearing on the case, and I would like the inspector to hear it."

"Of course the inspector must hear it."

Mr. Usher hesitated. "I suppose you would not be willing, Dr. Westlake, to tell the inspector yourself, without—ah—making my name public? My reputation in Haling, you know."

I failed to see how Mr. Usher's reputation could be affected or why I should care even if it were.

"I wouldn't consider such a thing," I said. "If you wish to make this accusation against Buck you will have to make it yourself."

Usher looked nervous. "But I hesitate to—"

"Remember your duty to the community," I said with some tartness. And then, because I had had more than enough of Mr. Usher for my nerves, I added: "You should worry anyhow. Maybe on your testimony Buck will be convicted of the murder and electrocuted—then you'll have another customer."

Mr. Usher looked at me from behind appalled, quivering lashes.

He didn't think that was funny at all.

Managing to produce a high, pious dignity from somewhere, he tilted his chin up and clasped his hands together. "Very well, Dr. Westlake. Since you are not sympathetic I shall, naturally, tell the inspector myself."

We walked on, mutually loathing each other, until we joined the party.

Buck, huge and primitive-looking in his scanty swimming trunks, was the center of the group. In the foggy darkness of the night before I had not really seen Inspector Sweeney. He was smaller than I had imagined, but his face completely suited his crisp voice—sharp and alert, with bright eyes and a little black mustache which bristled on his upper lip and was as expressive of his mood as a dog's hackles. Everything about him was taut and keen and slightly exasperated.

Barnes, thin and weathered and imperishably local, stood on the fringes, while Dr. Gilchrist's solid and respectably doctorial form took up a considerable patch of beach to Buck's left.

They all turned as Usher and I came up. Buck was looking ill at ease. Sweeney's bright little eyes darted to Usher and then to me.

"Morning, Usher. Morning, Westlake. They told me at the inn you were down on the beach. We came to find you."

Gilchrist nodded a greeting at me. We all stood around in some awkwardness.

Then Sweeney said: "Been talking to Valentine about last night, Westlake. He admits he carried on with Nellie Wood." He snorted. "After you had found that torn photograph he couldn't have denied it anyway. But he swears he's had nothing to do with her for weeks."

So Buck was still sticking to that very sticky story.

Usher's hands were fluttering around each other. I waited for him to drop his minor bombshell. He didn't.

Reluctantly I realized it was up to me to prod him into action.

"I think," I said, "that both you, Sweeney, and Buck will be interested in something Mr. Usher has to say about last night."

The faint suggestion of a flush stained the candle pallor of the undertaker's cheeks.

"It is—ah—painful for me to have to say this, Inspector. I wish no one ill, and you must realize that. Mr. Valentine claims he never saw Miss Wood

after she left the porch last night. Unhappily this is not so, because—”

He paused then.

“Because—?” barked Sweeney.

“Because,” said Mr. Usher, “I saw them together on the dunes just outside the inn a few minutes after Miss Wood had left the porch. They were in each other’s arms—embracing.”

Embracing. I might have known Usher would sooner or later use that word.

In spite of his vocabulary, this remark created as much of a sensation as he could have wished. Buck’s shoulders collapsed. Barnes’s rugged face went blank, and Gilchrist grunted his surprise. Sweeney turned to the lifeguard.

“Mr. Valentine will have a great deal to tell us now. We’d better get back to the inn.”

Without waiting for the rest of us he started back across the beach. Gilchrist and Barnes followed. Mr. Usher, who seemed to have added inches to his stature, strutted after them.

No One seemed to bother about Buck. I put my hand on his arm “Come on, Buck. Better get this over.”

He relaxed under my grip and let me guide him up the sand.

I said: “How about telling the truth for a change? Lying hasn’t gotten you so far to date.”

He shot me a sulky glance but didn’t say anything.

I gathered that he did not think much of my advice.

Sweeney, Barnes, and Gilchrist were waiting impatiently on the porch. We all trooped together into the inn lobby. We must have made quite a formidable group.

At least we seemed to impress Maggie Hillman. She had been coming out of the dining room, carrying an empty tray, as we entered. When she saw us she stopped dead, staring from wide, terrified eyes. The tray slipped from her fingers, clattering on the bare boards of the floor.

As she groped to pick it up I noticed two small faces, bodiless, it seemed, staring at me from between the banister rails. Dawn’s face wore an

enchanted look. Bobby's was as expressionless as usual. They just stared like unsmiling Cheshire cats

Then Bobby's husky, tough voice boomed with sudden volume.

"There he is," he announced. "There's that silly man again.

There was a scuffling as the two heads slipped back from between the banisters. A thumping sound, and then a high, piercing wail. Dawn had risen in defense of her father. And once again Bobby had bitten the dust.

Mr. Mitchell had appeared, and Sweeney was saying to him:

"We need somewhere to go, Mitchell. Your office?"

"Yes, yes." Mitchell's gaze moved apprehensively to Buck, as if he had guessed that the lifeguard was the reason why we needed somewhere to go and as if he didn't like that at all. "Please come with me."

We marched down the passage and crowded into Mitchell's prim little office. A shelf in the corner was filled with books on criminal psychology. They did not seem at all expected reading for the hotel manager until I remembered his criminal sister. Mitchell, presumably, spent hours studying to find what made Cora tick.

Sweeney dropped into a chair behind the desk. Buck stood in front of him. Mr. Usher, assuming the role of "the accuser," hovered at his side. Gilchrist, Mitchell, Barnes, and I made a foursome by the window.

"Well?" Inspector Sweeney's voice sounded like the rap of a ruler on knuckles. "Nellie Wood must have been killed around eleven o'clock last night. You saw Valentine kissing the girl. When, Mr. Usher?"

Usher smirked. "Just a few moments after they left the porch, around twenty minutes to eleven, I suppose."

"Twenty to eleven." Sweeney started at Buck. "Twenty minutes before the murder. Well, Valentine, what about it?"

Buck just stood looking big and bewildered. Finally he shrugged.

"I guess I was a fool to try and hide it. I did see Nellie last night. Did have a date to meet her on the dunes. God knows I didn't want to keep it. God knows I wasn't with her for more than a couple of minutes." He laughed harshly. "If Mr. Usher had snooped around a bit longer he'd have seen me leaving her."

Buck's behavior was consistent. Each time a new development placed him nearer the crime he admitted the new evidence. He denied everything else.

Sweeney said: "You didn't want to keep the date with her? You only stayed a couple of minutes?"

"That's the truth."

"Do you normally kiss girls you don't want to keep dates with?"

Buck looked even more awkward. "I don't like having to talk out of turn about a girl when she's dead. But you didn't know Nellie Wood." His handsome face flushed. "I've been around quite a bit. But I never met up with a girl like that before. She made up her mind she wanted something, and she went right on till she got it. For some reason I was one of the things she wanted."

Sweeney smiled sourly. "You mean she seduced you, Mr. Valentine?"

Buck scowled. "May seem funny to you. It wouldn't have been if you'd had that girl on your hands. She chased me day and night like a dive bomber. Oh, I had a couple of tumbles with her. Couldn't have gotten out of it even if I'd wanted to. But I was disgusted with her. And I told her so once and for all a couple of weeks ago. I told her I wasn't the type that helped women two-time their men."

"You mean she had some other man?"

I knew what was coming.

Buck's uneasiness was even more marked. "You're making pretty much of a heel out of me, Inspector. But since Mr. Usher was so keen to squawk on me, I guess I've got to do my own bit of squawking in self-protection. I said to hell with Nellie because she was sleeping with Fanshawe, and he was paying plenty for it. I think that when a man spends that much money on a woman he ought to be allowed to have his money's worth."

Mr. Usher winced. Mr. Mitchell twittered. Sweeney was as sharp-eyed as a terrier on a scent.

"Then you accuse Fanshawe—?"

"I don't accuse Fanshawe," retorted Buck. "I don't accuse anyone of anything. You asked me for the truth. I'm giving it to you. I broke off with Nellie. I've told you my reasons. Somehow—and it was no easy matter, I

assure you—I kept that woman out of my hair for three whole weeks. But I guess her motto was ‘Never say die.’ Yesterday morning she forced me into promising I’d meet her on the dunes at ten-thirty. Said she’d commit suicide if I didn’t—that old, familiar line.”

He folded his huge arms across his bronzed chest. Standing there in his swimming trunks, he looked like a maiden’s dream of Flash Gordon.

“At ten-thirty last night she came down from Fanshawe’s studio, where she had been posing. I was on the porch waiting for her. She went out. I followed. We met down on the dunes. She started making a fool of herself. I treated her rough. I told her she could consider herself in hell so far as I was concerned and that if she didn’t stop pestering me I’d tell Fanshawe the whole story. That fixed her. She got worried and started gabbling about Fanshawe being jealous.”

He broke off, as if he realized that, unintentionally, he had thrown the spotlight a little too mercilessly on Fanshawe

“Well, the end of it was that she promised to behave herself, provided I’d give her one last good-by kiss.” He shuffled his feet. “I kissed her good-by. I guess Mr. Usher happened to witness that touching scene. Matter of fact, now I come to think of it, I thought I saw a light in the fog last night, but I didn’t pay much attention. After that was over I left Nellie. I swear I did. I walked right out on her and I never saw her again.”

Sweeney’s face was unrevealing “What did Nellie do after you left her?”

“Haven’t any idea. She was standing there on the dunes when I saw her last.”

“You went straight back to the hotel?”

Buck hesitated. “Yes.”

“In that case it must have been a very long good-by kiss,” said Sweeney dryly. “I’ve talked to the servants here. The chef saw you come in last night. His room’s right by the back door. And he saw you in the light above it. He said that when he saw you it was past midnight.”

I looked at Buck. He certainly was not one to get the breaks. Each time he thought out a new lie someone else popped up to disprove it.

“Well?” Sweeney’s voice was very clipped now. “You left Nellie at quarter of eleven, left her on the dunes way away from the Monk’s Head, where her body was found. What did you do between a quarter of eleven and midnight? Go swimming?”

Buck’s face had become set into a hard, sulky mask. Mr. Mitchell, I noticed, was watching him with a concern which seemed in excess of that normally felt by a boss for his employee. I was quite tense myself.

His eyes staring down at his feet, Buck said: “Nellie had made me jittery. I was bored with sitting around the inn anyway. I just—I just went on walking until I was tired. Then I went home.”

“Which way did you walk? Which direction?”

“Down past the Coast Guard Station.” Buck blurted that out, presumably without realizing its implications.

Sweeney realized them, of course.

“Past the Coast Guard Station? Past the Monk’s Head, in other words? You mean you went walking right past the place where the murder was committed and walked back again past it without noticing anything—even though that Chinese lantern was shining through the mist so’s anyone could see it yards away?”

Buck said: “I didn’t see the lantern. I didn’t see anything.”

Sweeney rose. He reminded me of a diminutive middle-aged David confronting Goliath. “Valentine, this whole story’s a lie. Perhaps you were telling part of the truth about Nellie Wood. Perhaps you had got tired of her. Perhaps you did try to get rid of her. But what if you hadn’t been able to get rid of her? What if you found you had her round your neck for life? That you’d maybe even have to marry her—unless you murdered her? Valentine, did you murder Nellie Wood?”

Buck laughed. It was an angry laugh. “Do you expect me to say yes?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then why do you ask such damn-fool questions?”

The scene had developed an undeniable drama.

Buck and Sweeney continued to stare at each other like boxers assessing each other before the ring of the bell.

Suddenly Buck said: "You've made it plain exactly what you think. Now tell me what you're going to do."

Sweeney's eyes snapped. "I'm going to take you to headquarters and keep you there until I get the truth out of you."

Buck's lips curled. "The dumb cop always has to arrest someone to save his own face."

Sweeney moved around the desk. "I've had enough of this from you. You're coming right now with me to—"

He broke off and spun round to the door. So did the rest of us. Because it had been thrown precipitously open, and Maggie Hillman stood on the threshold.

She was still wearing her rather wilted waitress's uniform from breakfast. Her hair had an irrepressibly wispy quality. Her cheeks, free of cosmetics now, were flushed, as if she was embarrassed at her own daring in breaking into the police conference.

"Maggie!" The word came in outraged explosion from Mr. Mitchell.

The girl tossed back her hair. "I know it's wrong to listen outside doors. But I've been listening. I heard the inspector say Buck killed the girl, and it's a lie."

Buck was staring at her with a queer expression, half of perplexity, half of concern.

"Maggie!"

With little clicking steps she half ran toward the inspector.

"Please listen to me. You want to know what Buck was doing after he left the girl and before he came back to the hotel. He said he was just walking alone, and you knew he was lying. He was lying. But not for the reason you think." Her hands plucked at each other. "He—he lied to you because he was trying not to get me into trouble with Mr. Mitchell. He did leave Nellie there on the dunes—just the way he said. And all the time after that, until he went back to the hotel, he was with me."

She stood there, a little quivering pillar of defiance. All of us exclaimed as a man:

"With you?"

She did turn to Buck then. A shy smile moved her pale lips. “You shouldn’t have tried to lie, Buck. Mr. Mitchell can fire me. Nothing worse than that can happen.”

Sweeney’s voice came, sharp and intimidating. “You are giving this man an alibi?”

“Of course I am. Buck and me—we’ve been going together for weeks now. Three weeks.” She said that with a pathetic throb in her voice, as if she was proud of the fact that she had held the dashing lifeguard’s interest for twenty-one whole days. “It was because of me that Buck was so worried about the way Nellie Wood carried on. He didn’t have any use for her. Did you, Buck? It was you and me. And seeing how Mr. Mitchell is about not letting the girls go out with boys or anything, we had to be secret about it. We’d meet after dark on the beach.”

I thought of Maggie’s best dress last night and of the forlorn vestiges of make-up.

“Buck and I had a date last night for ten-thirty. That’s why he didn’t want to meet Nellie. But she made him. He told me all about it. He didn’t keep anything from me. And I was there on the dunes when he met her, right there in the darkness. I saw it all, saw him kissing her. But I didn’t mind because I knew it was only because she made him do it. I saw Mr. Usher creeping up to snoop too. I saw everything.”

Usher winced at that word “snoop.”

“After he’d kissed her and got away from her he went off down the beach to the place where we meet.” Maggie faltered. “He didn’t know I’d stolen up to watch him, you see. I waited around a couple of minutes to make sure Nellie wasn’t going to follow him. Then I ran and caught up with him. We were together all the time until we saw that lantern and—”

“Maggie!” Buck’s voice rang out hoarsely. “Maggie, you don’t have to —”

“Of course I have to.” Maggie turned back to the inspector, “That’s the truth, Inspector. We were coming back along the beach, and just when we came up to the Monk’s Head we saw the lantern. Buck and I, we went down to look at it and we found Nellie there—found that awful thing. We didn’t want everyone to know we’d been together, so Buck said for me to slip

back to the hotel and he'd pretend he'd found it alone. But I was afraid people knew about him and Nellie and would suspect him. So I made him go home and I was the one who called Dr. Gilchrist and pretended I'd found it all by myself. That's why the chef saw Buck going back just about the time was calling from the Coast Guard Station."

I thought of her little weeping figure huddled on the sand the night before. Poor Maggie with her best dress and her secret affair with the local Lothario—she had a lot more spunk than I'd given her credit for.

"That's the truth." Her lower lip was trembling now. "You can't think Buck did it any more, because he was with me all the time. And Mr. Mitchell can fire me if—"

The words got all choked up then. Impulsively she threw herself against Buck. Her disheveled head reached only to his broad, naked chest. Very steadily the lifeguard stared at the inspector.

"Well, Inspector, I guess you'll have to look around for another scapegoat now."

The inspector glowered. His voice sharply claimed Maggie's attention.

"You swear you were with this man all the time between twenty of eleven and twelve—between the time he left Nellie and the time you discovered the body?"

Maggie nodded. "Yes, yes. I swear it."

"You say you saw him leave Nellie and go off down the beach to the place where he was to meet you?"

"Yes."

"And you stayed behind a few moments to make sure Nellie wasn't going to follow him?"

"That's right."

Sweeney paused.

"Then, Miss Hillman—that's your name, isn't it?—what was Nellie Wood doing when you left?"

"She just stayed there."

"Alone?"

"Oh no." Maggie turned away from Buck and stood with her hands twined in front of her. Her eyes moved to Mr. Usher. "She stayed there a

few minutes, and then a man came up to her out of the darkness. I left the two of them together.”

“A man?” barked Sweeney. “You saw another man join her?”

“Yes.” Maggie was still looking at Usher, “I’d seen you there earlier when—when Buck was kissing Nellie, Mr. Usher. I thought it was you.”

That utterly undermined Usher. “Me! You say I—ah—joined Miss Wood? That isn’t true. That is disgraceful. That—”

Maggie blinked. “I wasn’t sure. I couldn’t see so well in the dark and I wasn’t paying much mind anyway. Well, if it wasn’t you, I guess there’s only one person it could have been.”

We all stared at her with an alarming amount of tension. This, of course, might be the crux of the case. The man who met Nellie after Buck had left her on the dunes might very probably have been the murderer.

“Yes?” exclaimed Sweeney. “Only one person it could have been? Who do you mean?”

Maggie’s hand went up once more to wipe a refractory tear from the tip of her nose.

“Well, of course I didn’t really see him and I can’t be sure. But if what Nellie told Buck and everything is right, then—well, I guess it must have been Mr. Fanshawe....”

XI

The conference in Mr. Mitchell's office broke up. Usher scuttled away. Maggie stood watching Mr. Mitchell with patient resignation, waiting, no doubt, for him to fire her. But the proprietor positively beamed at her. His delight at Buck's exoneration seemed to have overcome his distaste for sex among the staff.

Buck himself was a changed man too. He was swaggering again—all six foot four of him. It was pretty evident that Maggie was not playing a major role in his elaborate love life. But she had come in very handy. She had saved him from a murder charge.

As if in recognition of this, he threw his large arm around her little shoulders. He and Maggie and Mr. Mitchell all left.

Sweeney looked downcast. "Guess I made a fool of myself. That is, if the girl's telling the truth."

Sergeant Barnes scratched his head. "You reckon she's maybe making it all up just to give the boy an alibi?"

"I doubt it." I told them about the make-up and the best dress "Maggie was obviously out with some boy friend last night, and Buck's the only stag around here."

The inspector ran a finger across his stiff mustache. "Well, in any case, we gotta have a talk with Fanshawe. Looks like he's in this plenty deep. Gilchrist, Barnes, you'd both better come with me. Want to come too, Westlake?"

I was tempted to say yes, but Dawn and Mr. Fanshawe's Bobby had been on the loose quite long enough.

"I've got to check up on the kids," I said. "But I'll stay around the inn. Maybe you'll let me know what Fanshawe says when you're through?"

I located Dawn and Bobby. They were both on the porch and behaving in a suspiciously angelic fashion. They were squatting on the floor in a

corner, their arms entwined while Dawn read aloud from a small black book.

I dropped into a chair and listened lazily to my daughter's droning, singsong voice, wondering what literary work had so completely won their ear. I had expected some daring enterprise of Tarzan or some woolly episode of the wild West.

Instead I heard:

"... And Arphaxad lived five and thirty years and begat Salah; and Arphaxad lived after he begat Salah four hundred and three years and begat sons and daughters. And Salah lived thirty years and begat Eber...."

They had presumably gotten hold of Mr. Usher's Bible and were having a whale of a time with the less stimulating chapters of Genesis.

There is no accounting for tastes.

The interminable genealogical table dragged on.

"... And Peleg lived thirty years and begat Reu...."

Bobby's face became more and more ecstatic. His arm still curled around Dawn's waist; his heartbreaking black eyes were fixed on her face.

Suddenly he boomed: "What does 'begat' mean?"

Dawn looked superior and said very loudly: "It's what Daddy did to me."

As I shuddered she turned back to Genesis and proceeded imperturbably:

"... And Terah lived seventy years and begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran...."

They were still deliriously contented some half-hour later when Sweeney and Gilchrist and Barnes trooped out onto the porch. I ordered the children away to Dawn's room. They rose with their arms wreathed around each other and disappeared at once through the door to the hall.

I heard Dawn's voice growing fainter and finally fading.

“... the first-born of Ishmael, Nebajoth; and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam, and Mishma, and Dumah, and Massa, Hadar, and Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and—”

Sweeney and Gilchrist dropped into chairs beside me. Sergeant Barnes stood staring out through the screens toward the dunes, looking more like a fisherman than a policeman. I could tell from the inspector’s face that the interview with my fellow guests had not been a satisfactory one.

“Well?” I asked.

The inspector grunted. “Fanshawe denied seeing Nellie on the dunes. Of course he did. His story’s simple. He finished his painting last night and went out for some air. He walked down the beach in the opposite direction from the Monk’s Head, toward the village. He saw no one, and when he was tired he turned around and came back.”

“What about his wife?” I asked, thinking of the enigmatic Marion Fanshawe’s pale, secret face.

“We didn’t see his wife, Westlake,” put in Gilchrist. “Fanshawe said she was sick, lying down in her room.”

“Gilchrist offered to give her a professional once-over,” said Sweeney. “But Fanshawe turned white as a ghost and wouldn’t hear of it. Something pretty queer about that marriage if you ask me.”

I was inclined to agree with him.

“In fact,” continued the inspector glumly, “everything’s queer around here. Either Valentine’s lying or Fanshawe is. Fanshawe absolutely denied having had anything to do with Nellie Wood. Denied giving her that ring—everything. She just took care of the kid, he said, and posed for those crazy pictures of his. Nothing off-color at all, he said.” He shrugged. “But then, of course he’d say that anyway.”

“He didn’t look to me as if he was lying,” said Gilchrist.

“Neither did Valentine,” retorted Sweeney.

“Perhaps they were both telling the truth,” I said. “Perhaps Fanshawe never had anything to do with Nellie and yet Valentine thought he did. Maybe it was Nellie who was lying, who pretended to Buck that Fanshawe was in love with her just to make herself seem more interesting.”

Sweeney shot me a quick glance, as if he thought that was one of my more intelligent remarks.

Gilchrist put his large hands on his solid knees. It was a characteristic gesture and heralded a weighty opinion. I had grown familiar with it during evenings spent over beer when we had beefed together about the dreary lot of doctors marooned in small towns.

“I think you’re wasting your time trying to check up on Nellie Wood’s private life. Sweeney. Unless I’m cockeyed, she was murdered by a maniac, probably someone she never even knew.”

Sweeney shrugged. “Maybe I agree with you. Never said I didn’t. But a policeman’s got to be thorough. Can’t ignore any angle.” He rose with the swift, jerky movements of a bird hopping off a perch. “I’ve got to be going. There’s a dozen things I have to organize—a checkup on everyone who lives in Cape Talisman a checkup on all strangers who could have been in the neighborhood last night, a checkup on anyone who’s been buying Chinese lanterns around here. All that and then some. Barnes, I’m going to need you badly.”

Gilchrist rose too. “I’ve got to run. I’m late for my clinic at the penitentiary as it is.” He turned to me. “By the way, Westlake, Sweeney told me about that damn crazy grave in the old churchyard. Wants me to identify it. I can do it all right. We have a complete chart of all the graves down at the Health Office. I should be through sometime this evening. We can go over together, and you can show me the grave that was tampered with. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Sweeney gave an exasperated cluck. “Girls getting themselves murdered by maniacs and people digging around in graves. This place is a madhouse. And they expect a self-respecting policeman to cope with it. Come on, Gilchrist. Come on, Barnes.”

The three of them hurried away.

My slender official connection with the murder investigation was broken with their departure. In spite of my intense curiosity, I welcomed this pause. I went to my room, changed into swimming trunks, and got my

surf-casting rod. The tide was rising, and I would be able to put in a couple of hours' fishing before lunch.

I went down the corridor to my daughter's room to pick up my two charges. Dawn and Bobby had abandoned the Bible in favor of a particularly venomous type of wrestling. I found them on the floor, their faces red with exertion, locked in each other's arms.

"Come on, kids," I said. "We're going back to the beach."

They both jumped up. Dawn was laughing and panting. Bobby, though scarlet-cheeked, was as sober as ever. He gave my trunks one black, scathing glance and announced:

"He lookth thillier than ever in that thwimming thuit."

To my knowledge Bobby Fanshawe had never lisped in his life before.

It was not an improvement.

In dignified silence I marched out of the room. They followed. Soon I was standing in the surf, waiting with indomitable optimism for the strike which never came. The children reverted to their elaborate "black-diamond" game.

They played it up to lunch time and then resumed it again after lunch. Gilchrist did not reappear. In spite of the strained atmosphere in the inn and the white, anxious faces of its inhabitants, this might almost have been just another of those serenely blue-and-gold Cape Talisman days whose very uneventfulness had exerted such a charm over me.

Evening came. The sky to the west glowed crimson and its gentle beauty threw a warm radiance over the vast expanse of ocean. I sent the children to change, changed myself, and, since hours in the surf had chilled me moved out onto the dunes for a brisk predinner walk.

In the gray evening light that desolate landscape, with its humped dunes and the tall, swishing grasses like green straggly hair, had taken on an unworldly quality. Outlines had blurred, and ahead of me the bare silhouette of the old church loomed in lonely prominence—the only man-made object in that rippling panorama of sand and scrub.

I hardly realized that the twilight had led me into a mood susceptible to eeriness until I saw the figure ahead of me.

In the obscure illumination the figure seemed somehow larger than life. It was at a point between me and the outer most fringes of the churchyard—standing erect and motionless etched against the suède gray of the sky.

A large dune sloped close to me. Obeying some primitive and pointless impulse, I moved into its shadow and peered through the long reeds, watching the figure:

At that distance it was impossible to identify it. I could not tell even whether it was a man or a woman. Something, however, seemed strange about it—a vague thickness around the middle which made no sense until I realized it was carrying something in its arms.

I turned to look back toward the hotel. And instantly I traced another figure—a small figure, dark in the fading light.

It was not far from me and, unlike the other figure, it was in motion, running, stumbling across the sand toward me.

The silence, made only more intense by the remote beating of the breakers, added an incalculable significance to the scene. The little figure was growing closer and closer. I could see now that it was a woman. She was almost up to me—a small, fragile figure with pale hair fluttering around her face. I could hear her breathing, short and spasmodic from the exertion of running.

It was only as she passed me, however, and I saw the vague outlines of her face that, I recognized Marion Fanshawe.

She didn't see me. I was sure of that. As she scurried by me her eyes were fixed straight ahead of her—straight at that other figure, dark and ominous, which still stood in motionless silhouette against the middle ground of the churchyard and the background of the sky.

Now I had identified one, at last, of the dune walkers my curiosity was heightened.

Marion Fanshawe had been officially sick all day. Why should she, of all people, be running with this desperate intensity across the dunes? Why? To what rendezvous?

Lying back against the sloping sand and grass, I watched Mrs. Fanshawe hurrying to keep her appointment.

At last the meeting took place. The light was too vague for me to catch a distinct impression of what occurred. I only knew that Marion ran up to the figure, that for a few moments they stood there together, and that in a very short time Mrs. Fanshawe was hurrying back toward me.

I watched until she was no more than a dozen yards from me. Then I rose and, moving casually, as if I had climbed up from the shore, started to stroll across the dunes.

She did not see me until I almost brushed against her. She stopped then with a little scream. Her face was a white terrified mask in the twilight.

“My God, who—”

“Good evening, Mrs. Fanshawe,” I said. “I’m afraid I frightened you. I’ve just been for a stroll on the beach.”

“Oh—” The word came as a sigh which seemed to contain all the relief in the world. “Oh, it’s only you, Dr. Westlake. I thought—”

I had seen from the first second of meeting her that Mrs. Fanshawe was carrying something in her arms—something vague and gray.

It was only now that I recognized it as a bunch of bayberry.

“I’m so glad to see you up,” I said. “I understood you were not well today.”

Her voice sounded again, rattlingly. “Oh, no, no, I was not well. The shock of that dreadful thing—that thing that happened to Nellie. My nerves, you know. You must have heard about my nerves. Virgil tells everyone about my nerves. So convenient to have a wife with nerves, isn’t it? You win so much cheap sympathy. *That poor, nice artist with a mad wife.*”

She laughed an extraordinary, rasping laugh. It alarmed me even more than its fellow had the night before when she had broken into our interview with her husband.

Foolishly, just to say something, I said: “Well, you’ve been taking a little walk before dinner yourself, eh?”

Mrs. Fanshawe gripped the ghostly bayberry closer to her breast. “Oh yes, Dr. Westlake. I’ve just been down the dunes to pick this bayberry. So pretty, so artistic, isn’t it? I felt I must have some for my room.”

She stood there a moment, a vague shadow. Then suddenly she scurried away from me across the dunes, back through the gloaming toward the inn.

I stood motionless and quite stupefied. I knew, of course, that she had not picked the bayberry herself. She had had no time, since I had watched her every moment. She had been running desperately across the dunes to meet someone who had given her a bunch of bayberry.

Why?

And where before had I heard those words she had used: *I love bayberry—so pretty, so artistic?*

I remembered, of course. It had been only the night before.

Barnes and I had been coming downstairs after our interview with Buck Valentine. In the hall we had met Miss Heywood. She, too, had been carrying bayberry in her arms and she had given us that gracious, ladylike smile which had no answering ripple in her eyes or on her skin.

I love bayberry—so pretty, so artistic.

Suddenly determined, I strode over the dunes away from the inn, toward the spot where I had seen that second waiting figure. I had no real hope of catching up with that shadowy form who had handed Marion Fanshawe the bayberry.

But as the track through the dunes took a sharp turn I saw the same tall dark figure. It was moving toward me.

In a moment we met. We paused, staring at each other in the dim light, and a voice, low and musical with its excessive refinement, murmured:

“Ah, Dr. Westlake, so you, too, are enjoying the beauty of this exquisite evening.”

The vague figure in front of me was Miss Heywood. And of course she was carrying nothing now in her arms.

“Good evening, Miss Heywood.”

“Those colors in the sky. Look, you can still see a glimpse of them. That sweet crimson lake! Nature goes on being eternally lovely—whatever vile man does, Dr. Westlake. Who would think now that a terrible murder was committed here last night? I had intended to leave this morning. I am not very brave physically. But the inspector is letting no one leave yet. In a way I am glad. It has given me this lovely evening.” Miss Heywood’s love of beauty, I felt, was abnormally developed. Hoping to give her a sudden jolt, I said:

“How was the painting today? Did you start your bayberry?”

“Bayberry!” She echoed the word explosively.

“Yes, Miss Heywood. Last night you told me you were planning to paint some bayberry.”

“Oh, yes, yes.” Her voice was effusive again, “I’m afraid this dreadful tragedy threw all thoughts of painting out of my head.”

For a few moments the two of us stood there, staring at each other—if one can be said to stare at somebody almost invisible.

Miss Heywood gave a little aesthetic sigh.

“Perhaps I will paint tomorrow. Perhaps contact with beauty will help to banish this—this horror.”

She must have been wearing some sort of bohemian jacket with pockets. For her hand groped around somewhere near her middle and moved back to her lips, holding a white gossamer handkerchief.

It was during this gesture of hers that my eyes caught something dim and gray fluttering to the ground.

I stooped and fumbled around the sand until my fingers touched something that felt like paper. I picked it up.

It was a fifty-dollar bill.

Fifty-dollar bills, surely, were unusual things for Miss Heywood to be carrying loose in her pocket.

“I think you dropped this, Miss Heywood,” I said.

She started out of some reverie and then made a sudden grab at the money, stuffing it back into her pocket.

“Oh yes, Dr. Westlake, thank you. Thank you very much, indeed.”

She left me then—hurrying away along the track back toward the inn.

Marion Fanshawe with a bunch of bayberry she hadn’t picked herself.
Miss Heywood with a fifty-dollar bill in her pocket.

Very odd.

Very odd, indeed....

XII

As I returned to the inn I saw another man coming up from the beach, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. We reached the porch together. It was Virgil Fanshawe.

“Hello, Westlake,” he said. “Just been for a stroll. I’ve been up with Marion all day. She insisted I go out and get some air.”

“Your wife’s still sick?” I asked cautiously.

His dark face, with its hurt, rather dazed eyes, watched me. “Afraid she is. Her nerves, you know. I’m going to take her something on a tray and hope she’ll be able to eat. She’ll be all right, I know, just as soon as I can get her away from here.”

I was sure, then, that Marion had deliberately picked the hour of her appointment to urge her husband into taking a walk and that her terror when I slipped out of the shadows was caused by the fact that she had thought I was Virgil.

The Fanshawes were indeed a strange couple.

“You’ve been swell to take over Bobby,” Fanshawe was saying. “Do you suppose he could sleep in Dawn’s room tonight? I don’t know much about coping with kids myself, and when she’s not well Bobby makes Marion nervous.”

I assured him that Dawn would be delighted to go on acting as Bobby’s nursemaid. He thanked me and moved on into the hall, presumably in search of the chef and a tray for Marion.

I went upstairs to find that Dawn, too, had a feeling for trays. There was an extra cot in her room, and Bobby, wearing a dashing pair of striped pajamas, was sitting up in it, devouring cereal and milk from a tray. Dawn, ensconced at a near-by table, was absorbed with a far more exotic supper of tried chicken with a large balloon of ice cream on the side.

“Don’t worry about Bobby,” she said placidly. “When he’s finished his supper we’re going to play a little more black diamond. Then he’s going to sleep.” She finished the chicken and started attacking the ice cream. “I think I shall go to bed then too.”

Dawn had never before expressed a voluntary intention of going to bed. Her unholy relations with Bobby had their good points. I left the room quickly before she decided to change her mind.

Downstairs there was still no sign of Gilchrist. I went into the dining room. Except for Usher and the very mysterious Miss Heywood, I had the place to myself. Maggie, who usually waited on me, did not appear, and I was served by the other waitress. I assumed that Maggie was with Buck in some more romantic spot than the dining room, now that Mr. Mitchell had so surprisingly bestowed his blessing upon their intimacy.

Both Usher and Miss Heywood disappeared after dinner, and I smoked a lonely pipe on the porch, staring out through the screening across the dark beach. This was a very different night from the last. No mists curled over the sea. The sky was bare and ablaze with stars.

It was a night without eeriness, a night for lovers, not for murderers.

It was nearly ten o’clock when Dr. Gilchrist’s heavy figure moved out onto the porch. His florid face was lined, and his eyes were tired.

“Well, Westlake, I’ve had one hell of a time in Haling. Didn’t think I could ever get away. But here I am, and before we do anything I’ll have to have a drink.”

I went in and came out with two rye highballs. Gilchrist took his and gulped a large swallow of it.

“Ah, that’s better.” He put the drink down on the arm of his chair. “Sweeney’s keen for us to identify that grave. If you’re game I’m ready to go right after this drink. I’ve got a flashlight. There won’t be any difficulty. I know that place so well.”

I said I was more than ready to go.

Gilchrist mopped his brow. “Sweeney’s a good man when he gets started, Westlake. I left him at police headquarters in Haling, and he was getting the investigation going in a big way.”

I sipped at my drink. “You were at the autopsy last night, weren’t you? Anything interesting come out?”

“Not a thing we didn’t know. Death by strangulation, no assault. They analyzed the stuff used to make the scarlet circle. As I expected, it was lipstick.”

“Lipstick?”

“Yes, and not the brand of lipstick Nellie Wood used. The murderer must have deliberately brought it along for that purpose.” Gilchrist leaned forward, putting his hands, as was his wont, on his knees. “Pretty unpleasant setup, isn’t it?”

“Sure,” I grunted. “There’s nothing like a homicidal maniac with a fixation on moles for brightening a place up, don’t you think?”

Gilchrist took another pull at his drink. “Frankly, Westlake I’m fascinated with this case. First time in years anything interesting has happened in this dump. I’ve been trying to dope out what this guy, this murderer’s like. Perhaps he was in love with a girl who had a mole on her cheek, a girl who turned him down. Maybe that’s how the thing started. Or perhaps it was more obscure, something from his early childhood, a nurse who was cruel to him, another child who did him a wrong. He must have brooded and brooded until, by some sort of fetishism, his hatred became identified not with the person who had wronged him, but with that person’s mole. From that it extended to a hatred of all people with moles. I can imagine him at the climax of his obsession, seeing Nellie Wood, maybe on the streets of Talisman, seeing her go by seeing the mole on her cheek, and suddenly experiencing an overwhelming desire—to destroy.”

“Paranoiacs like that usually confuse what they hate themselves with what is universally evil. Our friend probably thought that by killing a girl with a mole he was wreaking God’s vengeance on wickedness. That’s why he scrawled the circle around the mole—a sort of flourish to let the world know that justice had been done.”

“Exactly. And the lantern too. It all fits in. He put the lantern there because he was proud of the deed and wanted to draw attention to it as quickly as possible. And the arms folded over the breast—the deliberate

attempt to make the corpse look peaceful. That was to show that evil had been destroyed and that everything was serene again.”

Gilchrist had finished his drink. “To be frank, Westlake, I’m scared. I tried to knock it into Sweeney’s brain when we were driving to Haling. We’ve got to get the man quickly—or else this is going to happen again. You mark my words.”

I didn’t need to. I was more than convinced of that myself. But as we sat there together on the porch, gazing out at the dark, desolate beach, the thought he had conjured up brought a little chill.

This is going to happen again.

I said: “What about the graveyard angle? How do you tie that in?”

Gilchrist took out a pipe and started packing it with a large, deliberate thumb. “I don’t know that I do tie it in, Westlake. I know you saw a Chinese lantern there, and that certainly looks as if there’s some connection. But I’m inclined to think you just happened to stumble upon something else, something that had no connection with the murder.”

“But what kind of something else?”

He shrugged. “You don’t know these Talisman people, Westlake. I do. I’ve lived among them for sixteen years. Some of them—especially the older ones—are still as primitive and superstitious as their forefathers who came over here as ignorant fisherfolk from Europe. A lot of Portuguese here. When the old graveyard was hit by the hurricane they were all told that by applying to me through the Health Office they could get the coffins of their relatives moved to a safer place. But none of them did. Most people assumed they just didn’t want to bother. But I think it was really because they were suspicious of anything as cut and dried as a health officer. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if there’s someone down in the village, someone with crackpot superstitious ideas, who wants to move some coffin and is too damned ignorant to do it through the authorities. That’s what I think, Westlake.”

His pipe was lighted now. “But let’s get over there right away or we’ll never go. Perhaps when we find out what grave it was that’s been tampered with we’ll be able to get a better idea.”

A flashlight was sticking out of his side pocket. I went upstairs to get mine. Together we stepped out of the porch onto the shadowy, starlit dunes.

It was a beautiful night, one which would have sent the artistic Miss Heywood into a tizzy of ecstasy. The starlight was so bright that we did not need our flashlights. Around us the grasses rustled in a gentle breeze. The breakers on the sands sighed musically. Occasionally we passed outcrops of bayberry which were etched gray and black against the blueblack of the sky.

No one was in sight. The whole tranquil shore line belonged to us.

As we walked I started to think about the story Barnes had told me the night before on this same trip about Mr. Mitchell's criminal sister. Largely for something to talk about I asked Gilchrist whether he knew anything of the story.

"You mean Cora Mitchell?" he said. "Of course I know all about her. She's Cape Talisman's one claim to fame. Twenty years ago it was."

"She was some sort of a jewel thief, wasn't she? And she was arrested right here?"

"Yes." Gilchrist laughed. "It was before my day, but she gave the Talismanites the biggest thrill they ever had. They're still wagging their tongues over her—particularly Sergeant Barnes. He was the one who arrested her. He's never gotten over the rush he was given by the press."

"What was the story?" I asked. "It must have been sensational to keep people talking all this time."

"Oh, it certainly was sensational. Cora and John—that's the Mitchell who owns the inn now—they were the only children of old Mitchell, who was a fisherman here in the village. John always thought himself a cut above the rest of them, and when he was quite young he ran off to New York to make good in the hotel business. Cora was crazy about her father, but she was a wild, restless sort of a kid, and she soon got bored with Talisman and she ran off too. She got to New York somehow and fell in with bad company. She married some guy who was a real criminal, and the two of them with another man became big-time jewel thieves. They pulled several very daring jobs, getting away with a small fortune. For several years they kept it up and never got caught. No one even knew what they looked like or anything about them. Finally they staged the biggest job of

their career—a robbery at the house of a fabulously rich steel magnate on Long Island—Hogan, his name was. His wife had a very famous jewel—a black diamond. About the only one in the world, I believe. It was worth a king’s ransom.”

A black diamond! So this was where Dawn’s cryptic game came from.

“They got the black diamond?” I asked.

“Yep. But something went wrong with their plans. Hogan himself came home unexpectedly while they were still in the house. He caught them red-handed, and they shot him before they escaped. He died, but before he died he was able to give the police their description. That led to one of the biggest man hunts in history. They located Cora’s husband and the other guy and arrested them. But they couldn’t find Cora, and neither of the men would let on where she was. They couldn’t find the diamond either. It had probably been sold.”

“And they finally caught up with Cora right here in Cape Talisman?”

“Yes. Sweeney set a trap for her and it worked. Just about that time old man Mitchell got very ill. Sweeney knew how fond of him Cora was. He put an ad in all the papers, an anonymous ad. It just said: *Father dying. Come back, Cora.* He signed it *John*, as if it had been written by Mitchell at the hotel. He thought it was too simple a ruse to work. But it worked. One night Cora slipped into town and headed straight for old Mitchell’s house. Of course Sweeney had his men watching the place. Barnes was in charge. He was the one who arrested her. You can see what a story it made in the papers—famous jewel thief caught flying to her father’s sickbed. There was a heartbreak angle, too, because old Mitchell had died the day before she arrived.”

It was quite a story. No wonder the elegant Mr. Mitchell needed books on criminal psychology to remind him of his sister.

“The two men were electrocuted, both of them for Hogan’s murder,” said Gilchrist. “But Cora got off on some technicality. Instead she was given life imprisonment. She was sent to the penitentiary over in Haling. She only died a couple of weeks ago.” He laughed. “Cape Talisman doesn’t often get into the papers. But when it does it makes the big time. Cora Mitchell—and now this.”

I put Mr. Mitchell's notorious sister out of my thoughts as we approached the outskirts of the churchyard. Cora was in the past. We were very much in the present now—a present of mysteriously defiled graves and of a murderer insanely obsessed with moles.

Ahead of us, a dark shadow against the starlit sky, the abandoned church was clearly visible. It seemed to have lost the brooding sense of doom which had shrouded it the night before. There was something almost peaceful about its dilapidated silhouette—an old, forgotten church, a suggestion of crumbling tombstones, and the whisper of the sea on the sands. Churchyards have their placid as well as their ominous moods. This was one of them.

With Gilchrist moving weightily at my side I led the way through the now-familiar mounds toward the edge of the dunes. A large white moth flapped leisurely past us. Somewhere far off the frogs were piping their interminable lament. It was very quiet.

“You know the place, Westlake?” Gilchrist's voice exaggerated by the silence, seemed to boom at me.

“Sure. It's just down here, directly under a tree.”

I saw the fir tree then—saw its twisted black outline against the stars. I took Gilchrist's arm and guided him to it.

“Here,” I said. “Here we are.”

Gilchrist pulled his flashlight from his pocket and pointed its beam downward. I pointed mine down too. They revealed the irregular row of mounds whose tombstones had been washed away.

Our flashlights veered to the left and picked out the grave which Barnes and I had identified the night before. We could still see where the sandy dirt had been disturbed.

“That's the one, eh?” murmured Gilchrist.

“Yes, it was dug right down so that the coffin was half exposed.”

For a moment Gilchrist stood in silence. Then he murmured: “Let me see if I can remember.”

He pointed toward a grave three mounds away from the one which had been tampered with.

“That’s old Mrs. de Silva. I’m sure of that. Yes. De Silva. Then Fanshawe. That’s Virgil Fanshawe’s father. Then—then Mitchell.”

“Mitchell!” I exclaimed. “You don’t mean Cora?”

“Oh no. It’s old Mitchell, the father. Yes, I’m sure now. Seeing Mitchell’s grave brings it back. De Silva—Fanshawe—Mitchell. And then —”

His flashlight moved to the disturbed grave again and settled there.

“—then Casey. Irene Casey. Yes, Westlake, that’s it. That grave you saw dug up last night is Irene Casey’s grave.”

I had pricked up my ears when he had mentioned Fanshawe and Mitchell. But this—Casey—it meant nothing to me.

“Irene Casey?” I said. “Who is she? What possible connection could she have with this business?”

“None that I can see.” Gilchrist’s voice was thoughtful. “Irene Casey. Oh yes, I remember her vaguely. It was quite a time ago. Around thirteen years. I hadn’t been here long. But I attended her when she died. She was quite young. Quite attractive too. She died of pneumonia.”

“But who was she? One of the natives?”

“No. She was a cousin or something of some people who moved away from Talisman several years ago. Yes, that’s it. She was a cousin and she came to visit them. She was only here a couple of months before she died.”

That didn’t sound very promising—someone’s obscure cousin who had come to Cape Talisman thirteen years ago on a visit.

“Can’t you think of anything more interesting about her?” I asked. “Any reason why someone would have wanted to dig her up?”

“No, I can’t at all. But I’m beginning to remember more clearly what she looked like. Yes, she was pretty, very pretty, tall and blond, with—” He broke off. “My God, Westlake!”

I was startled by the sudden excitement in his voice. “What is it, Gilchrist?”

“I’ve just remembered.” Gilchrist’s heavy hand caught my wrist and clung to it. “I can see her face clearly now. On her left cheek she had a mole—a large, conspicuous mole.”

We stared at each other quite stupidly.

Here was a connection at last between the murder and the grave digging, a completely insane connection. A girl with a mole dying thirteen years ago—a girl with a mole dying last night, murdered.

I found myself invaded with grisly fancies of a mind gradually warping over thirteen years, a mind obsessed with the dead Irene Casey, a mind brooding over her, hating her memory month in, month out, until last night on the beach ...

The churchyard lost its benign mood. The starlit darkness became sinister again, peopled with elusive shadows which had not been there before. A sloping tombstone which had been only a tombstone a moment before seemed now a symbol of disaster. The rustle of the fir tree's boughs scraping together in the breeze sounded like the toothless chattering of corpses. A beetle whirred out of the darkness and batted against me with a dry plop.

I started.

"I guess that's about all we need to know, Westlake. Might as well get out of this place." From Gilchrist's voice I could tell that he, too, was experiencing some of the absurd fancies which were besetting me and was as eager as I to be gone. "Come on, let's go home by way of the beach. It's quicker."

We turned our backs on the mounds and on the looming bulk of the church and hurried away toward the edge of the dunes. Gilchrist was a little ahead. He reached the limit of the graveyard first and stood there staring out across the vast expanse of the ocean, his large bulk blocking my view.

I wondered why he had stopped so suddenly at that particular spot and why he was staring so intently out to sea.

Then his voice came to me. It was high and shrill and completely unlike his voice.

"Look, Westlake!"

With a stab of unreasoning alarm I jumped to his side.

His hand was pointing shakily across the beach to the ocean.

For a moment I stared uncomprehendingly. I saw the star-crusted sky, the limitless ocean with its vague horizon line separating water and sky.

"Look!" Gilchrist almost shouted it then.

And I saw what he was seeing. I saw it with a twittering of panic.

Bobbing, flickering weirdly clear against the velvet dark of the ocean was a light. It was some distance from shore, and beneath it I could just detect the outline of a small boat.

“My God,” I faltered, “it isn’t—It can’t be—”

But it was.

The light on that boat out to sea was pink, tinging the surrounding blackness with a soft, rosy radiance.

It was a light such as would come from a cheap pink Chinese lantern.

XIII

It was horrible—like some haunting thing in a dream.

I said in a most unconvincing voice: “Maybe it’s just someone late back from fishing.”

“Fishing! You don’t go out fishing with a Chinese paper lantern. Come on, Westlake. My boat’s down at the harbor. We’ve got to get it out. We’ve got to get to that lantern.”

Gilchrist’s cumbersome figure started forward down the dunes. I scrambled after him. We ran along the silent beach toward the village.

And all the time we ran that flickering, infinitely sinister light glowed against the dark mystery of the ocean at our side.

It was less than half a mile to the little harbor. Soon, gray and ghostlike, the silhouetted masts of the Cape Talisman fishing smacks became visible in the starlight, limned against the sky. Beyond them stretched the village itself, a light winking here and there in its vague cluster of houses.

We reached the wooden jetty which thrust out into the water. We hurried down it, past the tranquil moored boats.

“Here we are. This is mine.”

Gilchrist jumped down into a boat which, gleaming a faint white, was moored near the end of the dock. I jumped in with him.

No one was around. All the inhabitants of Cape Talisman, it seemed, were safely stowed in their beds.

With the aid of his flashlight Gilchrist was fumbling around the engine. At last there was a chugging, gasping sound.

“The mooring rope, Westlake. Free her.”

I clambered up onto the bows and slid the coil of rope off the mooring post.

“If we get the boat we’ll have to tow it ashore.” Gilchrist’s voice sounded above the throbbing of the engine. “I’ve got a rope we can use

somewhere down in the stern.”

The launch lumbered forward then, sending a shower of salty spray over the gunwale. I staggered as we headed out from the little wharf and through the shiny black water down toward the inn.

In the first few minutes I could see nothing ahead of me in the darkness. Then, faint at first, but growing brighter as we gained on the aimless drift of its rowboat, I saw the light again—that pink, pulsing light which symbolized for us now all the unknown menace and terror that had reared its head in our little community.

“In a boat, Westlake,” Gilchrist said softly. “Why is it in a boat? That Chinese lantern—out at sea in a boat. It’s—it’s crazy.”

Of course it was crazy.

The tide was at full ebb with a heavy swell. The launch lumbered from side to side, pitching and splashing. The light ahead grew brighter and larger. Across the water I could make out the boat more and more clearly. It was small and white, floating without purpose, it seemed, upon the waves.

Gilchrist was peering forward. “Good heavens, Westlake the boat’s white. A white rowboat. Isn’t it the hotel boat—Buck Valentine’s boat?”

We were near enough now to trace the lines of the little boat—the curiously thin pointed bows, the low gunwale.

“Yes,” I exclaimed, “I think it is!”

Until that moment the horror had been intangible, dream like. But this realization charged our expedition with a vivid reality. If it was the inn lifeguard’s boat, if the light did indicate that another of those maniacal acts had been performed—then whom? Whom would we find there? Someone I knew? Someone from the inn?

I thought with a quick, blinding terror of Dawn. But Dawn was safe in bed with Bobby Fanshawe and her childish dreams of the black diamond. Of course Dawn was safe!

The dinghy was less than ten yards away now. There seemed to be no oars, absolutely no signs of life, nothing but the pink Chinese lantern flickering.

We skirted the boat and approached it from the seaward side.

Gilchrist shouted:

“Now, Westlake, your flashlight—turn it on the boat now!”

I pointed my flashlight straight at the bobbing boat. In the bright arc of light the water gleamed black and brilliant. I focused the beam on the white side of the dinghy and fixed it there like a spotlight.

It was Buck Valentine’s boat. I recognized that immediately. But I took the fact in only vaguely. For all my attention was fixed on the thing which was in the boat, gleaming in the pink radiance of the Chinese lantern which seemed somehow to be fixed in a stationary position on the central thwart.

At first what I saw seemed beyond the realms of possibility. It was horrible, indeed. But it was more than that. It was indecent—somehow obscene.

Flung across the white woodwork of the gunwale, dangling its toes in the water in a manner which suggested playful frivolity, was a leg, a naked female leg.

By now the tide had taken us almost abreast of the dinghy. Gilchrist cut the motor and scrambled forward to join me staring, too, into the bottom of the lifeguard’s boat.

The torchlight shone downward, moving with the heavy pitching of the launch. It slid from the smooth, naked leg up the raised skirt of the body that lay there carefully stretched beneath the thwarts. The hands were folded on the breast just as Nellie Wood’s hands had been folded. The head was thrown back and the pale face turned slightly away from us as though in sleep.

For a moment I stared at that body, so quiet, so reposeful except for the fantastic position of the leg, which now suggested an attempt at a macabre dance step in the very hour of death.

Although the face was in shadow I could see its outline. I could see the brown hair falling wistfully backward, and even before I leaned forward and shot a torch onto the profile I knew who it was.

But instinctively I carried the motion through. The light played across the pale skin, the closed eyes, the cute little tiptilted nose.

That nose, which even now in death was irredeemably shiny!

The girl lying there in the dinghy was Maggie Hillman.

I felt a clutch at my heart.

Maggie Hillman! Poor little Maggie was lying there in the boat under the flickering pink radiance of the Chinese lantern—murdered.

Maggie was the second victim of that terrible scourge which had indeed struck not once, but twice.

My mind was in a whirl, but one fact inevitably rose uppermost. Nellie had been Buck's girl, and Nellie was dead. Maggie had been Buck's girl, and now Maggie was dead. And her body was here in Buck's boat, floating pointlessly out to sea.

Instinctively I moved forward as though to board the dinghy, but Gilchrist's voice cut through the darkness.

"Don't board her, Westlake. We're not touching a thing until we get to shore where Sweeney can see it. Get the rope. It's lying in the stern—a long rope with a rock on the end."

I scrambled to the stern, fumbled around, and found the rope. I slipped the coil around my arm and, picking up the heavy rock, carried it to the side. I managed to drop the stone into the dinghy's bows.

Gilchrist was back at the wheel. As the spray splashed over us, stinging our eyes, he set the engine roaring. The launch headed forward along the shore. I could hear the swift scraping of the rope as it slid over the stern behind me.

A backward glance showed me the dinghy lurching slowly forward just outside the white churning wake of the launch.

"We'll take her downshore to the Coast Guard Station by the Monk's Head, Westlake." Gilchrist's voice sounded strangely high. "We can have the beach to ourselves there, and we can phone Sweeney from the station without waking up the entire village."

I shall never forget that interminable ride with the launch lumbering along, the water splashing up in cold salt showers, and behind us, illuminated by the pink light of the lantern, that white boat with its gruesome burden.

At length we reached the little cove where the Coast Guard dock thrust out into the water. As Gilchrist headed inshore I made out the faint flickering of a flashlight moving down the beach. Gilchrist moored at the dock, and the two of us, jumping out, eased the dinghy in cautiously by the

tow rope. We had just brought the small boat up to the wharf when I heard heavy footsteps on the wooden boards behind us.

A figure emerged from the darkness, shining a flashlight on us—a tall, thin figure which gleamed in wet oilskins.

“Why, it’s you—Doc Gilchrist and Doc Westlake!”

I recognized the voice and the lanky bulk of Sergeant Barnes.

“What is it?” he asked hoarsely. “What’s happened?” Gilchrist unbent from the boat. “How did you get here, Barnes?”

“I seed the light out to sea—the pink light—and kind of reckoned something was wrong. I ran down to the harbor just as your boat got away from the jetty. Weren’t no other boat I could take, so I followed alongshore.”

One of the sailors from the Coast Guard Station had come down now. He stood curiously at Barnes’s side.

“It’s another murder, Barnes,” I said, “another just the same as last night—only this time it’s Maggie Hillman.”

“Maggie!” exclaimed Barnes.

“Yes. You and the sailor get up to the station quick and call Sweeney. Tell him to come right away.”

“But—”

“Right away,” I urged.

The sergeant and the sailor scurried away in awed silence. After they had gone Gilchrist and I fastened the dinghy firmly to the wharf. We straightened up and stood in silence.

Something—a vague sense of something wrong on the shore behind us—made me turn. In the first second that I glanced I thought I detected a movement in the shadowy darkness, as if someone were lurking uneasily at the foot of the wharf.

“Who’s there?” I called.

There was no reply. And as I peered down the desolate strip of beach I assumed it had been my imagination playing tricks on me.

Gilchrist was bending over the lantern, very careful not to touch it.

“Ingenious,” he muttered. “It’s tacked to the thwart, and there’s some sort of protection around the candle so that it wouldn’t catch fire to the

paper as the boat rolled.” He grunted, a touch of professionalism coming into his voice. “As I thought, this murder is even more exhibitionistic than the first. The same setup of the folded arms and the closed eyes. But this time it had to have an even more dramatic setting—a rowboat bobbing around in the sea.”

“But the leg,” I said, “the leg dangling over the gunwale. Why on earth did he do that? Just something extra? A final touch of theatricalism?”

As I spoke Gilchrist switched on his flashlight. He played it straight on Maggie’s forlorn little leg.

Both of us stared, and both of us gave a simultaneous exclamation of horror. For on that leg was something which, in the confusion at sea, we had neither of us noticed.

I had indeed been right. That dangling leg was the final touch of theatricalism—a final touch which set the hair at the back of my neck tingling.

We might have guessed it, of course. We might have guessed it from the first instant that we saw the light. But I wasn’t prepared for it. And the shock, mingling with the dreadful memory of Nellie Wood and the long deceased Mrs. Casey, was like a blow between the eyes.

Gilchrist was pointing, but there was no need for him to point.

High up on Maggie’s naked thigh, about six inches above the kneecap, was a large circular mole.

And around it, shrill and vivid, had been scrawled a perfectly symmetrical scarlet circle.

XIV

Gilchrist and I stood alone on the little jetty. Soon Barnes joined us, with the news that Inspector Sweeney was coming from Haling right away.

The sheer insanity of this second crime seemed to be unquestioned. And yet instinctively my mind, trained to coping with murder as a reasoned phenomenon, started to consider this latest outrage in the light of what we knew about poor Maggie.

Once more I noted the fact that both Nellie and Maggie had been Buck's girls. Was it possible that our unknown killer had selected them as victims not merely because they were girls but because he had some demented grudge against any women connected with Buck? I thought of Mr. Mitchell's strange concern for the lifeguard and his venomous, spinsterish distaste for any symptom of "sexiness" in his female employees. There was an idea there—but surely far too extravagant a one.

I thought, too, of the role Maggie had played in last night's tragedy. Maggie had provided Buck with an alibi. What if she had been lying merely because she was infatuated with the lifeguard and had been trying to protect him? What if Buck had killed Nellie and, knowing that Maggie's false story would never hold up under repeated examination, had killed her before Sweeney could trick her into confessing that her alibi for Buck was a false one?

At last voices sounded through the darkness, and in a few moments Sweeney and his men clattered down the jetty toward us.

The inspector was very sharp and on edge. We showed him the bizarre tableau in the boat and told him our story. He listened with a sort of frayed exasperation, muttering:

"For God's sake, why couldn't we stop this happening? Two of them in two days. Two of them in two days."

But his irritability, not untouched with a sense of his own partial responsibility, did not keep him from being as efficient as ever. He had his men swarming about and stood tensely by while the medical examiner, Gilchrist, and I made a cursory examination of the body.

Just as in the case of Nellie, Maggie had been strangled by a piece of sash cord thrown around her neck and twisted tight from behind. She, too, had probably never seen or suspected her assailant and had never had a chance to struggle.

Owing to exposure to the sea air, it was difficult to be precise as to how long she had been dead. We set four hours as the higher and one and a half as the extreme lower limit—which meant the crime could have been committed just after dinner or a very short time before our seeing the pink light from the churchyard.

I was able to tell them that Buck kept his boat in a little bay on the far side of the promontory from the Monk's Head. Maggie had either walked to the bay alone or had been lured there. She had been killed and arranged with the lantern in the boat, and then the boat had been set adrift. The ebb tide would have carried it out to sea.

"It's crazy," muttered Sweeney. "No question about it now. Putting the poor girl in the boat, nailing the lantern to the thwart, cutting the boat adrift so it would show up out there on the ocean and be visible for miles around. No man in his right mind would have done that. It's so mad it's terrifying."

"And the mole too," said Gilchrist.

It was then that what should have been obvious from the start came to my mind.

Nellie's mole had been on her cheek, for all the world to see. But Maggie's mole, on the other hand, had been on her leg six inches above her knee. To my knowledge Maggie, who was not the athletic type, had never been on the beach in a swimming suit. Who would have known that she had a mole? Who, indeed?

Only someone who had been very intimate with her.

A lover, for example.

I started thinking about Buck again.

The inspector seemed to have exhausted the possibilities of the rowboat. His men were reassembled around him, and there was talk of removing the body to Haling for autopsy. Gilchrist was going along with them. Sweeney, who still seemed to consider me as semiofficially connected with the case, asked me to go too. But I refused.

I felt there was far less of a chance of discovering something interesting in the morgue than there was right at home on our own little strip of shore.

The group of men started up the beach in a phalanx around the vague white stretcher which carried the pathetic remains of Maggie Hillman. I bade them good night and turned back up the shore toward the Monk's Head and the inn.

I began to think of the panic which would inevitably strike Cape Talisman now that this second murder shouted to the world that there was a maniacal killer still at liberty among us. I even felt anxiety myself—not for my own safety, but for Dawn's. The murderer of Nellie and Maggie was hardly the type of person I would have chosen to share the same community with my daughter.

It looked as if Sweeney expected me to stay until such a time as the case was cleared up. I would not be able to take Dawn away myself. But she should certainly go. I started to consider prospective sanctuaries for her. My aunt Mabel, perhaps? She was old and ailing and very bad-tempered. But ...

I had forgotten the vague figure which I had thought I detected on the dark shore when we had first landed at the Coast Guard jetty. Now, as I approached the Monk's Head and the promontory which separated me from the inn, I became conscious, with that impalpable sixth sense, of someone behind me, someone moving through the darkness with swift, noiseless steps.

I spun round. In the starlight I could see a man's figure hurrying toward me.

“Who on earth—” I began.

The figure came half running up to me. “Ah—good evening, Dr. Westlake. I thought it was you.”

In the dim light I could just distinguish the waxen face, the obsequiously stooped shoulders of Mr. Usher.

I said curtly: "I thought I saw someone on the beach when we came here. Have you been waiting around all this time?"

"Ah yes, yes." He joined me and hurried along at my side. "I—ah—did not wish to break in upon the official investigation. But I was curious. I thought I would wait in the hopes of being able to accost you alone."

"Accost me about what?"

"I saw the light out to sea." His whisper was funereal. "I felt that something must have happened. And then I hurried along the beach. I came upon—Ah, here it is again!"

He paused and pointed down at the sand. I peered and saw an anchor and a frayed length of rope which must have marked the spot where Buck's boat had been and from which the murderer had launched his macabre handiwork onto the waters.

"I knew then, of course," he said. "The boat gone, a pink lantern out to sea. Strange, Dr. Westlake, very strange."

"You seem very observant, Mr. Usher."

"I saw you bring the boat in. I could even see something of what it contained. Another girl, eh, Dr. Westlake? Another girl?"

I had the impression that he was rubbing his warty hands together.

"It was Maggie Hillman," I said wearily. "You might as well know. The whole shore will be talking about it tomorrow."

"Maggie! That poor little girl. How terrible! How terrible!" He edged even closer. "Did it happen the same way, Dr. Westlake? The same markings?"

I was getting tired of Mr. Usher's unappeasable curiosity. I made no reply. But his voice slid on:

"Maggie was a good girl. I would like to do something for her." Then, speaking louder, he added: "I understand that she had no—ah—no immediate relatives, Dr. Westlake. In that case, of course, it would normally mean that the last rites would be of the scantiest. But, as I remarked to you yesterday in connection with Nellie, I would be more than willing to see

that the whole funeral is attended to from my establishment and—ah—at my expense, of course.”

If I hadn't become immunized to Mr. Usher I would have registered my disgust at that moment. But I managed to control myself, and he went on:

“Now, Doctor, if Maggie had any moles, any blemishes, I can remove them without trace. There is a certain paste which builds up the skin and conceals the scar. It makes a dead body more beautiful, more peaceful than —”

That was too much!

“For heaven's sake, give it a rest!” I exclaimed. “Things are bad enough without your gloating over them.”

I could see his face peering close to mine in the darkness.

“Perhaps we feel differently about death, Dr. Westlake. As a physician you see only the horrible, the painful side. But I see it after the pain is over. And it can be beautiful, peaceful.” The whisper faded. “It is my work to add to that sense of peace and beauty. To give what comfort I can to the relatives of the departed—to make beautiful in death what was often ugly and misshapen in life. They say I am an artist at my work.”

There it was again. The old catch phrase.

I threw my cigarette butt across the damp sand and lighted another. Ahead I could see the twinkling lights of the inn. I was never more grateful for any sight.

At the inn I got rid of Usher by the simple expedient of going straight up to my room and shutting the door.

My clothes were soaked from our macabre aquatics. I peeled them off and slipped into a sweater and a pair of blue jeans. There was an agitated knock on the door, accompanied by the equally agitated voice of Mr. Mitchell saying:

“Dr. Westlake, may I come in?”

I called “Yes,” and the hotel proprietor made a pallid entrance. His neat face was disorganized by shock; his hands, below the immaculate white shirt cuffs, scurried back and forth like flustered mice.

“Dr. Westlake, this is too terrible! Mr. Usher just told me. Maggie murdered. Another murder from my inn.”

The mice met in an agonized embrace.

“In the hotel boat too. Put out to sea in the hotel boat.” He paused. “Doctor, what are we going to do?”

I said: “We could do everything in our power to find the murderer, Mr. Mitchell.”

He gripped at my sleeve. “Dr. Westlake, you’ve got to tell me. The police—the inspector, he doesn’t still think that Buck—Buck has anything to do with these things, does he?”

He was back again, worrying about his lifeguard.

“I haven’t discussed the matter with Sweeney,” I said. Then, just to give him the works: “But the fact remains that Both Nellie and Maggie were girls of Buck’s and that it was his boat—”

Mitchell broke in: “The inspector cannot possibly suspect Buck because—because Buck has been with me all evening. I was restless, nervous. I needed something to occupy my mind. I asked him to my room to play backgammon with me. He never left my side until a few moments ago.”

Instead of dispelling my vague suspicions of Buck, this breathlessly given alibi merely strengthened my curiosity about Mitchell himself. The hotel manager was not a master of deception. And I was almost sure from the look in his eyes that this story was untrue—that, whatever else they had done, Buck and he had not spent a tranquil evening of backgammon together.

We stood there watching each other. I was thinking that, unless Mitchell had somehow found out about the murder before Usher told him, he would not have had time to get together with the lifeguard on a story. If I went to Buck’s room immediately I might be able to reach him before the hotel manager had rehearsed him. In that case, if the alibi were false, I would be able to overturn it once and for all.

Mitchell was waiting for me to make some remark. I muttered a brusque apology, pushed past him, moved out into the corridor, and left him.

In a few seconds I was outside Buck’s room.

The closed transom above his door showed a light. That presumably meant that he was in and still awake. I knocked and then, because I did not

feel that formality was necessary with Buck, I pushed open the door and stepped into the lighted room.

I saw at once that I had been indiscretion itself. Buck was there all right. Dressed as usual in nothing but his blue bathrobe, his Florentine-fresco body sprawled across the bed.

But he was not alone.

Seated in a chair by the foot of the bed, very willowy and tearoomish in some floating artistic gown, was Miss Heywood.

I was taken aback at the sight of this ill-suited couple.

Buck sprang to his feet. His tough young face wore an expression of dazed surprise which, I am almost sure, had nothing to do with my entrance but which must be the result of something he and Miss Heywood had been discussing before I appeared. Miss Heywood's placid, mask-like face was as unmoved as ever. The bones showed prominently behind the tightly drawn skin. The eyes, so deceptively pleasant, were watching me with a bright curiosity.

Although she was much older than Buck, Miss Heywood was a good-looking woman. Knowing Buck's indiscriminate weakness for the opposite sex, I had in the first seconds imagined that I had interrupted a romantic tête-à-tête. I was pretty sure now, however, that Miss Heywood's business with the lifeguard was far from sentimental and that she had brought him some news which had pitched him completely off balance.

Miss Heywood rose, gathering at some particularly floating part of her gray-green gown, and said:

"I have just been trying to persuade Mr. Valentine to pose for me, Dr. Westlake. I feel the urge to paint again, and Mr. Valentine, I think, would make an excellent model."

She said that most convincingly. I might almost have believed her if Buck's expression had not given her away as a liar.

I said: "I'm afraid you won't be feeling very much like painting tomorrow, Miss Heywood. And I doubt whether Buck will be able to pose for you. Something's happened. That's what I've come to tell Buck. There's been another murder."

Buck's face went stunned. Miss Heywood turned a sort of aesthetic green and stared at me from eyes which for a moment, showed naked terror.

"Another murder!" Buck managed hoarsely. "Who? Who has been murdered?"

"Maggie," I said. "Maggie Hillman."

"Maggie!" Buck's lips trembled. "Poor little Maggie. It's not possible. It can't—"

"Gilchrist and I discovered her body," I cut in. "It was floating out to sea in your rowboat, Buck. All the same business—the lantern, the scarlet circle around the mole."

"Maggie—murdered! Doctor—"

Buck broke off, because Miss Heywood had half screamed the word "mole" and, clutching at her throat, had collapsed backward into a chair, covering her face with her hand.

For a moment she sat there in a crumpled heap. Then she managed to get a grip on herself. She raised her head. Vestiges of fear were still in her eyes, but she had recovered almost all her old calm.

"Excuse me, Doctor," she said. "The news—it was such a terrible shock. The poor girl—the poor little girl. I was not prepared—"

Buck's face was blazing now with indignation. "We've got to find out who's doing this, Dr. Westlake. Killing poor little Maggie! She was a decent girl; she never did anyone any harm. We've got to get the guy that did it."

"Exactly, Buck," I said. "I thought I'd bring you the news myself, because Sweeney will be around soon to question you. Since Maggie was your girl and since the body was found in your boat, he's bound to want to know what you've been doing this evening."

Buck threw one quick glance at Miss Heywood and blurted: "That's easy, Doctor. Sweeney can't try to pull anything on me this time. I've been up here all evening since dinner with Miss Heywood."

Miss Heywood's hands, rather coarse and roughened for so ladylike a person, plucked at the droopy folds of her dress.

In a very bland voice she said:

"Buck is right, Dr. Westlake. I came up to ask him to pose for me almost immediately after dinner. I discovered he had posed for several other

painters, including Mr. Fanshawe. We have had a very pleasant little chat about painters and art in general. In fact, it was so pleasant that I'm afraid I quite lost track of time."

I looked at them both. I blinked.

In murder cases suspects usually suffer from a lack of alibis.

But now Buck had a superfluity.

Two alibis are one too many.

Buck could hardly have spent the whole evening playing backgammon with Mr. Mitchell and simultaneously have spent the same whole evening discussing art with Miss Heywood.

I did not need a master detective to realize that.

XV

Miss Heywood chose that moment to rise. Smiling a smile at me which was meant to be feminine and sensitive, she murmured:

“This terrible, terrible thing. I must lie down. I feel a little faint.”

She moved across the room. At the door she paused and let her eyes settle for an instant on Buck’s face.

After that she departed.

She hadn’t fooled me. That final look at Buck, which I was intended not to have noticed, had been far more than a vague exchange of glances. Before she left Miss Heywood had been warning Buck of something. I was sure of it.

The lifeguard stood at my side, the bathrobe half off his broad, rippling shoulders, instinctively taking the sort of pose that a sculptor would be crazy about. Over and over again he made distracted comments upon Maggie’s murder, the dreadfulness of it and the urgent necessity to catch the guilty party.

Although his unhappiness for Maggie was patently sincere, I had the feeling that he was exploiting it for some purpose of his own—as if he were stalling for time, edging around for a chance to extract from me some information that was of vital interest to him.

Suddenly he said:

“You and Gilchrist saw the body out at sea?”

“Yes.”

“But where—where were you?”

“Down at the churchyard.”

“The churchyard?” Buck’s voice fluttered slightly. “Oh yes, I heard about that, now I come to think of it. You and Gilchrist went down to the churchyard. Something about identifying a grave or something, wasn’t it?”

I stared, wondering how on earth he had known about that. Of course Gilchrist and I had been talking about it on the hotel porch that evening. He might have overheard us. And Barnes, too, with typical small-town garrulity, might easily have gossiped.

“Yes,” I said. “Sweeney wanted us to identify a grave down there—the grave of an Irene Casey. Know anything about her?”

“Casey?” Buck’s distraught young face showed no change of expression. “No, I don’t think so.”

For a moment he stood there awkwardly. Instead of showing curiosity, which would have been the normal thing, he merely turned away to the mantel and lighted a cigarette. He came back again, smoking much too nonchalantly.

“I’ve heard a lot about that old graveyard. Quite a few of the graves got washed away in the hurricane, didn’t they?”

“I believe they did.”

“Yep.” Buck flicked a piece of tobacco off his upper lip. “Mr. Fanshawe’s father’s buried down there, I understand. Fanshawe’s and Mitchell’s too.”

“Yes,” I said.

Buck flopped into a chair. He was being so casual now that I was almost sure he was coming to the question that he really wanted to ask.

“You’d think Fanshawe and Mitchell would show some interest in their fathers,” he murmured, “that they’d get them moved to the new cemetery or something. Gilchrist didn’t happen to show you which ones their graves were, did he?”

“Yes,” I said, wondering.

Buck stubbed his cigarette and, without looking at me, said: “Where are they exactly?”

“Right there,” I said, “right next to Irene Casey’s grave. Both of them. Side by side.”

Buck’s hand stubbing the cigarette was trembling. I stared at him, waiting for him to say something more. But he had apparently found out what he wanted to know. He rose again and said:

“God, when I think of Maggie. Poor little Maggie....”

He was back again behind his smoke screen. We talked some more about Maggie. At length, when it seemed pretty obvious that the interview was going to produce no more strange fruit, I said:

“Well, Buck, it’s getting late. Guess I’ll be turning in.”

Buck turned to open the door for me.

His hand went to the doorknob and then stopped in midair. He swung round. I swung round too.

From somewhere in the inn, somewhere on the floor below us, had come a scream, the high, terrified scream of a woman.

“Westlake, what—”

The scream came again, loud, shrill.

“Quick,” I said. “Downstairs.”

Tugging the bathrobe around him, Buck pulled open the door. We both ran out into the dark corridor and headed toward the stairs.

The floor beneath, where the guests slept, was dimly lighted. I hurried to catch up with Buck. And as I did so that thin, terrified scream came again.

“Miss Heywood!” shouted Buck. “It’s Miss Heywood’s room.”

Together we ran forward, and Buck hurled open the door of the room from which the scream had sounded.

An amazing scene confronted us. Wild and disheveled, Miss Heywood sprawled across the edge of her bed. She had changed into a white nightdress which had slipped from her shoulder, revealing the white skin. She was staring upward, her face pale as death.

And bending over her, his hands curled as if to grip her throat, his eyes blazing with almost insane fury, crouched Virgil Fanshawe.

For an instant after we had thrown ourselves into the room neither of the two moved. It was almost as if they were posing for a tableau in some old-time melodrama. Instinctively I took in every detail—Fanshawe’s tumbled gray pajamas Miss Heywood’s torn nightdress, her firm, virginal breasts the glazed, desperate stare in the eyes of both.

Buck strode forward, grasped Fanshawe’s shoulder in a great fist, and sent him spinning across the room.

Still nobody said anything. The unreality of the scene grew even more marked.

And then gradually everything changed back to normal, as though the play were over and the actors had done with their roles and were becoming ordinary people again. Fanshawe straightened himself against the wall, smoothed his pajamas, and stared straight ahead of him, his face expressionless as a dark, brooding mask. Miss Heywood pulled the torn nightgown around her shoulders, passed a hand across her hair, and quite incredibly, smiled her normal, gracious smile.

After a few very awkward moments Mitchell hurried in, his face glossed with concern.

“What is it?” he exclaimed. “What’s the matter? I heard a scream.”

I told him what Buck and I had found. Neither Fanshawe nor Miss Heywood spoke. They might have been dummies.

Mitchell stared at them both and said:

“Well, Miss Heywood, do you wish me to call the police?”

A swift glance passed, between Miss Heywood and Fanshawe. Very calmly Miss Heywood rose and, looking her most refined, said:

“The police! Oh, dear me, no. How absurd. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. It was all a silly mistake.”

“A mistake,” I echoed, goggle-eyed.

“Yes. I was dozing. I didn’t recognize Mr. Fanshawe. I was frightened. I screamed. So silly of me. He only stopped in to borrow some cold cream for his wife. She seems to have mislaid hers.”

A stunned silence had fallen on the room. Then Buck, who was obviously as stupefied as I, blurted:

“We saw Fanshawe. You know we did. He was just going to strangle you.”

“Strangle me!” Miss Heywood laughed. “My dear boy, how fanciful. What childish nonsense.”

“Really!” Mitchell spluttered, and his glance slid to Fanshawe. “And you, Mr. Fanshawe? Have you any explanation to offer?”

The artist’s face was still deathly pale, but his eyes managed to keep pretty good control.

“Miss Heywood has told you what happened.”

Miss Heywood had crossed composedly to the dressing table. I noticed that she took great care in arranging the dark waves of hair around her ears.

After a moment she shot us a quick sidewise smile which revealed sharp white teeth.

“Well, gentlemen, I am sorry to have disturbed you. But it is late. If you will excuse me now...”

In a tongue-tied procession we four males trooped out. Fanshawe strode away to his own room. Mr. Mitchell scurried off.

Buck and I were left alone. Buck stared at me.

“Well,” he said, “tie that.”

I couldn’t—of course.

XVI

As I left Buck and started along the corridor from Miss Heywood's room to my own I paused outside my daughter's door and on an impulse opened it. The shaft of light from the corridor illumined part of Bobby's cot and a portion of his dark solemnly sleeping face. It touched the other bed and revealed there the still and curled-up figure of Dawn.

The sight of them there so splendidly oblivious to what was going on around them brought relief which was warm and soothing as a hot toddy.

The key was in the lock. I slipped it out and locked the door on the outside. With a maniac abroad I was taking no chances of the kids getting out or of anyone else getting in.

I slipped the key into my pocket.

I was too tired to do any more thinking, and I wanted to go to sleep.

So I did.

It was early enough, as late hours go—only about twelve. I think I went to sleep immediately. I certainly had no intention of waking up again.

But I did. I was suddenly curiously awake, as if some invisible hand had touched me on the shoulder. For a moment I sat in bed in the darkness, my heart thumping for no good reason. Then I consciously heard the sound which must have awakened me.

A stealthy tapping of footsteps moving down the corridor outside my room.

I glanced at the luminous dial of my watch. It was exactly three.

There should be nothing particularly remarkable about someone's moving down a hotel corridor at three o'clock in the morning. And yet as the tangled events of the evening rushed back to me I found myself suddenly and burningly curious.

My sweater and blue jeans were on the chair next to my bed where I had thrown them. I turned on the light, jumped into my clothes, extinguished the

light again, and slipped out into the corridor.

The whole operation could have taken no more than a minute or so.

As I stood in the darkness outside my room I heard a creak from the stairs which led down to the hall. That creak betrayed the fact that my wide-awake fellow guest was going downstairs.

I waited, holding my breath. The creak came again from a lower stair, and then yet a lower one. There was a slight scuffling which showed that the nightwalker had reached the hall. I moved until I was at the head of the stairs. The stairs themselves acted as a sort of sounding board. I could hear all noises downstairs distinctly.

I heard the footsteps growing fainter in the direction of the front door. Then I heard the grumble of a drawn bolt and a creak as the door was opened. There was another creak as the door shut again.

The person responsible for those furtive footsteps had gone out on the dunes.

Until that moment I had had no clear intention. But now, without the slightest sense of strangeness, I decided to follow. These were not normal times, and abnormal times called for abnormal activities—such as shadowing shadowy figures who crept by night.

There was no chance of my being overheard now I hurried down the stairs, stumbled through the pitch-blackness of the hall, and found the front door. With a minimum of creaking, I managed to open it and slip onto the vague expanse of dunes.

The stars were even brighter than they had been, and after the somber darkness of the inn the light seemed almost as strong as day.

And I saw the person who had preceded me out into the night. I saw her immediately—a tall, willowy figure speeding across the dunes in the direction of the churchyard.

The moment I saw her I recognized her. She was an easy person to identify in silhouette.

It was Miss Heywood.

My curiosity was now a hundredfold increased.

Miss Heywood, who had bizarrely given Marion Fanshawe bayberry on the evening dunes. Miss Heywood, who had spent the after-dinner hours

talking to Buck about art in his bedroom. Miss Heywood, who had been almost murdered by Virgil Fanshawe and who had tried to pretend he was borrowing cold cream!

Miss Heywood was now—with the tireless vitality characteristic of her—hurrying across the dunes toward the churchyard at three o'clock in the morning.

It was easy to follow her without being seen. Easy because she was wearing some flowing garment of ghostly gray while I was in a camouflaging navy blue. Easy, too, because she obviously had no suspicion that her exit from the inn had been observed.

Soon, as I slipped after her, the outline of the old church loomed ahead. Miss Heywood quickened her pace. There was something eerie about the way she glided. She was, in fact, very spectral. She reached the edge of the churchyard, hesitated a moment, and then started forward again.

She was heading straight for the fir tree under which lay the grave of the mysterious Irene Casey.

I had no difficulty in finding cover. The dunes bulged back like sloping walls. I dodged from one to another of them. I, too, reached the edge of the graveyard. I had lost sight of Miss Heywood for a few seconds. Now, suddenly, she came into view again.

She was standing beneath the fir tree and she was not alone. A tall male figure had appeared from nowhere, it seemed, and was standing at her side.

I ducked behind an old, leaning tombstone. As I peered around it I saw that the man was carrying something dark and long.

The man was Buck Valentine. And the thing he was carrying was a spade.

I remembered Buck's strangely urgent and, it seemed, pointless interest earlier that evening in the setup of the graveyard.

Old Mr. Fanshawe's grave ... Old Mr. Mitchell's grave ...

I might have felt foolish lying there in the sheltering shadow of an old tombstone. I might even have felt rather macabre, but I didn't.

I was just overwhelmingly curious.

And as I watched I saw Buck lift the spade and start to dig. Miss Heywood hovered at his side with all the symptoms of eager anxiety.

I could not, from that distance, tell exactly where they were digging. I could tell, of course, that they must be concentrating on one of the graves in that area. And, fantastic as it was, this secret black and midnight act seemed to hint that it was this same pair who had been digging up Irene Casey's grave two nights ago when Dawn and I had interrupted them. I thought of the old Cape Talisman woman who had complained to Sergeant Barnes of the gray ghost in the churchyard.

Gray ghost. Miss Heywood in her gray, ghostly dress!

I don't know how long I lay there feeling the wet dew from the grass seeping through to my knees, feeling my neck grow stiffer and stiffer.

I debated whether or not to break in on them and challenge them to offer an explanation. Just as I had steeled myself to do it Buck stopped digging. I saw the two silhouettes stiffen. I heard a sharp, anxious exclamation from Miss Heywood.

And then the two of them disappeared as suddenly as if they had dissolved into the chilly night air.

I rose from my uncomfortable place of concealment and ran toward the spot where they had been digging. I remembered the order of the graves from the account Gilchrist had given me of them earlier that evening. There was a grave which had been tampered with. The dirt had been dug to a depth of about two feet.

But it wasn't the grave of the weird Irene Casey.

It was the grave of Virgil Fanshawe's father.

I stood there, peering down through the gloom at the dark hollow which had been scooped out above that other coffin. Until then I had not stopped to consider what had sent the gravediggers hurrying so precipitously away. But now as I looked up from the defiled grave I saw a figure immediately in front of me—a dark, stooped man's figure coming toward me through the graves and who was not Buck Valentine.

I darted sideways and behind the fir tree, concealing myself as quickly as possible. I was sure the third stranger had not seen me. Not because I had been so quick in concealing myself, but because he was obviously wrapped up with his own reflections.

He came nearer and nearer, his shoulders stooped, his feet dragging—with the curious blind walk of a somnambulist. He came right up to the grave that had been disturbed, hardly more than five feet from me. He stood there a moment, lost in some dreadful contemplation of his own.

His whole body mirrored an inner desolation that seemed stronger than he could bear. Very slowly he dropped on the mound which marked Mr. Mitchell's grave. He sat there, his face buried in his hands.

But just before he hid his eyes I recognized his pale face in the starlight.

I recognized Virgil Fanshawe.

I never saw any man so completely oblivious to his surroundings. He just sat there, his shoulders hunched, his hands covering his face.

I stood there behind the fir tree, so very, very close. Just a step forward and I could have tapped him on the shoulder.

I was almost about to do so when I heard the sound.

It was low at first, a low, choking sound. Then it rose into a racking, desolate sobbing.

Virgil Fanshawe was sitting there alone in the churchyard at three o'clock in the morning sobbing as if his heart would break.

I could not bring myself to let Virgil Fanshawe know he was being observed like that, with all his defenses gone. I couldn't have done it to any man.

Very silently I moved step by step back from the fir tree. I circled around the churchyard and away.

I left Mr. Fanshawe to his lonely and very baffling vigil.

XVII

When I awoke next morning, the sun was streaming in at the window. I was conscious of a series of strange muffled bangings and the ghost of a voice piping indignantly:

‘Daddy, Daddy!’

I remembered then that the night before I had locked Dawn and Bobby into their room next door. The cause of the shrill complaints was obvious.

Tumbling out of bed, I grabbed for a bathrobe, located the key to the other room, and weaved sleepily out into the sunny passage and down it to my daughter’s aid. With the sound of my footsteps the complaints grew even more vociferous. I turned the key in the door and went in to be confronted by a red-faced and vehement Dawn with tumbled tawny hair and even more tumbled striped pajamas.

I looked over her head at Bobby’s cot. Very sedate and immaculate, his black bang smoothly shining over his round, doll-like face, Bobby was sitting straight up in bed. His little arms were folded solidly across the front of his pajamas. His soot-black eyes watched me with absorbed disdain.

Dawn said: “Daddy, Daddy, someone locked us in. We’ve been banging and banging. At least I have.”

Bobby pointed an accusatory finger directly at me. “*He* locked us in,” his booming voice announced. “*He* locked us in. I know he did. Silly man.”

Dawn spun round on him in instinctive defense of her father and then, remembering her own indignation, turned back to me.

“Did you, Daddy? It’s terrible to lock us in. Bobby woke up and wanted to go to the bathroom and he couldn’t and—”

“He can go now,” I said.

Bobby grinned then, a wide, pornographic grin. “Silly,” he said. “It’s too late now.”

I had to hand it to Bobby. He always had the last word.

But his bathroom problems were something with which I refused to concern myself. I looked at Dawn's flushed, inquisitive face. I knew that she knew now that I had locked them in, and she was no fool. She knew perfectly well that I had had a good reason for doing so.

While Bobby smoldered in the background I put my arm around my daughter's shoulder and said:

"Listen, honey, something else happened last night. Someone else died. That's why I locked you in. I wanted you to be safe. And that's why you're packing your things right away and leaving this place."

"Leaving!" Dawn echoed the word in blank misery. "Leaving! Daddy, but we can't leave yet. You promised to go picnicking up on the dunes and you promised—"

"I'm sorry, but it's got to be. This isn't any place for a kid now. I'm packing you off right away."

"Me! You mean you aren't coming too?"

"No, honey. I can't. Not for a couple of days. I promised the inspector I'd stick around. He needs me to help him with investigations and things."

Dawn's lower lip was protruding ominously. Her whole little body seemed to grow stockier and more compact, as if she were expecting to be picked up by brute force and were willing her feet to grow into the ground.

"I won't go without you, Daddy. I won't. I won't. I won't. I know you'll send me to Aunt Mabel." The lip swelled out even more fully. "Aunt Mabel!" She repeated the name in infinite scorn. "Aunt Mabel with her hateful old dog Pierrot who bites and her gloomy old house." She reached the climax of her crescendo. "Aunt Mabel is a—a jerk."

I could tell she had used the naughtiest word she could think of to describe my dull but perfectly harmless aunt. I should, as a parent, have reproved her for so impertinent a remark. But the situation had become too tense for mere technical chiding.

Dawn's lower lip, so stiff a moment before, was trembling now.

"No, Daddy, I can't go to Aunt Mabel and leave you. I don't care what you say or who gets themselves dead; I won't leave. How can I leave when I still haven't found the black diamond?" Tears started rolling from her

eyes. “The black diamond,” she moaned. “I can’t leave. I can’t till I’ve found the black diamond.”

She started to howl then. And Bobby, who until that moment had been completely impassive, suddenly parroted:

“The black diamond. The black diamond.”

And then he, too, started to howl. I have never seen or heard two crying children.

Because there is nothing I like less before breakfast than weeping children, I let the matter drop for the time being and swept testily out of the room.

I had almost reached my own room when another door down the corridor opened and the fragile figure of Marion Fanshawe hurried out. She was dressed in a white feathery negligee.

“Dr. Westlake.” She ran to me, her slim white hands doing nervous little things. “Dr. Westlake, I’ve got to talk to you.”

I was sleepy and much too disheveled to concern myself with a lady, but Marion Fanshawe was far too seldom seen and too significant a character to pass up.

“Yes,” I said. “What is it?”

Her flowerlike eyes, so reminiscent of Bobby’s, were watching me with a kind of agonized solemnity. “Dr. Westlake, my husband tells me nothing—nothing. He pretends it’s because of my nerves. Says it’s bad for me because of my nerves. But something else happened last night, didn’t it? I know. I can feel it. Someone else was murdered. Please tell me.”

I decided that the truth never hurts—at least it never hurts the person who tells it.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m afraid there has been another murder. Maggie Hillman. She was found dead last night.”

“Maggie!” Mrs. Fanshawe gave a stifled cry. “Maggie! It’s this place, this horrible place. It was Virgil’s idea to come here. It was all Virgil’s idea. We’ve got to get away. We’ve got to—”

She was standing a little to my side and, as her words faded, I saw her eyes shift their focus to something behind me in the passage. It was quite

horrible to see their expression change from shocked eagerness to one of stark, physical revulsion.

That was the expression I had seen once before when she looked at her husband. I turned, expecting to see the dark, tragic figure of Virgil Fanshawe coming up the passage.

I was quite wrong.

Bobby was there in the passage. He had broken out of Dawn's room and, with much flopping of pajamas, was padding on bare feet toward us.

He stepped right past me to his mother and put his small hands up, so that they clutched at the negligee.

"Dr. Westlake's a naughty man, Mummy," he boomed "He's trying to take Dawn away before we've found the black diamond. You've got to stop him. Tell him not to take Dawn away."

Marion Fanshawe stood there, her eyes fixed on her son's face with hypnotized fascination.

"Mummy, make it for Dawn to stay until we've found—"

Marion Fanshawe seemed to come to life then. Her lips curled in disgust. Suddenly she wrenched her negligee free from her son's grasp. Her hand went out, pushing him away from her as if he were something disgusting.

"Don't touch me," she said. "Go away. Don't touch me."

Her face crumpled then, so that all the pattern of its beauty collapsed into a pointless blur of features. She gave a whimper. Blindly she ran back into her room, slamming and locking the door behind her.

By all the laws of child psychology Bobby should have developed some deep inner wound at having received such disgraceful treatment at the hands of his mother. If there was a wound, however, it was very well concealed.

His Japanese-doll face was impervious as ever. He put a thumb into his little red mouth and sucked it.

Then, withdrawing the thumb, he announced:

"Mummy's silly." His coal-black eyes flashed up to meet mine for one second. "Mummy's silly—*too*."

That "too," I knew, was intended for me.

Very calmly he turned and padded back down the corridor, disappearing into Dawn's room.

A remarkable family, the Fanshawes.

Back in my own room I got dressed and then went downstairs in search of breakfast. I knew the children would be down any minute and, to get a brief rest from them, I avoided the porch, which was their favorite pre-breakfast hangout, and moved down the passage which led past Mitchell's office to a side door.

As I passed the office two voices, both of them male, were raised in a heated argument inside. I paused and recognized Mr. Mitchell's nervous little cough and an explosive monosyllable which could only have come from Buck.

I felt my connection with the murder case sufficiently strong to justify eavesdropping. I leaned my ear nearer to the closed door. The voices were still too muffled to distinguish the words. At least they were while Mitchell was speaking.

Then suddenly Buck broke into the manager's sentence in a voice harsh and booming with anger. Very distinctly I heard him say:

"But we can't leave her there. Don't you see? We've got to get her body moved somehow."

Her body. Irene Casey's body?

Last night, with the assistance of Miss Heywood, Buck had been digging up old Mr. Fanshawe's grave. Now he was fighting with Mitchell about removing a *woman's* body.

What had I gotten myself mixed up with anyway—a ghouls' convention?

I stood there, waiting for some other equally world-shattering remark, but my name was called from the hall behind me. I turned to see Inspector Sweeney and Dr. Gilchrist coming in through the front door.

They couldn't have come at a worse time. But Sweeney called again, and I had to walk out on what was certainly one of the most interesting of many interesting conversations which had been and were going on in the Cape Talisman Inn.

Both Sweeney and Gilchrist looked tired and rather peeved when I joined them. The inspector's little mustache was as bristly as ever. I felt it boded no good for anyone who crossed his path that morning.

"Hello, Westlake," he said. "You were smart not coming to the morgue with us last night. Spent hours there while they autopsied the Hillman girl. Didn't get a clue—not a clue."

Gilchrist put in: "Only that the lipstick that scrawled the circle around her mole was the same make as the one used on Nellie Wood."

"We'd expected that anyway," grunted Sweeney. "Well, Westlake, this is one hell of a mess—having a maniac on our hands. My men have been scouring the neighborhood for the trace of some stranger. But there doesn't seem to have been one. They've been inquiring around in Talisman, too, trying to be tactful—but it's no use. Everyone knows the truth now—knows there's a madman loose. The village is in a panic. People trying to leave. Girls scared to walk three steps in broad daylight without an escort. And they all blame me!" He snorted. "Well, how's the amateur sleuth? Got anything to tell us?"

I had, as a matter of fact, intended to tell the inspector everything I'd stumbled upon. But now, as he watched me, I thought of the amazing conversation which was going on in the manager's office.

Sweeney was a good man, a very efficient one. But policemen are policemen, and the very best of them, particularly in the country, are apt to be a little heavy on the feet. Neither Miss Heywood nor Buck Valentine knew I had observed them the night before. Neither Buck nor Mitchell knew I had overheard a significant sentence of their conversation. Neither Mr. Fanshawe nor Mrs. Fanshawe knew that I had seen Fanshawe in the graveyard last night.

If I told Sweeney what I knew he would inevitably confront those various characters with the proven facts in an attempt to force the truth out of them.

I thought I knew them all well enough to realize such tactics were doomed to failure. There was only one way to trick the truth out of such slippery people as Miss Heywood and her associates, and that was by making them feel secure and giving them their heads.

That's what I decided then and there. In the long run it was best for me, for the investigation, and for the police themselves, to bide my time before I took Sweeney into my confidence.

So I said—very simply:

“No, Sweeney. I don't think I've got much that could help you.”

The inspector did not look surprised or disappointed. “Okay, Westlake. But stick around. Don't leave or anything like that. You never know. You might pick up something.”

From the tone of his voice I was pretty sure that, even though he had enlisted my services, he did not set much store by any investigator with an amateur status.

He shrugged. “Well, I've come here to try to get someplace with that Valentine boy. Oh, this setup's a crazy one all right. But I argue this way. Anyone might be crazy. Even you doctors can't tell. And I don't necessarily believe you can count out the most obvious party. I'm going to put Valentine through his paces.”

As he stumped off, followed by Gilchrist, I reflected that Buck Valentine had a great many more paces than Sweeney even dreamed of and that it might take more than a curt police questioning to put him through them.

I was joined by two sulky and tear-stained children, and we went in to breakfast. Mr. Usher was already at his table exuding his normal atmosphere of piety and sunlessness. Miss Heywood was there, too, serenely sipping orange juice. I had to hand it to her. She could be up all night, acting like something out of a horror movie, and still appear in time for breakfast.

That morning she had the gall to nod and smile at me and to pat Bobby's head as he passed, murmuring: “Sweet child.”

Miss Heywood was fast becoming my ideal of a wicked woman.

I hurried the children through breakfast as quickly as possible. I wanted to get out on the beach in the sun where I could, perhaps, think. In a reasonably short time I had both of the kids in their absurd swimming shorts, and we were all trailing out across the sand.

The pleasures of the warm September morning soon made Dawn and Bobby forget the touchy problem of Dawn's departure. They launched into some new phase of their blackdiamond game. This time Dawn would pick up a shell or something and announce that she had found the black diamond. Then Bobby would chase her on very wobbly legs, making fiendish sounds like the rapid explosion of machinegun bullets. Dawn would retaliate to his fire with shooting of her own.

It was a very bloodthirsty game.

They were still spattering the beach with imaginary gore when some time later I saw the tall, droopy figure of Miss Heywood drifting down the beach toward us. She had a large striped canvas holdall in her hand and she passed us high up the beach, moving on to a spot some fifty or so yards away. There she settled down with her holdall, from which she produced what was obviously a sketching block and a box of water colors.

Propping the block on her knees, she began, it seemed, to capture in paint the beauties of the ocean at morning.

I could not afford to pass up this opportunity. The children were happy and safely occupied with violent attack and sudden death. I got up from the sand and strolled down the beach until I reached Miss Heywood.

She had already sketched in a horizon and was working intently upon a very amateurish-looking foreground of rolling breakers.

She turned in profile, looking at me over her shoulder, and smiled impenetrably.

"Good morning again, Doctor. A little sketching, you see. Nothing like it, I find, for soothing the nerves."

Miss Heywood, of all people in the world, I reflected, did not have to worry about her nerves.

"Can I sit and watch you for a while?" I asked. "The kids are very obstreperous this morning. I'd like a little rest from them."

"Why, certainly. Sit down. Delightful."

Miss Heywood put her brush in her mouth and patted invitingly at the sand next to her. I squatted there, regarding her from the corner of my eye. She was unquestionably a handsome woman. Her hair, pulled over her ears and drawn into a knot at the back of her neck, was a rich black. Her eyes

were deep and bright and her lips a lustrous scarlet. And yet, as I had noticed before, it was her skin which gave her face its curiously sphinxlike quality. It was drawn so tight over her cheekbones that one almost felt that a movement of the mouth would split it.

I wondered how old she was and decided that it was quite impossible to guess.

I knew I would have to handle her with great delicacy. I said: "I hope your little encounter with Fanshawe last night wasn't too unpleasant. It was gallant of you to pretend to Mitchell that nothing was wrong."

Her brush hovered over the very blue waves of her picture. "Oh yes, Dr. Westlake, I did not want to cause any fuss. Poor man, I'm afraid he must have been a little drunk. It is tiresome, of course, when men break into your room and—and try to make love to you. But—well, men will be men, won't they?" She gave a little tinkling laugh. "And I suppose, at my age, I should be flattered."

I gulped. So she had the nerve to pretend now that Fanshawe, instead of having tried to murder her, had merely broken into her room to make a few amorous passes.

She laid her hand lightly on my knee. "But, please, Doctor, let's not talk about that unhappy little episode any more. It wasn't pleasant. I prefer to forget it."

That neatly shut the door on that episode. There remained her unexpected relationship with Buck.

"I'm surprised to see you sketching the ocean this morning, Miss Heywood. After I found you discussing art with Buck last night I expected you would be using him as a model."

"Oh yes," she murmured as her brush put a very clumsy finishing touch to the white crest of a breaker. "I was planning to try some figure drawing. But after the second dreadful murder last night I knew the police would be wanting to talk to Buck this morning. It wasn't a good day for him." She had everything very pat.

For a moment I sat watching her as she continued with her picture. It was so completely amateurish that I was almost certain she had never, or hardly ever, painted before.

“You seem to be very versatile, Miss Heywood. Landscape, figure drawing—still life.”

“Still life? Oh no, Doctor, I hardly ever try still life. The dear flowers. They are so sweet in themselves. Why trap their elusive beauty on stupid canvas?”

I didn’t let this piece of ham aestheticism pass. “But you’ve forgotten the bayberry. Don’t you remember how you told me you were planning to paint bayberry? You loved it, you said.” I paused. “Mrs. Fanshawe’s crazy about it too.”

That got her. Her whole body stiffened. She shot me a quick, penetrating glance. Then with an airy shrug she murmured:

“That sweet little Mrs. Fanshawe. So she likes bayberry too, does she? I don’t wonder. So many people—”

She stopped speaking abruptly. Although she had only begun her picture she swept it and the paints into her holdall. She rose in a flurry of garment and, with the vaguest and most agitated of good-bys, started walking rapidly away down the beach toward the Monk’s Head.

It all happened so quickly that at first I did nothing but stare. Then I turned in the direction that Miss Heywood had been looking, half expecting to see some mythical monstrous shape approaching.

What I saw was far from monstrous.

Three figures were hurrying down the beach toward me. Two of them were tiny and gamboling—Dawn and Bobby The other, and the one who presumably had had such an extraordinary effect upon Miss Heywood, was no one more terrifying than Dr. Gilchrist.

The three of them came up to me. Gilchrist mopped his brow with a large handkerchief. “Westlake, Sweeney asked me to come out and tell you that he got nothing out of Buck.” He was staring curiously down the beach after the fast-disappearing figure of Miss Heywood.

“Who’s your lady friend, Westlake?”

“It’s Miss Heywood. A woman staying at the inn.”

“She seemed to leave in a hurry.”

“That’s just what I was thinking,” I said. “It looked very much to me as if she didn’t want to see you.”

“But why?” Gilchrist’s eyes were blank. “I’ve never seen the woman in my life, have I?”

“Maybe you haven’t. But I’m pretty sure she’s seen you.”

I was sure, then, that I was speaking the truth. My “lady friend” had met Gilchrist before and was most unexpectedly anxious not to remake his acquaintance.

XVIII

When the children and I returned for lunch a very hagridden Mr. Mitchell reported that the inspector was still in the hotel, closeted with Virgil Fanshawe.

I heard this information without much interest. I had made only one decision on the beach, which was that Dawn should get away from Cape Talisman before darkness brought yet another of those danger-infected nights. I borrowed a train timetable from Mitchell and hurried the two children upstairs to Dawn's room.

I was adamant now. Repugnant as Aunt Mabel may have been to Dawn, my daughter was going straight under her unamiable wing. Aunt Mabel who, among her other shortcomings, was dourly New England, lived conveniently close. I looked up a train which left in a few hours and then announced my plan to Dawn as a *fait accompli*, ordering her to pack.

There was a great deal of scowling and bulging of lower lip, but my daughter raised no actual objections. She merely said:

"If I can't stay because it's dangerous and everything, then Bobby can't stay either, and Bobby should come with me." She shot me a sidelong glance. "Aunt Mabel wouldn't be so bad if Bobby was there too."

In spite of the terrors that such a plan would seem to hold in store for Aunt Mabel, I was inclined to agree that it would be best for all parties concerned. The Fanshaws, I knew, would not be allowed to leave by Sweeney. But after the scene Marion had thrown that morning in the corridor I couldn't imagine that she would be reluctant to part with Bobby for a while.

Dawn was looking at me with tense expectancy. "Daddy, can Bobby come?"

"Okay," I said. "You start packing and I'll go and talk things over with Mrs. Fanshawe."

Dawn tugged her suitcase dutifully out from under her bed. Bobby reached over his head and pulled from a drawer a pile of small and intimately feminine undergarments. He carried them halfway to the suitcase and then, with a sudden access of boredom, dropped them in a heap on the floor and sat himself monumentally upon them.

Bobby was not much of a help around the home.

As I went down the corridor I remembered that Virgil was downstairs with Sweeney. That meant I would have one more chance to beard Marion Fanshawe alone.

My first knock received no reply. Neither did my second. I figured that Marion might be in the bedroom, with the door connecting it to the studio closed. In that case she would not hear me. I moved to the next door down the passage which led directly into the bedroom and knocked again.

Mrs. Fanshawe's voice answered immediately, very brisk and gay.

"Yes, yes. Who is it?"

"It's Dr. Westlake. Can I come in and speak to you for a moment?"

"Why, certainly. Come in."

I opened the door and stepped into the bare, dowdy room which was furnished with Mr. Mitchell's idea of simple elegance. Marion Fanshawe had been seated on a little stool in front of the vanity mirror. She drifted toward me, the folds of her white negligee floating around her. I was astonished at the unwonted animation in her lovely little face. Her cheeks were glowing; her dark flower eyes were radiant, and as she held her hand to me she watched my face from pupils narrowed to pin points, with a happiness that was almost hectic.

"How nice to have a visitor, Doctor. I was just sitting at the mirror thinking how pretty I am." She laughed, a funny, birdlike laugh. "What a way for a supposedly intelligent woman to spend her morning!"

She patted one of the twin beds.

"Let's sit down and have a chat."

I blinked. This was a very different Marion from the one I was used to—a rather incongruous one too. All this vivacity and charm did not go with the murder-ridden atmosphere of the Talisman Inn.

As I sat down I noticed the bed table. Standing on it beside a large silver-framed photograph of a little boy which, though idealized, was probably Bobby, was a vase. And in the vase was a tastefully arranged bunch of bayberry.

Miss Heywood's fifty-dollar bayberry?

Mrs. Fanshawe was chattering on without giving me a chance to state my mission. At one stage she sailed away from the bed, found a cigarette, and returned, lighting it with a hand that quivered with a kind of internal tension.

"But here I am, Doctor, rattling on and on and not giving you a chance to say anything. Tell me about you. What have you been doing?"

I said: "I've decided the hotel isn't the kind of place for kids right now. I'm sending Dawn off to an old aunt of mine. She'll be perfectly safe there. And I thought since you've—you've not been well and everything, it might be a sound plan to have Bobby go off with Dawn. Then you wouldn't have him on your mind."

"Bobby!" She still gave me that fixed vivacious stare. "Oh yes, Bobby. One almost forgets him. Send him away with your daughter?" She wagged her cigarette airily. "Why, yes, I think that's a good idea. Very good and so kind of you. Send him right away."

I watched the taut, trembling hand; I watched the bright, thin-pupiled eyes and the jerky, feverish toss of her head. I was beginning to realize something about Mrs. Fanshawe's gaiety.

And then as my eye moved back to the bayberry I thought I understood.

"Very pretty, that bayberry," I murmured. "That's the bunch you picked on the dunes when I met you yesterday evening, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes." Marion Fanshawe had nervously risen from the bed now.

I rose too, and moved toward the vase. She hovered at my side.

"Dr. Westlake, wouldn't you care for a drink? I believe Virgil has some in the studio. Let's—"

I moved closer to the bayberry, examining as carefully as I dared the stiff gray twigs plunging down into the empty vase and the hard gray-and-orange berries.

“I see you’ve no water in the vase,” I said. “Let me get you some from the bathroom.”

“No, no.” Marion Fanshawe almost screamed the words, and she clutched at my sleeve convulsively. “They don’t need water.”

She was technically right. But although it demanded a certain amount of social clumsiness I saw my one hope of clearing up the bayberry problem. I pushed her hand gently off my sleeve.

“I assure you you’re mistaken, Mrs. Fanshawe. If you don’t put water in that vase the berries will drop off.”

I went into the bathroom. An empty water carafe stood on the top of the drug closet. I filled it and came back into the bedroom.

I was confronted with an extraordinary sight. Marion Fanshawe had grabbed the bayberry out of the vase and was clutching it against her breast. Through its gray stalks she was staring at me from bright, desperate eyes.

“I don’t want them watered,” she said. “I don’t, Dr. Westlake. I don’t want water in that vase.”

I put the carafe down on the bed table. “Very well, Mrs. Fanshawe. I’m sorry I made such a fuss. It’ll be all right about Bobby going away?”

“Yes, yes. Of course.”

“All right.” I moved past her to the door. “I’ll see all arrangements are made to get Bobby off. Thank you, Mrs. Fanshawe.”

I stepped out into the corridor and turned to close the door behind me. She was still standing perfectly still with the bunch of twigs clenched passionately against her negligee.

I shut the door. I knew then what was the matter with Marion Fanshawe. Her secret had turned out to be pitifully simple.

I was beginning to see something very distinctly about Miss Heywood too.

All I needed now was a talk with Virgil Fanshawe.

Just as I was thinking that the artist appeared, dark and dejected, coming up from the hall below. We met at the head of the stairs. Fanshawe’s haunted eyes met mine with a wry smile.

“Well, Westlake, I’ve been having quite a time with your inspector friend. He seemed rather annoyed that I wouldn’t admit to being an

adulterer, a maniac, and a double murderer.”

I said: “I’ve got some rye in my room. How about having a post-inquisitorial drink? As a doctor, I recommend it.”

His smile, still essentially sad, broadened. “That’s the kind of doctor I like.”

He followed me down the passage to my room. I found glasses and rye and water. The concoctions were warm and unpleasant, but they served the purpose of establishing a certain informal camaraderie between the two of us which was what I wanted, because the questions I had to ask of him were hardly the sort that one normally asks of a stranger.

I began with Bobby, repeating my offer to send him away with Dawn to my aunt until such a time as the trouble blew over or the Fanshawes were allowed to leave.

“It’s not a long trip,” I said. “Dawn’s quite a traveler. She’ll be able to take care of Bobby on the train, and someone from my aunt’s will pick them up at the other end.”

He approved of the idea—gratefully. In fact, he seemed so grateful at the prospect of being relieved of parental duty that I took courage to say what I had to say.

“Listen, Fanshawe, I’m a doctor. You know that. You also know that I’m sort of semiofficially connected with the murder investigation. As a doctor, I hope you can bring yourself to trust me. As someone who’s trying to figure out the truth behind the murders, you’ve got to realize that it’s my business to be a bit curious about everyone.”

Fanshawe merely shrugged. “You couldn’t be more curious than Sweeney. What’s on your mind?”

“There are a lot of mysterious things going on in this inn, for example,” I said. “Some of them may be connected with the murders. Some of them very definitely aren’t. It would help a lot if you could help me eliminate a couple of the mysteries and prove once and for all that they have nothing to do with Sweeney’s murdering maniac.”

He looked a little uncomfortable then and suspicious. “I don’t believe I know—”

“I’m talking about your wife,” I said very quietly. “You’ve told me she was sick. But until a few minutes ago I never really had a chance to observe her. I’ve been with her just now. Yes, she is sick. But—it’s not a pathological disease, is it?”

He shuffled. “Westlake, I—”

“Just now she had all the symptoms of being under the influence of cocaine—the pin-point pupils, the hectic gaiety, the shaky hands, everything. That’s the truth, isn’t it? Your wife has the cocaine habit, and Miss Heywood’s been supplying her with the stuff.”

His face was deathly pale.

I went on: “You found out or suspected the truth about Miss Heywood. That’s why you were almost killing her last night when we broke in. That’s why, although she was terrified of you, she didn’t dare ask Mitchell to call the police for fear the truth would come out. And that’s why, when you couldn’t bear it any more, you went down to the old churchyard around three o’clock last night—and broke down.”

Fanshawe had risen. He stood staring at me with a kind of blind horror in his eyes.

“But how—how did you know?”

“Nothing mysterious about that. I could see with my own eyes what was the matter with your wife. And last night I happened to be in the graveyard, too, and I saw you. I didn’t understand what was the trouble then. I do now. You must have been going through hell. Please don’t be mad at me for bringing it up. It’s just something the two of us have to straighten out. No one else need know.”

He didn’t seem to be listening. “But, Westlake, I mean about Miss Heywood. How did you know she’s been—been supplying Marion? I suspected it. I was almost certain. But I hadn’t any proof. That’s why I went to her room last night. I was going to try to force her into telling the truth,”

Fanshawe’s dark suffering eyes fixed on my face.

“I know Miss Heywood’s supplying your wife because I know how she does it. Yesterday evening, when your wife persuaded you to go out for a walk, she had a date to meet Miss Heywood on the dunes. I saw them meet. Miss Heywood gave her a bunch of bayberry and she gave Miss Heywood a

fifty-dollar bill. Your wife has that bunch of bayberry by her bed now. Just now I made a fool of myself. I pretended bayberry should be kept in water. I even brought some in to pour into the vase. Your wife snatched the bayberry out of the vase and wouldn't let me touch it. I was sure then. She didn't care whether or not the bayberry was put in water. She was terrified because her supply of cocaine was hidden somewhere in it—probably some of the stalks had been hollowed out—and she was terrified I would wet it and spoil it.”

“The bayberry! So that's where she keeps it.” Fanshawe's face was tormented with anxiety. “This—this has been going on now for months. I've got so expert at tracking down the places where she hides the filthy stuff. But I never thought of the bayberry.”

Until then it had seemed to me that Miss Heywood's use of bayberry as a vehicle for her smuggled dope had been almost ludicrously elaborate. I understood the reason for her extreme caution now. Marion must have insisted on a particularly safe hiding place since her husband was so clever at discovering her caches.

Fanshawe had turned to the door. I put my hand gently on his arm.

“There's no hurry,” I said. “Won't you tell me? I mean, won't you tell me the story behind it? Your wife's had some great shock, hasn't she? Something happened that gave her a neurasthenic hatred of you—and of Bobby too.”

He made no attempt to shake my hand off his arm. After a second's hesitation he dropped back into his chair. His eyes, so deeply wounded by suffering, moved to my face with a tentative expression, as if he were trying to make up his mind whether or not he could trust me. I could tell he was longing to talk, that he had bottled up his tragic problems inside him so long that it would be an almost physical relief to spill them out in words.

“Okay, Westlake.” He rose again and started moving around the room. “You'll treat this as a confidence. I know you will.”

I nodded.

He came back to me, gripping the end of the bed. “It happened two years ago. Everything was dandy until two years ago. And then ... It was Christmas Day. Bobby was only a baby then, but we had another son,

Martin. Maybe you saw his photograph. Marion always keeps it by her bed.”

I remembered that large silver-framed photograph I had just seen—the picture of the little boy whom I had assumed to be Bobby.

Fanshawe ran a hand across his dark hair. “There was snow,” he said huskily. “It was a snowy Christmas. Beautiful. We had a place out in Connecticut. We’d had some people in for cocktails before Christmas dinner. After they’d gone, after dinner, I was still a little tight. Martinis. Not really tight, but kind of high and gay. I thought it would be a wonderful idea to take the car out and just drive around—have a look at the Christmas trees, the snow, and everything. Marion wasn’t feeling so well. She was lying down upstairs. Bobby was with her. But Martin—he was six then. Six years old. Martin was with me. I said: ‘Marty, how about a driver?’ And he said sure, he’d love it. So I got out the station wagon.”

He paused, his eyes foreshadowing some dreadful thing to come. “We went for the drive. I—I was a little tight; I told you that. Marty was with me in the front seat, staring out with those great round eyes of his at the pretty Christmas trees, the snow, and everything. It had gotten colder. I hadn’t realized it. The roads started freezing over. I—I drove quite fast because—well, because I was gay and happy. There was a hill. We started down it. Suddenly the car skidded. It got out of control. I couldn’t do anything. We careened to the side of the road. We turned over. I heard the crash of glass as the windows broke. I felt everything spinning around. And I heard a cry—a high, thin little cry from Marty. I passed out then. When I came to I was in hospital. They told me then. They told me that Marty was dead.”

His face mirrored now the whole horror of that Christmas Day.

“It was bad enough for me, God knows. But even then in those first moments I thought of Marion. For Marion’s one passion in life was Marty. He was her first boy, and she worshiped the ground he walked on. She would have seen both Bobby and me dead before she would have had a hair of Marty’s head hurt. And now I’d killed Marty. She didn’t come to see me in hospital. They told me that she’d broken down when she’d heard the news. She was in bed at home with a trained nurse. I didn’t see her until I went home myself several weeks later and—and the change in her had

happened already. She wouldn't even let me into her room when I got back. She held me responsible, you see. She knew I'd been drinking a little and—and she thought of me as if I'd murdered Marty. She'd turned against Bobby too. Bobby was alive, and her beloved Marty was dead. She couldn't forgive Bobby that. It was hell on earth for me. Marion that way and—and my own conscience biting at me all the time like a dog. Marion was finally well enough to be up and about, but all the life had gone out of her and—”

He broke off. “What's the use of going on? The whole thing got worse and worse, so that it was impossible. She wouldn't leave me. For some crazy reason she wouldn't. But it was a kind of physical horror for her if I even touched her. She was the same with Bobby too. She just sat all day, staring at Marty's picture. Later I discovered she had taken to cocaine—to try and make herself forget.”

That was as poignant as any story I had heard.

“I sent her to a place where they said they could cure her of the cocaine business. She came back, and they swore she was broken of it. But life went on pretty much the same. Although, God knows, she didn't want me herself, she started accusing me of being unfaithful to her. I'm an artist. I have to make a living. I have to have models for my work. But every time I hired a new model there would be the same pattern—sarcastic remarks about my new 'sex life,' constant nagging—and finally a bang-up scene which ended with the model walking out on me. Life at home got unendurable. I had the crazy idea that if I brought her here to the little place where I'd grown up things might improve. I brought Nellie Wood along because I had to have a model and because Bobby had to have someone to look after him. For a while it looked as if things were getting better. But then a few weeks ago the whole cycle started again.”

He paused. “Marion began to hint and make digs about me and Nellie. There was nothing between us—absolutely nothing. But you heard her that night after the murder. She tried to make you believe Nellie and I had been having an affair, that I'd followed her out onto the dunes that night. It was a lie, of course. I don't think she can help it. There's this terrible bug in her, the bug that makes her want to hurt me, to punish me for what I did to

Marty, and yet to hold onto me—not let me go. And then in the middle of all that I began to be pretty sure she was taking cocaine again.”

I was almost prepared to swear that he was telling the truth about Nellie. No one could have lied at such a moment. That cleared up one thing once and for all. There had been nothing between Virgil and Nellie Wood. That business had been nothing but an imaginary product of Marion’s mind and Nellie’s determination to make herself glamorous for Buck.

Virgil’s knuckles, as he gripped the end of the bed, stood up hard and white. “You know the rest. Slowly, just from little things, I began to suspect Miss Heywood, of being the person who gave Marion the dope. It seemed crazy at first—Miss Heywood looked like the last person in the world to be a dope peddler. But it went on until last night I was sure of it. I made a fool of myself. You know that only too well. But I guess I was almost out of my mind. I might even have murdered the woman if you and Buck hadn’t burst in when you did.”

His hands dropped to his sides. He gave a dry little laugh that was enough to wring one’s heart.

“That’s the charming story of the Fanshawes’ married bliss. These crazy murders—you can believe it or not—they hardly enter my consciousness. For hours this morning Sweeney’s been pounding at me, asking me this question and that question, suspecting me of God knows what connection with the crimes. But it just doesn’t seem real to me. I can’t put my mind on it. I can’t think of anything but Marion.”

His lips trembled. “That’s the elaborate joke of it, you see. In spite of everything, in spite of what I’ve done to her, in spite of her loathing of me, I can’t think of anyone else or care about anyone else. That’s my trouble, Westlake. I’m still in love with my wife.”

He had said his say then. He stood there, a faint flush spreading over his dark face, suddenly embarrassed by me because I knew more about him than he wanted anyone to know. I would have given a lot to tell him how sorry I was for him. But you just can’t say things like that.

We watched each other for a few moments in increasing awkwardness. Then with a muttered something about going to see Marion he strode out of the room.

In the last half-hour I had learned a great deal about the Fanshawes and about Miss Heywood too.

Miss Heywood was a peddler of cocaine (at fifty dollars per bayberry bunch). And Miss Heywood was interested in digging in the graveyard. Until that moment I had been able to bring forward no reasonable explanation for that most remarkable of acts. I began to see one—a rather woolly one—now. Dope peddlers have to make a cache of their dope somewhere. Perhaps Miss Heywood had chosen the graveyard as an appropriately macabre locale to conceal the bulk of her precious cocaine. Or perhaps, again, some earlier peddler had made a cache there and she, enterprising to the end, was trying to rediscover it and use it for her own profit.

If this were true it looked as though the whole graveyard business was a side line, disconnected from the murders. In that case we were back again to Gilchrist's point of view—that the murders stood alone, unreasoning acts of a maniac with no motive other than a psychopathic aversion to moles.

But—what about Irene Casey? Irene Casey, who was dead in the graveyard and who had sported a mole. Irene Casey, who, though long since departed this life, seemed to be the one remaining link that connected the murders with the churchyard disturbances.

Things were still pretty confused. But one chance of unscrambling them was obviously mine now to exploit. Buck Valentine had assisted Miss Heywood at her little digging bee last night. Buck came in there somehow. And with the knowledge that his mature girl friend was a dope peddler, I might be able to shock-troop something out of him.

Buck was definitely my next move.

Or, rather, my next but one. Before I did anything else I was determined to get Dawn and Bobby safely away to Aunt Mabel.

I returned to my daughter's room. I found Dawn and Bobby sitting together on a single ladder-backed chair, whispering intimately in each other's ears and smiling with the secret smugness of conspirators. They started when they saw me.

I glanced at the bed. The suitcase was packed and closed. All of Dawn's clothes were apparently inside. All of them, that is, except a generous

portion of pink drawers which bulged out at one side.

“All set?” I asked. “The train goes pretty soon. I’ve got to wire ahead to Aunt Mabel to pick you up at the other end. It’s okay about Bobby, by the way.”

Bobby and Dawn exchanged glances again and smirked.

“Yes, Daddy,” said Dawn. “We’re ready. At least we will be when Bobby’s packed.”

I found their obedience highly suspect. Dawn asked me in a very prim and aloof voice:

“By the way, Daddy, if Bobby and I happened to get thirsty on the train and wanted two Pepsi-Colas from the man who comes around with drinks and things, and if we happened to be hungry and wanted some peanuts or maybe some candy, and if we happened to want to read magazines and things—if all that happened, seeing that we don’t have anything but six cents left over from that quarter you gave me, it would be nice to have some money, wouldn’t it?”

She looked at Bobby again, who nodded. They both stared at me. I was beginning to see.

“How much do you want?” I asked.

Dawn’s face did not change its expression in the slightest degree. “About three dollars and forty-five cents,” she said.

Bobby looked at her in horror. “No,” he boomed in his profound basso. “No. That’s not right.”

“It isn’t?” I said.

“No.” Bobby’s round black eyes watched me with infinite scorn. “Not right at all. We need about three dollars and forty-six cents.” He nodded soberly to himself. “Three dollars and forty-six cents.”

He turned his scathing stare on Dawn.

“Silly,” he said. “Silly fool.”

Bobby’s passion for having the last word had gone, I felt, a trifle too far.

XIX

With the minimum of trouble I put Dawn and Bobby onto the train which would take them to Aunt Mabel. My relief at waving them good-by was immense. I had no responsibilities any more. I could go to town on my quiet little side investigation which, although it seemed to be leading me farther and farther away from the murders, was at least leading me somewhere.

Sweeney was back at the hotel when I returned. I met him in the hall gloomily talking to Mr. Mitchell. His temper seemed even worse than it had been in the morning, and from his few barked sentences I gathered that the official investigation was not progressing with any sensational rapidity.

"I was just telling Mitchell," he snapped "that anyone who goes out after dark goes out at his own risk. I've said the same thing in the village. Barnes is going to be on duty all night, patrolling the beach. A couple of other men are taking on in the village. If there's a third murder tonight"—his mustache bristled ferociously—"I might as well put a rope around my neck and jump off the roof of the City Hall." He snorted. "You still taking an interest in the case, Westlake?"

"Sure."

He laughed sarcastically. "The amateur expert! They always solve the mystery while the dumb cop flounders around, don't they?"

"Traditionally," I said.

"Solve this, Westlake, and I'll give you—"

"Three dollars and forty-six cents," I said. "That's what it's cost me to date."

I left them in search of Buck Valentine. The lifeguard wasn't in the hotel. I found him lounging on the beach, his great tanned torso exposed except for what his brief white trunks concealed. If he was lifeguarding he didn't have to work very hard at it, because there were no bathers in sight.

I dropped at his side and said: "Hello."

His young face was drawn and irritable. "Hi, Doc. Hell of a morning I've had with your pal Sweeney. He's been throwing questions at me like crazy. I wish he'd get it into his thick head that I don't know a darn thing to interest him."

"You don't?"

"Why the hell should I?"

"Personally I'd like to know why you spent part of last night digging up old Mr. Fanshawe's grave with the assistance of a cocaine peddler." Remembering the strange conversation I had overheard between him and Mitchell that morning, I added: "And whose body is it you're so keen to have removed from the churchyard?"

He listened to that as if he had been suddenly hit between the eyes. For a few seconds he stammered ineffectually. Then he managed:

"Cocaine peddler? What do you mean—cocaine peddler?"

"Didn't you know that's Miss Heywood's line of business?" He got up, towering over me.

"Miss Heywood!"

"Exactly." I took a brodie then. "There's no point in pretending you don't know. The two of you were digging in the graveyard to locate some cache of dope, weren't you?"

"You're crazy," he faltered.

"You deny that?"

"Of course I deny it. Dope—why should I give a damn about dope?"

"You don't deny digging in the graveyard with Miss Heywood, digging up Mr. Fanshawe's grave?"

"Deny it? Of course I deny it. I never went to the churchyard with Miss Heywood or anyone else."

Before I could say anything else he had turned on his heel and was striding away from me back to the hotel.

The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully. I chattered pretty inconclusively with Sweeney and Gilchrist, who came in for a while. They left, and Miss Heywood herself drifted onto the porch where I was sitting

and settled down with a book as if life was going on the way life in small summer seaside resorts is supposed to go on.

I didn't try to tackle her. I knew she still had all the trumps in her hand.

Unlike Miss Heywood, the other inhabitants of the inn grew increasingly jittery as evening slipped into night and blackness stretched in front of the wide screen windows of the porch. Staff and guests, as they came and went, cast uneasy glances out into the darkness which might and so very probably did hide a maniac—a maniac prowling even now, perhaps on the dunes with an unlighted lantern in one hand and a length of sash cord in the other, a maniac urged on by an impulse to kill and to deface with his secret lipstick the skin of his third victim-to-be.

I felt lonely and anchorless without Dawn. Because there was nothing to do but sit and wonder, I decided on bed. So, it seemed, did the others. When I retired to my room somewhere around ten o'clock the whole downstairs of the inn was deserted.

I went to sleep quickly and slept heavily. Very heavily. For when I was awakened by that odd noise it took several moments to realize that the deep, resonant booming I had heard was an actual sound and not a mere vestige of some disturbing dream.

I stirred in bed, cursing Cape Talisman for waking me up on three consecutive nights and trying to concentrate my weakened thoughts on that weird booming.

A bell! That's what it was, of course. Somewhere out in the darkness a bell was blaring one long single note which echoed across the dunes till it faded away in a droning sigh. It came again, that one throbbing note, a pause, then the bell note again.

A church bell. The bell in the old church on the dunes was incredibly tolling. And it was incredibly tolling the slow, rhythmic chime which calls people to the service for the burial of the dead.

I jumped out of bed and ran to the open window. I saw nothing. And I heard nothing but the swishing of the rising tide against the invisible sand. The silence was complete—almost unendurable for the noise which had shattered it so short a time before.

With a sudden access of energy I pulled on a sweater and pants over my pajamas and slipped into some shoes. I ran out into the corridor and dashed down the stairs. In the deserted lobby the ceiling light was on and the front door wide open.

I hurried out across the dunes in the direction of the church. The wind had risen, blowing sharply from the sea. In the pale light from a sickle moon I could see the dark silhouettes of the bayberry bushes. Around me the long grasses moaned and whispered a melancholy dirge.

As I hurried toward the graveyard and the vague outlines of the abandoned church I half expected the long, mournful boom of the bell to ring out again. But there was no sound.

Within a few minutes I had reached the extreme landward end of the graveyard. The crumbling tombstones reared to my left and right. In front loomed the church itself. I could see the blurred shape of the little dilapidated porch.

I ran toward it. And as I ran I became conscious of a scuffling sound from somewhere ahead in the shadow of the porch.

I slackened my pace and halted. From that blurred confusion in front, individual sounds emerged—heavy male breathing, the ripping of material, a low, angry snarl.

Out in the churchyard the moon cast a wan, somber radiance, but the porch itself was impenetrably black. I was about to press forward and investigate when the struggling grew fiercer and I saw an arm, a leg, and then the clinched bodies of two men stumbling across the threshold and out into the sandy turf.

I could not recognize either of the combatants in their desperate, wordless battle. It was almost as though I were gazing at the shadows of these two men. Their clothes were black, almost invisible. Only the white faces stood out, and the white hands clutching for each other's throats.

I shouted and started forward. Before I reached them one of the fighters broke away. A white fist shot out, and there was a sharp noise as it crashed against something hard. Then the other figure crumpled limply to the ground.

I hurried to the victor, who was crouching forward in the pale moonlight. Disheveled though he was, I recognized Mr. Mitchell.

“Mitchell!” I exclaimed, surprised, beyond, anything else, by the fact that the elegant hotel manager should be expert enough with his fists to knock anybody out. “What is it? What on earth’s going on here?”

The manager had started at the sound of my voice. Then he straightened himself and pushed back the long, thinning hair that was hanging over his forehead.

“Is he all right, Dr. Westlake?”

I dropped to my knees beside the prostrate man. “Who is he?”

“I don’t know. We started fighting before I had time to see. It was dark in the porch and—Here, take this.”

Mitchell fumbled in his pocket and produced a torch. I took it and directed its beam onto the unconscious man’s face. In the garish illumination I could see every detail now—the pale, waxy cheeks, the thick red hair, the full, bloodstained lips of Benjamin Usher.

Mitchell was hovering at my shoulder. “That blood—that blood, Dr. Westlake. He is all right? And Mr. Usher too. If only I’d known. Attacking one of my own guests!”

I felt Usher’s pulse. It was strong. The injury was obviously not serious.

“Help me take him back onto the porch,” I ordered. “And don’t worry. He’s only knocked out.”

Mitchell gripped one arm and I the other. Together we half dragged, half carried Usher up the low steps and laid him down on the splintered porch floor.

I said: “How did it happen?”

Mitchell had somehow managed to restore order to his clothes. Breathlessly he began to explain; “I was in my room reading. I heard the church bell. After those ghastly crimes had been committed I was afraid something else had happened. I felt I should investigate....”

“Of course.”

“I had just reached the porch and was about to enter the church when someone attacked me. I had no time to call out, to do anything but defend myself. I—er—am not very proficient at fighting with my fists. But—well,

the need to protect myself. I fought; I—I—knocked him out.” Then he started all over again. “I never realized it was Mr. Usher. Such a good guest, such a—”

“You think it was Usher who rang the bell?”

“Oh, no, not Mr. Usher.” Mitchell’s voice sounded as if I had made an indecent suggestion. “He is a very well-known undertaker in Haling and a most respectable citizen. Why, he buried my poor old father and he’s one of my most regular guests.”

I said: “Well, if it wasn’t Usher, we’d better go in there right away and see if anyone else is hanging around.”

Leaving the unconscious artistic undertaker lying on the porch, we swung open the old oak door which led into the derelict building. No one, it seemed, had bothered to keep this dreary place locked.

Slowly the light from the torch swept around the barren walls. Every movable object had been taken away when the church had been abandoned. The flashlight revealed the cracked plaster, the sagging timber of the room, an old stone font, and a few broken pews. For an instant it gleamed on a painted angel, still intact and stiffly on vigil in one of the windows.

The air was stale and musty as we hurried forward, swinging the torch to the right and the left. We passed the decaying pulpit, and ahead I could make out the place where the altar had stood. Mitchell crossed to the left and slid back a dusty curtain which seemed strangely out of place in that husk of a building.

“The bell rope—it’s in here.”

I held the torch forward. We saw the gray network of cobwebs on the walls, the narrow slit of a window. The light flickered upward, and high in the tower above us I could make out the dull, gleaming metal of the bell. From it a frayed rope dangled downward, brushing against the floor.

The rope was swaying slightly, almost as though the hand of the strange ringer had only that moment left it—as though he had given a final, insanely vicious tug and then slipped away just before we entered that little alcove.

“Well, he’s gone all right,” I said. “Couldn’t expect him to wait for us.”

Mitchell made no reply. When I turned he followed and hurried after me through the deserted church and out onto the porch.

My first instinct was to look for Usher. I flashed the torch along the stone wall and as I did so I heard Mitchell give a little gasp.

“He’s gone. How extraordinary!”

I shone the beam right around the porch and sent it across the huddled tombstones outside. Mitchell was right. The knockout blow he inflicted could not have been a real killer-diller. In our short absence the undertaker must have recovered and slipped away from the churchyard as mysteriously as he had come.

We stood together on the steps of the church porch, staring forward into the gloom.

“He might be somewhere out there,” offered Mitchell at length. “Out there in the graveyard. He—he might not be quite himself yet. We should find him, take him back to the hotel.”

It was only then that I remembered how Sweeney had told me that Barnes was to patrol the beach all night. What on earth, I wondered, had happened to the sergeant? Surely he must have heard the bell. He should have been with us some time ago.

“Mr. Usher! Mr. Usher! Are you there? Are you all right?” Mitchell’s voice sounded high and ineffectual in that thick silence.

Sweeping the torch in a broad arc, I reached the crest of the dunes and stared along the dark expanse of beach. Mitchell was at my side.

Both of us had been gazing in the direction of the harbor. Mitchell was the first to turn toward the hotel, and his voice broke into my reflections, swift and startled.

“Dr. Westlake. Look!”

I spun around to see him pointing anxiously. There was no need to ask what had alarmed him. It was all too apparent.

Bobbing, swaying, burning a hole in the darkness of the shore, was a pink Chinese lantern.

As I watched it grew larger and larger. It was coming toward us.

For an instant I felt a curious sense of personal danger. At Cape Talisman we had grown to associate those Chinese lanterns with horror and

death. It was almost as though Death itself were creeping toward us along the sands—silent, swift, inevitable.

Calling Mitchell to follow, I scrambled down the sandy earth and hurried in the direction of that pink, eerie light. The wind was high. It blew the soft sand around me in sudden gusts.

It is difficult to remember all the strange, improbable fancies that skimmed through my mind as I ran. But they were short-lived. Mitchell had hardly caught up with me before a familiar voice rang out from the darkness ahead and I recognized the gruff tones of Sergeant Barnes.

“Who’s there?” he was calling.

“Okay. It’s Dr. Westlake.”

Within a few seconds the lantern was almost abreast of us. Behind it I could make out the thin figure of the sergeant and the large, thickset form of Gilchrist.

“Westlake!” exclaimed Gilchrist. “What are you doing here? And who’s that—Mitchell?”

“We heard the bell,” I explained. “But where have you been, Barnes? How did you get that lantern?”

“I was patrolling the beach, Doctor, and I saw a light beyond the Monk’s Head. I went up there and found this lantern. When I heard the bell I didn’t leave at once because I was busy looking around to see what was there. But I couldn’t find anything, so I hurried down here.”

“Yes,” muttered Gilchrist. “I heard that bell too. I bumped into Barnes with the lantern as I came down the beach. What is it, Westlake? Has—has anything happened?”

“You mean there was nothing by the lantern, Barnes?” I asked. “No—no body?”

“Not a darn thing, Doc. I searched all over. Not a thing. Jest the lantern, propped up against the Monk’s Head, way the other one was when Nellie Wood was murdered.”

That in a way was as horrible as anything—the picture of that Chinese lantern, symbol now of disaster, burning, flickering in pointless solitude at the base of that huge, looming rock.

It proved the one thing that we had been dreading. In spite of Sweeney's precautions, in spite of everything, the maniac of Cape Talisman was once more on the loose.

I told them then all that we had seen in the churchyard.

In the pink circle of light from the lantern I could see the faces of my companions—Gilchrist's perplexed, Barnes's dour and expressionless, Mitchell's tense and agitated.

"I wonder," mused Gilchrist, "if there's been any more tampering with the graves. If it was the crazy man who rang the bell he must have had a reason, Westlake. He must have wanted to draw our attention to something—something he wants us to find."

I had been thinking that too.

I said: "Come on. Let's look."

Barnes led the way with the lantern. I followed, flashing the torch. We came to the nearest point of the churchyard and kept along the foot of the dunes until we reached the spot where Dawn and I had first seen that lantern.

"If it's anywhere, it's here," I said.

Barnes started up the side of the dunes and I followed, scrambling past him as I pushed my way up the loose sand and earth to the top.

In front, the barren, sea-flattened edge of the churchyard stretched away into the darkness. I had half expected to see the soft familiar radiance—the radiance which had flickered there that first misty night. But there was no light ahead.

I could hear the others climbing behind me. Soon they were at my side.

"Come on."

Gilchrist seized the lantern from Barnes and strode forward.

I remember the jagged silhouette of the fir tree, the softer earth beneath my feet as we crossed Irene Casey's grave and Mr. Fanshawe's grave, both of which had felt the defiling hand of—whom? Miss Heywood?

The vision of Miss Heywood rose in my mind as she had been on the beach that morning, gracious, uncommunicative, with her swanlike neck, her incalculable eyes bent absorbedly over her disgraceful water color.

The lantern light played over the sandy mounds. Then suddenly the rosy globe posed motionless in mid-air and I heard Gilchrist's voice ring out, harsh, horrified.

"Look at it! Look!"

His burly figure blocked my view as I dashed forward. Barnes and Mitchell were close behind. I saw the sergeant's astonished face and then felt the hotel manager squeezing past me.

I gripped Gilchrist's arm and stared down at what he had discovered. The lantern was held on high, casting its beams downward, so that I could see that amazing scene in all its ghastly entirety.

We were standing on the edge of a newly dug grave. In those first frightful seconds I did not stop to think whose grave it was. The earth had been hastily scooped out, leaving a hole about one foot in depth. And in that hole, with an iron spade on one side of it and an extinguished Chinese lantern on the other, lay the body of a woman.

The position was only too familiar. The hands were folded across the breast; the skirt was meticulously tidy; the eyes were closed, and the face was pale with a strange, almost ecstatic smile on the lips.

The lantern in Gilchrist's hand moved slowly—moved until it shone directly above the face. But I had recognized that figure as soon as I had first glimpsed it—the long gray dress, the roughened hands, the taut, unwrinkled skin of the cheeks.

Miss Heywood's image had been in my mind. And suddenly it was not a mental image any more.

It was real.

Miss Heywood was lying here in the scooped-out grave, lying pale and foolishly smiling—and dead.

And around her throat, horribly visible, was the inevitable, fiercely tight noose of sash cord.

None of us spoke. None of us moved. Barnes was crouched forward, frozen in a pose of almost grotesque horror. Gilchrist held out the lantern, firm and motionless as a tree. Mitchell was on his knees, gazing downward, his face a set, doll-like mask.

My eyes slid once more along that grave and settled upon the dull, unlighted Chinese lantern by the head.

“So there was a lantern, you see,” I said softly. “He put a lantern there, but it—went out.”

The maniac had struck again. Nellie Wood ... Maggie Hillman ... Miss Heywood ... That steady crescendo of death was still mounting.

Gilchrist set down the lantern and, putting one leg in the half-dug grave, bent over the body, staring at the face. I crossed to his side, pointing the torch.

The hair had slipped back from one of her ears, and for the first time the ear itself was visible. Something about it attracted my attention. I stooped and peered more closely at the skin beneath it.

“Look, Gilchrist.”

I pointed at the tightly drawn skin under the ear. Gilchrist looked too.

Sketched there, neat and thin, was a small, recent scar. I slid my hand under the head and moved it, so that we could see the other ear. In a spot exactly corresponding to the one on the other side was a similar scar.

I realized their significance then. So that explained the preternatural tightness of skin which I had always remarked about Miss Heywood’s handsome face.

“See, Gilchrist? See those scars? That’s why she looked so—so ageless. It must have happened quite recently. She’d had her face lifted.”

I glanced once more at Miss Heywood’s gray, expressionless countenance. Somehow, in the light of this new knowledge, it seemed more sinister, more macabre. That hard, artificial quality which it had always possessed in life had become accentuated in death. She looked like a plaster dummy taken from a store window.

Gilchrist was examining the scars when Barnes voiced the persistent thought which had been uppermost in all our minds.

“He killed her, this crazy guy who killed Nellie and Maggie. He killed her, and yet where are they—the mole, the circle—where are they?”

“Seems as though he skipped it this time,” I said grimly.

Mitchell had not spoken since his first glimpse of that grisly thing. He had been crouching there, white as a ghost. It was only now that a sound

came from him—and it came as a kind of stifled groan.

“The grave,” he said. “She’s lying there—in my father’s grave.”

He was right. I hadn’t realized that before.

Irene Casey ... *Mr. Mitchell* ...

I stared down once more at that prostrate body. I was standing erect now, and for the first time I could see the sides of Miss Heywood’s long gray dress. Something was strange about them. They were ragged, loose. I stooped down once more.

“Turn her over, Gilchrist.”

Gilchrist’s hands gripped a shoulder. I gripped the other, and slowly, gently, we turned.

I saw at once what had been wrong. Miss Heywood’s dress had been slashed from the shoulders to the waist with the fierce slash of a madman.

Her naked back was smooth and white behind its caking of sandy earth.

With stiff, mechanical fingers I brushed away the fragments of soil. The skin was cold against my touch. Gilchrist had jumped from the grave and was stooped over my shoulders, pointing the torch downward—revealing the most gruesome of all those weird, horrible sights.

Barnes’s voice, as he had spoken a few moments before, still seemed to echo in my ears.

“The mole, the circle—where are they?”

We knew now, at least, where one of those two fantastic stigmata of death was.

On the pale, colorless skin of Miss Heywood’s back, near the top vertebra of the spine, a hand had begun to scrawl a broad, scarlet circle.

But it was not finished—the arc swept boldly around and then suddenly stopped before the circle was completed.

And in the center of that broken circle, where, by all the insane laws of these murders, a mole should have been, there was nothing.

Nothing at all....

XX

Barnes went off to call Sweeney, who finally arrived, accompanied by his escort of officials. The inspector was at his most explosive and vented the full force of his wrath upon Barnes.

“It was your duty to patrol the beach,” he snorted. “Fine job you made of it. You let this happen right under your nose. You’re supposed to be a policeman. You couldn’t be trusted to police a six months’ old baby.”

This was obviously unfair. It was only too clear that the sergeant had been tricked. The murderer had known Barnes was patrolling the beach and had wanted to make sure that his lethal interview with Miss Heywood should be unobserved. He had set the lantern by the Monk’s Head as a decoy to lure the sergeant away. Later, when the crime had been committed, he had rung the old church bell with grandiose and typical exhibitionism to draw attention to his latest and most sensational victim.

The inspector had switched his fiery attention to the broken scarlet circle on Miss Heywood’s back. Why had the murderer chosen that particular spot? Why was there no mole? Why ...?

He did not seem to want any of us to suggest an answer. He was particularly indifferent to me. Since the beginning of the case I had offered him no shred of constructive assistance. He seemed to be taking this opportunity to let me know my services were no longer required. When the time came to remove the body to Haling he did not ask me to accompany them.

A dejected Barnes lingered with Mitchell and me by the defiled graves of Mr. Fanshawe, Mr. Mitchell, and Irene Casey. On an impulse I asked:

“You’ve been around these parts all your life, Barnes. Ever know Irene Casey?”

The sergeant’s lanky body stiffened. In the beam of the ‘flashlight I was startled by the strange, haunted expression that slid into his eyes. I was sure

he had heard me, but with a gruff: “Good night,” he turned from us and strode away.

I pondered this remarkable reaction as Mitchell and I plodded back to the hotel. In the vestibule we were immediately met by Mr. Usher. I noticed with some satisfaction that Mr. Mitchell’s dainty fist had left its mark. Beneath the ginger-brown hair one of Usher’s ginger-brown eyes was half closed and surrounded by a patch of deep purple bruise.

“Ah, Mr. Mitchell, Dr. Westlake, what has happened? I heard that church bell ringing. I hurried to the scene and someone—ah—leaped upon me and—”

“That was Mitchell,” I said, watching the hotel manager’s face go a confused pink. “He thought you were the maniac.”

Mitchell started to apologize and tell the news. Wondering dimly whether Usher would put in a bid for Miss Heywood’s body, too, I left the two of them bobbing their heads over the tragedy and went upstairs.

Before going to bed I tiptoed up to the next floor and listened at Buck’s closed door. From the darkness inside came the heavy, regular breathing of a sleeper. The young lifeguard who had been Miss Heywood’s strange partner at grave digging was either legitimately asleep or pretending to be so. In either case, he was definitely in his room.

With that much knowledge I went back to my own room, peeled off my clothes, and flopped into bed.

As I lay there, grateful for the warmth, I started to think quite furiously. If Miss Heywood had been merely another victim of the motiveless maniac her own activities were of no real significance. To tell Sweeney what I knew about her would be to break the Fanshawes’ confidence and very little else. If, on the other hand, that very mysterious woman had been involved in the crimes in some capacity other than that of a mere murderess, she might still be the center of the pattern, and I might still be able to uncover something through her.

If only I could get some clue as to where she had come from and of course, why she had come. Face lifted ... hands roughened ... There rose in my mind an image from yesterday, an image of Miss Heywood tumbling

her paints into her holdall and gliding away before the arrival of Dr. Gilchrist

Something clicked in my mind. Of course I knew where Miss Heywood had come from. Why hadn't I thought of it before?

I was so pleased with my own deductions that I fell asleep with the clear conscience of a man who in a few minutes has done a good day's work.

Next morning I descended to an early breakfast. What was left of the hotel's personnel was in a state of jitters that bordered upon panic. I didn't blame them. But I wasn't particularly interested in them either. I was a man of one idea—and that was to get in touch with Sweeney.

I was about to telephone to him when he appeared in person, bawling to a pallid Mitchell that he wanted a talk with Usher. He gave me the brusquest of nods. I stopped him.

“Do me a favor, Sweeney, will you?”

He scowled at his watch. “Not if it takes time.”

“It won't take any time. You know the authorities up at the women's penitentiary at Haling. Would you scribble a note to someone there who'll be willing to give me any dope I might need?”

He stared. “The Haling Penitentiary? What the hell do you want to go there for? Something to do with the murders?”

“Could be.”

“Well, it's about time you did something.” He felt in his pocket, brought out a card, and scribbled on it. “This'll take you to the warden. She's a wonderful woman, holds down a man-sized job.”

“Thanks.”

Sweeney smiled. It was a pitying smile. “Much good may it do you.”

I had no car with me, but I obtained Mitchell's permission to borrow his for the morning. Those were still the days when rubber was rubber and gas just something you bought at a gas station when you felt like it. I started off along the sandy road which led toward Haling.

Something very odd seemed to be happening to the weather. There was a strange icy sunlight and an utter absence of wind. Off to the northeast clouds were banking in ominous battalions. September, I knew, was the

season for the big storms. It had been in September that the ocean, lashed to frenzy, had made its last and crushing attack on the old churchyard.

As I drove through the uneventful New England landscape the cloud bank became progressively more sinister. I did not pay it much attention, however. My thoughts were all on the visit which lay ahead of me.

Located in a squalid district of the large industrial town, the women's penitentiary loomed gray and forbidding and completely surrounded by a high stone wall. I parked the car and moved to a huge iron-studded door. My ring was answered by a male official to whom I presented Sweeney's card. The official let me in through one of the panels in the massive door.

I stepped into a dark entranceway. Heavy iron grilles blocked the passages which led away on either side. In front stretched a courtyard with a grass lawn in the center. I waited under the dour scrutiny of other warders until the first official returned with the news that the warden would be pleased to see me. I followed him across the courtyard to a pleasant brick house. The warden received me in her private sitting room on the ground floor.

She was a tall, dignified woman with steel-gray hair and alert blue eyes.

"Good morning, Dr. Westlake. I'm only too glad to help you in any way I can."

"I'm on the track of a woman," I said. "I don't know her name. She was quite tall and willowy, with high cheekbones and green eyes—sort of pseudo ladylike. It's my guess that she was one of your prisoners here, that she was in for some sort of dope peddling, and that she was let out only a few weeks or months ago. Is there any way in which you possibly could —?"

"Oh, that's simple." The warden smiled briskly, "You could mean only one woman. Lena Darnell. She was here on a narcotic charge. And she was let out exactly a month ago. One of the few really hardened criminals we had here."

The deductions which had brought me to the prison were simple. Miss Heywood, the refined dope peddler, had had roughened hands. Ex-convicts have roughened hands. Miss Heywood had had her face lifted. An ex-convict, wishing to disguise herself, might well have her face lifted. It was

Miss Heywood's avoidance of Gilchrist, however, which had made me sure. As an alumna of Haling Penitentiary playing some very devious game, she would obviously, in spite of her disguise, have been reluctant to risk recognition by the prison doctor.

"I'll take you down to the record room," the warden was saying. "You'll be able to see Darnell's photograph there and check whether she's the woman you want."

She led the way across the courtyard into a small erection which jutted out from the main buildings. I found myself in a long officelike room where a woman in horn-rimmed spectacles sat behind a desk. The walls were lined with long rows of filing cabinets.

"Oh, Miss Webb," said the warden, "Dr. Westlake wants to look at Lena Darnell's cards."

Miss Webb produced two pasteboard cards from a filing cabinet. To the left-hand top corner of the first had been glued a photograph. In spite of the gray streaks in the hair which in her Talisman days must have been dyed, in spite of the "unlifted" face, it was unmistakably the picture of Miss Heywood.

Underneath the photograph was typed the name LENA DARNELL, followed by a handsome variety of aliases, none of which was Heywood. Apparently Lena Darnell had believed that a new name was apt to smell sweeter than an old one. The card offered me the interesting information that Miss Lena Darnell had spent three progressively longer prison terms, in each case for breaking the narcotic laws. She had, it seemed, devoted the best years of her life to dope.

I turned to the second card. It gave a brisk description of the lady's physical traits. It listed her coloring, her general measurements, her age.

I was astonished to see that she was forty-seven. She had indeed been well preserved.

My eye moved then to the bottom of the card. My attention was halted there with a sudden jolt. For under a heading marked *Identifications* were written the words:

Large mole high on spine.

For a moment that meant nothing. Then in a rush of understanding it meant practically everything. I found myself struggling with a new idea which was as sensational, as dangerous, as slippery as an octopus.

The warden was watching me. “Well, have you found what you wanted?”

“Have I found—!” I began. And then I stopped because I had seen what was typed in the other corner of the card. As if the first shock had not been sufficient, another one surged after it, leaving me almost staggered.

There in the opposite corner had been typed:

Cell No. 3672

Cell Mate: Cora Lasky.

I turned wildly to the warden. “Cora Lasky!” I exclaimed. “That wasn’t, by any chance, the jewel thief, Cora Mitchell?”

“Yes indeed. Lasky was Cora’s married name, although everyone still called her Mitchell. Lena Darnell was released just after Cora Mitchell died. They shared a cell, I believe, for about three years.”

I tossed the cards back to the bewildered Miss Webb. All sorts of things were happening inside me. I said, “Would it be possible—is there any way I could talk to someone about Cora Mitchell, about the details of her arrest, things like that?”

The warden, who seemed to know everything, paused for a moment’s reflection. “We have the official records here, but I don’t expect that’s what you want. I know—there’s an old woman in the cells who might be able to help. A prison’s a very small town. She’s a lifer—been in thirty-five years. There’s nothing much for her to do but talk and think about her neighbors. Would you like to see her?”

“I certainly would.”

Miss Webb had dickered around the files and produced a couple more cards. They were the record on Cora Mitchell Lasky. I gazed in fascination at the photograph. It had been taken twenty years previously and showed Mr. Mitchell’s wicked sister as a young, rather flashy woman with tousled blond hair. Something in the expression of the face was tantalizingly

familiar. And yet it wasn't, I was sure, a resemblance to her brother. No, those eyes, that strong, rather brutal mouth—they weren't Mr. Mitchell. They were—who?

The warden's voice came: "When you're ready, Doctor, I'll take you down to the cells."

I gave Miss Webb back her cards and followed the warden through an inner door and along a dark passage which was closed at the end by an iron grille. A keeper opened it to us, and we passed into a corridor, crowded on both sides with cells. We passed through another locked iron grille into a large hall.

"This is the center of the prison," said the warden. "The place's built like a wheel with the cell blocks as spokes and this as the hub. See those mirrors? They're fixed so that you can see down all the corridors at once."

The warden showed me the workshops, the cells that had been converted into hairdressing establishments, basketwork stores, or laundries and were run by the prisoners themselves. Many of the individual cells had been decorated by amateur artists—whole walls turned into summer gardens or vividly colored Venetian boating scenes. Practically all the women prisoners were engaged in some part of their toilet. They were either peering at their faces in the mirrors, combing their severely trimmed hair, filing their nails, or polishing their shoes. There was something infinitely depressing about this pointless narcissism.

"By the way," remarked the warden, "this woman I'm taking you to is rather a character. Her name's Ruth Mallory and, curiously enough, she comes from a village very close to Cape Talisman. She poisoned her husband thirty-five years ago. She did it for a thousand-dollar insurance policy. It was a very brutal, cold-blooded crime."

She paused outside one of the cells and pushed open the massive door. I followed her into the cell, expecting to see some raddled incarnation of evil. Instead I was confronted with two sweet-looking old ladies—one knitting, the other embroidering a pincushion. The back of the cell had been painted to represent a country garden full of roses, lilies, poppies. The walls were decorated with carefully stitched samplers.

“Morning, Doris. Morning, Ruth,” said the warden. “I’ve brought a visitor to see you, Ruth.”

Ruth Mallory, the husband murderer, looked up from her knitting. Her hair was snow white and caught in a bun on the top of her head in the style of over thirty years ago. Her face was rosy and unlined. She smiled, when she saw us, as prettily and pleasantly as an idealized painting of somebody’s grandmother.

“It’s always a pleasure to meet people from the outside,” she said in a gentle, quavering voice.

“I’d like you to come to my office, Ruth,” put in the warden. “Dr. Westlake wants to know something, and I think you can help him.”

The old woman smiled like a little girl who had been given an unexpected treat. Collecting up her knitting, she rose rather shakily, waved to the other old lady (who looked equally amiable, although she’d probably hatcheted her mother to death), and followed us along the corridor.

The warden led us into a large bare room which adjoined the center hallway. She indicated chairs and offered the old woman a cigarette.

Ruth Mallory looked shocked.

“I’ve never touched tobacco or alcohol in my life, Warden,” she said primly. She turned to me. “I’m making a sweater for my grandson. He’s going to be married next week. It’s a wedding present.”

“Charming,” I said rather awkwardly and because I could think of nothing better.

“Now, Ruth, Dr. Westlake comes from Cape Talisman. He wants to know about Cora Mitchell. Isn’t that right, Doctor?”

“I particularly want to know the details of her arrest,” I said. “I know most of the story, about how Cora, her husband, and the other man stole Hogan’s black diamond and killed him, about how the two men were caught and electrocuted, and about how Cora was finally trapped when she came back to see her dying father. But—well, the details of the arrest—who was there, exactly how it happened—that’s what I want to know.”

“Cora!” Ruth Mallory shook her head sadly. “I see them all come, Dr. Westlake. And I see most of them go. They all confide in me. ‘Mother

Ruth,' they call me. Some are in here because things went against them—others because they were just plain bad. Cora Mitchell was just plain bad.”

She did expert things with her knitting needles. “She was a clever girl, though. She used to boast that she and her husband had committed a dozen successful big-time burglaries before they were caught over the Hogan affair. And I guess she had.”

She paused. “And then the black diamond, of course. Worth a fortune, they say. And she got away with it, although they were pretty sure she had it with her when they arrested her. Yes, she was smart all right. And she let us know it too.” Ruth Mallory shook her head again. “A boastful girl, she was—and a bad one, I’m afraid. Yes, Cora Mitchell was one of those girls that was just born bad.”

I thought it best to let the old woman ramble on in her own way.

She gazed at me with serene, kindly eyes. “I said Cora Mitchell was plain bad, but there was one good streak in her. Leastways, it seemed that way. She loved her old father, she did. And she was ready to risk her life for a last glimpse of him before he died.”

“She never actually saw him, did she?” I put in. “He died a couple of days before she came back to the house and was arrested.”

Ruth Mallory’s eyes were far away now. “Oh yes, old John Mitchell. He was a fisherman down at Cape Talisman. His sister married a cousin of mine. I used to visit with them. I even remember Cora as a little girl—and her brother, too, a funny little boy who never played with the other children. They tell me he’s made a good bit of money running a hotel. In my time there was nothing like that at Cape Talisman—just a few cottages and the old church. I heard they’ve had to give that up, too, on account of the ocean creeping up.”

She sighed. “Funny, isn’t it? I haven’t seen the ocean for over thirty years, and when I was young I used to be so fond of it.”

She shook herself. “Oh, but you wanted to know about Cora. Of course. Many’s the time I’ve heard her tell the story. Mostly she’d tell it on account of she was so bitter about her brother. He was there, you know, when she walked into the house, into the trap the police had laid. He’d been in with the police and he wouldn’t even speak to her when she walked in. It was

that Joe Barnes who arrested her. Used to know him as a little boy too—lazy little cuss he was, always off fishing and getting his clothes messed up. She crept in the back door, and there was Joe Barnes, ready with the handcuffs.”

“And her father was dead?” I asked.

“Sure. That’s what broke Cora’s heart. She was just two days too late. The undertaker was right there when she arrived, right there upstairs laying out the body.”

“The undertaker!” I exclaimed. “You don’t happen to know—?”

“It was Mr. Usher. We often see him around here. And in the early days he came and visited with Cora here, just to let her know her father had a decent burial.”

“Go on,” I said excitedly.

“Well”—Ruth Mallory stooped to pick up the ball of wool which had dropped to the floor—”Cora begged to be allowed to see her poor father just for a moment. Her brother, he didn’t want her to, but Joe Barnes had a kind heart. He took her up himself. Cora’s eyes used to fill with tears when she told me that story. Real sad, it was. There she was, handcuffed to Joe Barnes and another policeman. She had only time to bend over the casket and kiss her father—and then they took her away. Yes, if she hadn’t gone to see her father once more before he was laid under the earth she wouldn’t have been caught. I’m sorry I said she was bad. There was a good streak in that girl. Now she’s dead and gone herself.”

“When she died here,” I asked tensely, “were you with her?”

“No. Only Lena was there. The doctor very kindly gave me the chance. But I don’t like to see people die. I’m too old myself to see people die. And then she was delirious some of the time. There were strange stories among the girls here. It seemed as though that last visit to her father preyed on her mind. They say she called out things like: ‘I had to kiss his corpse.’ Dreadful things, Dr. Westlake. At my age I felt I couldn’t stand it.”

She gave a little shiver. “And then there was her son. She had a son, you know—poor little boy. When she was arrested some people adopted him. He never saw her, never knew about her. But she had his picture always by

her—cute little blond boy, cute as you'd ever seen. Poor Cora, when she was sick she'd keep calling for him.”

It was all I could do to conceal my elation. This charming old murderess with her wandering discourse was giving me information that exceeded my wildest dreams.

“Cora and Lena”—the old woman laid the knitting down on her lap—“they were a pair, they were. Both as bad as the other, and both real friends like. They were never separated night and day.” Ruth Mallory smiled at the warden. “I guess they gave you more trouble than the rest of us put together. Well, they've both gone now—Cora's dead and Lena's on the outside. We're better off without'em.”

Vaguely through my racing reflections I heard the warden's voice: “Well, Dr. Westlake, is there anything else?”

“Yes, one thing. Cora Mitchell—when she died, I guess she was buried right here in the prison somewhere?”

The warden nodded. “Yes, a relative could have made a request for the body, but none did. In those cases the prisoners are buried here.”

“I see.” I rose. “Well, I guess that's all. Thanks very much. And thank you, Mrs. Mallory. I'm very grateful, indeed.”

The old woman acknowledged my thanks with a nod, rose, and held out the knitting for my inspection.

“Pretty color, this sweater, don't you think? I do hope my grandson will like it.”

“I'm sure he will,” I said.

Mrs. Mallory, the New England Borgia, smiled benignly and moved out of the room—back to the cell where she had spent the last thirty-five years of her life and where she would doubtless spend the rest of her days.

XXI

When I left the women's penitentiary something quite incredible had happened to the weather. The sky to the northeast, above the dingy roofs of the tenements, was a pulsing plum color, and a wind, fierce and steady, spurted down the streets.

That morning I had been as far from a solution of the Talisman crimes as any man could have been. Now the extraordinary pattern behind them was becoming crystal-clear.

As I nosed Mitchell's car through the drab outskirts of Haling I began to feel quite smug. I thought of the inspector's face when I broke the news. It would be decidedly worth watching.

I drove on into the barren shore country which separated Haling from the lonely outpost of Cape Talisman. The wind butted the car like a hoard of ferocious, invisible goats. The clouds were a vast inkstain on the gray blotting-paper sky. The few sparse trees that flourished on the sandy dunes weaved back and forth with the elasticity of willow shoots. And, in spite of the moaning of the wind, the whole coast was caught up in the hollow stillness of anticipation.

Then the rain came. I never saw such rain. The sky seemed to have split open, and water poured down in a solid wall. I slowed the car to a snail's pace couldn't see a foot in front of me. And the slower I went, the less resistance I had to the demented wind.

Somehow I crawled on until I must have been within three miles or so of Talisman. Then a particularly fierce blast of wind sent the car rearing and lurching. I did ineffectual things, with the steering wheel, but nothing responded. In a few seconds Mr. Mitchell's car was firmly ensconced in a very deep ditch. Nothing short of a wrecking squad could have wheedled it onto the road again.

The storm was so melodramatic that under normal circumstances I would have given up and remained in the car. But I was acutely conscious of my responsibility as the only person who had the solution to the murders. Danger was still at fever pitch for almost everybody. Speed was essential. My only hope for a speedy conclusion was to get to Cape Talisman quickly.

Hatless and coatless, I started out through the rain and the wind and all the other things. It was a most unpleasant experience. No car came along, of course. I narrowly missed destruction when a telephone pole gave up the unequal struggle and collapsed three feet ahead of me. But somehow I made the inn.

The door, of course, was bolted and barred. I banged at it. I battered until my fists were raw. Eventually I heard exclamations and scuffings and clankings of bolts inside. The door burst inward and, with the wind right after me, I was shot straight into the hall.

Mitchell and the chef, who had opened the door, were trying with their united weights to shut it again. Panting and soaked, I joined them. We managed somehow to close it and snap back the bolt. After that I collapsed onto one of Mr. Mitchell's daintily cretonned easy chairs. I knew I was ruining it.

But Mitchell's agitation had reached a point far beyond worry for a single piece of furniture.

"Dr. Westlake, you've been out in it all this time." He wrung his delicate hands. "Thank heavens you're safe. This is the worst storm in years. Maybe it's a hurricane. The ocean, it's right up to the porch, and the tide's still rising." His eyes rolled desperately, "I'm afraid the hotel's going to go. I'm afraid—"

At that juncture the chef, who had disappeared, came running back, exclaiming:

"The roof's leaking. The rain's coming straight through from upstairs and pouring down into the kitchen in buckets. It's terrible, terrible."

Mitchell ran off distractedly. If I'd been a little less wet I might have thought about getting dry. As it was, I was beyond such trivialities. My mind was still stubbornly fixed on the business in hand. Mitchell was one of

the people whose assistance I needed in my straightening-out process. I got up and hurried after him into the kitchen.

Chaos was reigning there too. The roaring of the storm was so loud that it might have been right inside the hotel. In fact, quite a lot of it was. Water was spattering down through the ceiling. The chef and Mitchell were running around with kitchen utensils, putting them under the worst leaks to catch the rain.

I went to the manager. “Mitchell,” I said, “I’ve got to talk to you right away—about the murders.”

The door from the passage burst open. Virgil Fanshawe came running in. He grabbed the chef. “The rain’s coming in all over upstairs. Part of the roof must have gotten carried away. Bring some of those darn pots and pans upstairs.”

He gathered up an armful of the stuff. So did the chef. The two of them scurried away. Mitchell was left alone with me.

“The murders!” He picked up my word. “But, Dr. Westlake, not now. There is so much to be attended to. So much—”

“Nothing’s more important than this. You’ve got to tell me one thing. Buck Valentine—he’s your nephew, isn’t he?”

Mitchell dropped a muffin dish with a clatter. “Dr. Westlake, what—?”

“I’ve just come from the Haling Penitentiary. I heard there that Cora Mitchell had had a son. I saw a picture of her. I recognized the likeness right away. The hair, the mouth, the eyes. Buck’s Cora Mitchell’s son. That’s why you’ve given him this job here when you don’t really need a lifeguard; that’s why you’ve been so concerned about him, why you tried to give him that phony alibi for Maggie Hillman’s death. He’s your nephew.”

Most of the saucepans and skillets were overflowing now. Mitchell didn’t seem to notice. He was gasping for breath like a fish.

“Well—yes, Buck is Cora’s son. He was only a baby when his father—ah—died and Cora was put in prison. I couldn’t bring myself to forgive Cora. But the baby was different. I did not want him to grow up with all the world knowing he was the son of—of such people. I had him adopted.” He flushed slightly. “I managed to do it privately, so that he never knew where the money came from or who his parents were. This summer he was out of

a job. So—so I gave him the job here, just to tide him over. I didn't naturally let him know my reasons. I made him think it was a purely ordinary business arrangement and—”

He broke off with a little squeak as a large patch of sodden plaster disengaged itself from the ceiling and fell gooiily to the floor.

“You never told Buck about his parents,” I persisted. “But he found out, didn't he, just a few days ago?”

“Why, yes, yes—”

“Yesterday I happened to overhear a conversation you had with him—in your office. You were quarreling. I heard Buck say: *We've got to move her body somehow*. I thought he was talking about something in the old churchyard. But he was talking about Cora, wasn't he? When she died you wouldn't put in a request for her body, and she was buried there in the prison. But when Buck found out she was his mother he wanted to see she had a decent burial. That's it, isn't it?”

Mr. Mitchell's little eyes went owlish, as if I were some kind of conjuror who magicked facts and solutions out of thin air. “Why, yes,” was all he managed. And then: “It was quite a—a heated argument. You see, I have always maintained the same attitude about Cora. But Buck was in an emotional state. He had just heard about his relationship to her and—”

“Naturally,” I broke in. “Okay, Mitchell. Thanks a lot. That's all I wanted to know.” I added: “Where's Buck now?”

“Buck—he is somewhere in the hotel. Somewhere, trying to fight the storm, like the rest of us.”

Mitchell was back worrying about the hotel again. He fled from me, snatched up another frying pan, and placed it in effectually at my feet. I left him and hurried out of the kitchen in search of Buck.

That flustered interview had made me feel much more sympathetic toward the elegant Mr. Mitchell. One could hardly blame a man for repudiating relationship with so desperate a character as Cora Mitchell Lasky. And all these years he had been supporting Buck on the quiet. He had manufactured a job for him when he was out of work. And—which was touching—had valiantly tried to protect him, even to the extent of lying, ever since the murders had put him under suspicion with the police.

Mitchell may not have been a model brother, but he had been an admirable uncle.

The storm was still gaining in exuberance. It was fantastic, being in that flimsy wooden structure which had only just lasted through the previous big storm and which had all but capitulated to this one. Out in the corridor water was streaming from the ceiling as it had been in the kitchen. And although all the windows and doors were bolted, the wind played at random with the curtains, the rugs, even the furniture, as if some giant and invisible vacuum cleaner were running amok through the rooms.

Mitchell might well be right. If this kept up the whole place would collapse over our heads.

A search through the quivering, gusty hotel revealed no Buck. But Virgil Fanshawe, down on his knees bailing in his own bedroom, told me that the lifeguard was on the front porch. I hurried downstairs again. The door to the porch was locked. I tugged it open, almost being thrown backward by the wind. I staggered out onto the screened porch and dragged the door shut after me.

Buck was there. He had found some old planks and was making a futile effort to nail them over the screens to keep the porch from blowing away altogether. The rain was swirling in, and the wind was tugging savagely at the shirt and pants which fluttered around his muscular body. I stumbled across the porch toward him. And as I did so I stared out through the screens at the churning storm.

The roaring of the breakers was even louder than the howl of the wind here. And, to my uneasy astonishment, I saw how real the peril from the ocean was. Some of the water, careening into the porch, was spray from the pounding waves. They were breaking only a few yards from the porch, heavy and formidable as steam rollers.

I reached Buck and screamed his name. He didn't hear me. I plucked at his sleeve. He turned, his face lightening. He shouted something and handed me a heavy plank. Before I knew it I had been enrolled as his assistant.

It was impossible to talk. I had to contain myself as the two of us struggled to block out the elements. By a superhuman effort we managed to

get almost half the porch protected. That turned out to be a fatal mistake. We succeeded only in bottling the wind into the place, giving it no exit. The waves were encroaching by the minute. After a particularly large one smashed up to us Buck grabbed my arm and pulled me back to the door. We tumbled through it into the living room of the inn and, by hurling-ourselves against the door, managed to swing it shut again.

We were still leaning and panting against the trembling woodwork when a rending crash sounded outside. Buck moved to the window. He grunted.

“There goes the porch.”

I joined him. The porch where, of a quiet evening, Mr. Usher had been wont to sit with his Bible had completely vanished. If Buck and I had stayed another moment out there we would have been spinning away over the dunes by now.

Buck grinned as if he had enjoyed his wrestling match with the universe. He wiped at his sodden forehead and dropped into a chair.

“Whew, what a storm. What happened to you?”

I slumped into a chair too. That made the second article of Mr. Mitchell’s furniture I had ruined. “I only just got back,” I said, “from Haling. I’ve been to the women’s penitentiary.”

Buck was on his guard at once. “You have?”

“Yes. Listen, Buck, I know the truth now. I know you’re Cora Mitchell Lasky’s son.”

The boy stiffened and half rose.

“It’s all right, Buck. I’m not going around spreading the news. Mitchell’s admitted it. And you’ve got to help me. It’s terribly important from the point of view of the murders.”

“The murders!” Buck faltered. “How’s it got anything to do—?”

“That evening when I broke into your room and found Miss Heywood with you—that was the night she told you about Cora being your mother, wasn’t it? You’d never known before that. Mitchell had kept it from you.”

Buck nodded feebly. “Why, yes—”

“Did she also tell you how she happened to know your mother? Did she tell you they’d shared a cell together at the penitentiary?”

“Shared a cell? No, no, nothing like that. She just said she’d been a friend of Cora’s, that she’d seen her before she died and that—that she felt it her duty to Cora to let me know the truth about being her son. That’s how she put it.”

“I see.” I gazed straight at the young lifeguard. He flinched slightly under my scrutiny. “She must have been in quite a persuasive mood. Somehow she got you to help her dig in the graveyard. That’s what I want to know. How on earth did she kid you around into doing that?”

Buck passed an awkward hand through his wet, stubbly hair. “I was so—so shot, Westlake. I didn’t know whether I was coming or going, I’d known all about Cora Mitchell, of course. Anyone who sticks around this dump knows all about her. And then—like that, I learned she was my mother. Maybe you’ll think I’m crazy, but right then I was sort of glad. Knowing who your mother is—even if she turns out to be Cora Mitchell—is somehow better than not knowing at all. And then all through this, Miss Heywood was rattling on about how Mitchell had refused to give Cora a decent burial and how”—he faltered—“how Cora had made one last wish before she died.”

“A last wish?”

“Yes. That’s what Miss Heywood said. She said Cora had been terribly fond of her father and that her last wish had been to have his body removed from the old churchyard to the cemetery, where it would be safe. She said Mitchell, as the old man’s son, was the only person who could get it done legally through Gilchrist and the Board of Health and that he had refused. Of course if I’d wanted to let the world know I was Cora’s son I might be able to get permission. But that would have meant a lot of publicity and it would have taken a lot of time. That’s what Miss Heywood said.”

“So Miss Heywood suggested that you and she together should creep out after dark and move the coffin yourselves.”

Buck flushed. “Sure. Even then the story sounded crazy, but I was so balled up, so confused, I said okay. I said I’d help her that night. We could at least dig the coffin up and bury it somewhere back from the edge of the dunes, some where safer until I could persuade Mitchell or someone to have it taken to the cemetery.”

He shrugged. “Miss Heywood told me you knew where the grave was. She wasn’t sure, you see. She told me to try to get the location out of you. I tried, pretty darn clumsily, I guess. And then that night we sneaked off together. You saw us, didn’t you? We started digging; then someone came along and scared us off. We had the wrong grave anyway, didn’t we? It was Fanshawe’s father we were digging up.”

So Miss Heywood had banked on Buck’s natural ingenuousness and his confusion at the news of his parentage to deceive him with that lame and sentimental lie of Cora’s last wish. She had needed him, of course, for two reasons—for his muscular digging power and as a stooge to get the whereabouts of the grave from me.

Buck was saying: “Then yesterday you sprung it on me that Miss Heywood was a dope peddler. I’d been feeling pretty shaky about what I’d done anyway. When I heard that I decided to have nothing more to do with her. She tried to get me to help her again last night. I refused.” He gave a weak, bewildered smile. “Lucky for me, wasn’t it? Otherwise I’d have been right there, in on her murder.”

I didn’t let him know exactly how lucky he had been.

“That night, Westlake, when you came and told me Maggie had been murdered you must have thought I was pretty much of a heel. The truth was, I couldn’t take it in. Miss Heywood had just told me about Cora Mitchell being my mother. I couldn’t think about anything else.” He gave a harsh little laugh. “The son of a murderer and a murderess! I guess I’ll get over it in time. I guess I won’t mind having people know. But just now—”

“Don’t worry, Buck. I’ll keep it to myself. If I have to tell anyone it’ll only be Sweeney. I promise.”

There was only one thing more I had to know then. It was the most important thing—the thing by which my case against the murderer would stand or fall. I was almost sure that my case would stand. But one man alone could, clinch it. And that man was Sergeant Barnes. Find Barnes, ask him a single question, and then go to Sweeney. It was as simple as that.

In my enthusiasm I had forgotten the storm. With the telephone dead and the hotel virtually marooned, finding Barnes and Sweeney would be quite a problem.

As I rose to leave Buck a dull crash, followed by a squeaking cry, sounded from upstairs. Almost immediately the black figure of Benjamin Usher came tumbling down the stairs toward us.

“The ceiling in my room,” he gasped. “It fell down. It all fell down. I was—ah—almost pinned beneath it.”

Fanshawe followed him, the sleeves of his lumber jacket rolled up, his dark hair sleek and wet. “Half the roof’s gone,” he said. “All the plaster—”

“The hotel’s going to collapse,” moaned Usher. “We must get away. Somehow—”

“It’s not as bad as that.” Buck slapped the undertaker’s shoulder encouragingly. “This place is pretty strong. You’re much safer here than out in the storm.”

As he spoke Marion Fanshawe came drifting down the stairs. She studiously ignored her husband. She paid no attention to the rest of us. She moved to the window and stared listlessly out at the pounding breakers.

The door which led from the kitchen quarters was pushed open. Mr. Mitchell’s one remaining waitress, very damp and bedraggled, hurried to me.

“Oh, Dr. Westlake, I just this moment heard you got back. When you were gone this came for you.” She handed me a crumpled telegram. “The boy said it hadn’t been properly addressed, just *Westlake, Cape Talisman*. It was sent last night, and he’d been trying to find out where you lived ever since.”

I slit the envelope and pulled out the wet message. I looked at it, and suddenly the world came tumbling around my ears.

For I read:

*Am terribly worried. Children never arrived on train. What has happened?
Please wire at once.*

AUNT MABEL

Virgil Fanshawe’s voice came through to me: “Bad news, Westlake?”

I tried to keep control. This was the Fanshawes’ problem as much as it was mine.

“The children,” I said. “They never got there.”

Fanshawe’s face went suddenly white. “What do you mean?”

Marion had turned from the window. She was watching me inscrutably.

“I—I don’t know,” I faltered. “I don’t know anything. Just that they never arrived. Something must have happened on the way. Something—”

“But what could have happened? You put them on the train yourself.”

“I know.”

Memories were whirling around in my brain now, things I hadn’t noticed at the time. Dawn had strenuously objected to leaving Cape Talisman at first. Then she had given in with surprising meekness. I remembered how I had caught the two children whispering conspiratorially in Dawn’s room. I thought, too, of that ridiculous three dollars and forty-six cents which they had demanded of me and which had been much too large a sum for the purpose they claimed.

What if Dawn and Bobby had decided to return to Cape Talisman in secret? Dawn was perfectly capable of hatching some such wild scheme. I felt shivers going up and down my spine. What if they were here right now—somewhere, in some stupid childish place of concealment, out in the tempestuous storm on the crumbling dunes?

Fanshawe’s dark eyes were harried with dread. “Why did we let them take the trip alone? Oh, Sweeney wanted you here, Westlake. But I could have gone. Why—?”

His sentence petered out. I could tell what was going on in his mind. Marty had been killed partly through his fault. And now Bobby was lost. If he’d acted otherwise, Virgil might have prevented it.

He didn’t look at Marion. I don’t think he dared to. But I did. She was still standing by the window. Beneath the tumbling blond hair her face was completely stricken.

I was jolted out of my dreadful reflections by gusty sounds from the hall. Then Sergeant Barnes, sheathed in glistening oilskins, appeared. Five minutes ago he had been the one person in the world I had wanted. Now I hardly noticed him.

He came in, shaking water off his shoulders.

“Came over from the village,” he panted. “Through the churchyard. It’s going to go this time. The breakers are right in over the graves already—almost up to the church. Wouldn’t be surprised, I wouldn’t, if the old church gets blown away, either.”

He puffed out his cheeks and stamped his heavy boots. “And the storm ain’t over yet. Getting worse, it is. Didn’t think I’d make it. Them breakers—knocked me flat a couple of times. Washed the dunes clear away and eating up to the church. Yes sir, I guess she’s going all right this time. And I don’t know but what it ain’t a good idea.”

No one was paying him any attention. He shook his head, a strange look of awe passing over his face. “Guess I’m just about as tetches as them old women down to the village. As I came by the church through the storm I could have sworn I heard noises from inside the old church, yes sir.”

I was suddenly interested. “What noises?”

“Don’t know what you might call them exactly. Voices, kind of. Singing, they seemed to be. Sort of high, thin voices—like children’s voices more.”

Children’s voices in the old church! It came to me in a flash.

I turned wildly to Fanshawe.

“The children!” I shouted. “They’re there in the old church. Bobby and Dawn.”

Fanshawe stared as if I were crazy, “In the church?”

“Come on. We’ve got to get them.”

I grabbed his arm. He still seemed dazed, but without a word he started running with me to the door.

“Virgil!” Marion’s voice sounded sharply. Dimly I realized it was the first time I had ever heard her address her husband. She clutched Fanshawe’s arm. “Virgil, you don’t know the children are there. You mustn’t go out—not in the storm. You’ll be killed.”

Virgil tugged his arm free and ran to join me at the door. Together we started feverishly to pull back the bolt.

“Virgil!” Marion’s voice rang out again, high, urgent. “Sergeant Barnes says the whole churchyard’s going to go. You’ll get swept away out to sea. You—Come back, come back.”

Released from the bolt, the door hurtled inward. Lowering our heads, struggling with all our force against the wind, Fanshawe and I battered our way out, leaving the door flapping and banging behind us.

Marion's voice trailed through the lashing rain and spray as we plunged into the chaos which had once been the dunes of Cape Talisman.

That was the last human sound we heard.

My heart was pounding. Anxiety gnawed at me like a rat in my entrails.

Dawn was out there in the old church. And the church was going to be swept away.

I had to get to Dawn....

XXII

A ferocious blast of wind, followed by a swirling surge of sea water, set me staggering sidewise. When I regained my balance Fanshawe had vanished behind the blinding sheet of rain. I plunged on, gauging my direction by instinct. A breaker, rolling farther than its fellows, dashed me off my feet and sucked me back through the hissing spray toward the ocean. By clinging to various shreds of vegetation I managed to steady myself and to continue.

Foot by foot, I made progress, my fear for Dawn urging me on. Dimly, too, in the recesses of my mind I was thinking that this storm which was so disastrously important to the Fanshawes and to me was going to change everything for the murderer too. It might well render vain the deaths of those three women and snatch away success on the very verge of its fulfillment.

It might also frustrate my solution to the case.

An occasional rift in the rain curtains showed tumbling breakers, shuddering, leafless bushes—and nothing else. There seemed no chance that I would reach the churchyard, let alone reach it in time.

When I had all but given up hope I stumbled against a drunkenly tilted tombstone. I was there.

The sea was hissing and roaring only a few feet from me. Yesterday these graves which still retained their tombstones had stood yards from the edge of the dunes. That meant the ocean had already surged over the tip of the promontory and rolled across that crucial part of the graveyard where Mr. Mitchell, Mr. Fanshawe, and Irene Casey had been buried and where last night Lena Darnell had gone to her exceedingly just reward.

That realization brought despair. The old church itself stood somewhere between the original edge of the dunes and these tombstones. Already, then, the church was surrounded by the fuming sea.

I forced myself on, panting like a spent track runner. Suddenly the dark figure of Virgil Fanshawe loomed in front of me. He was the wettest man I had ever seen, bar myself. His face, beneath the streaming rivulets, was white as a ghost's.

He shouted something and started dragging me straight into the breaking waves.

I had no sensation from the water which swirled up to my ribs. And then, as a blink freed my eyes from their cataracts of water, I saw the outline of the old church. The entire roof had been carried away. Something had happened to the bell tower too—that bell tower from which had come the maniacal toll for Miss Heywood's death. It was leaning at a freakish angle.

I was obsessed with the thought of Dawn and Bobby being inside that defeated building, huddled there, cut off on all sides by water. Since the storm started they could never have escaped. Any child out in that wind would have been blown away like a feather.

Desperately Fanshawe and I worked our way through the water. As we inched forward I made put a dark smudge in the white wall of the church where yesterday the porch had been. There was no porch now. Just this dark smudge—a gap....

I ran toward it. Flinging my hand out, I managed to grab at the opening and swing myself through into the interior of the church. Fanshawe came tumbling after me.

The inside of the church was madder than a Dali nightmare. Dirty gray sea water swirled over the floor. We sank into it up to our knees. Above us, instead of a roof, was a gaping void through which the rain seethed down. Around us, shuddering with every blast of wind, the four walls reared flimsy as pieces of cardboard.

It wasn't a church any more. It was a sort of idiot's swimming pool.

"Dawn I" The perilous walls boomed my voice back in an echo.

I tried to tell myself that the children might never have been here at all, that the whole thing had been nothing more than a hunch of mine brought on by Barnes's chance remark of childish spooks singing in the church.

"Dawn!"

A solitary curtain, sodden and torn, flapped by a side wall. I remembered the little closetlike space under the tower where the bell rope dangled. I dashed to the curtain, ripping at it so that it peeled off its rod, and tumbled clammily into the water.

“Dawn!” I shouted.

And as I shouted I saw the kids.

Under the bell tower a beam ran across one part of the little room at about five feet from the floor. It had been put there presumably to strengthen the tower. Perched on the beam above the pitching water were Dawn and Bobby. They stared down at me like two young battered owls.

Their clothes begged description. Dawn’s demure pink dress, especially selected for a visit to Aunt Mabel, had been converted into a travesty of some skintight creation in a burlesque show. The top of Bobby was covered with the remnants of his blue sailor jacket, but some unknown tragedy had removed all vestiges of his pants. There was nothing below the navel but bare leg and a scrap of tattered underdrawer.

“Thank God!” I was babbling like a fool. “Thank God I’ve found you.” I bellowed: “Fanshawe, quick. They’re here. They’re safe.”

The children watched me with benign incuriosity, as if I had just dropped in for tea.

“Hello, Daddy,” said Dawn.

Then she did something which was sheer lunacy. She removed a hand from behind her back. In that hand she was clutching something which she pressed to her breast now with affectionate intimacy. The thing was long and clammy and horrible.

It was a piece of baloney sausage:

I made vague agitated noises that approximated to words. I couldn’t scold or ask questions or wonder about the baloney because the relief was so strong. Dawn smiled then. So did Bobby.

“I’m Noah, Daddy,” remarked my daughter. “This is the ark, and this”—she flourished the baloney—“this is all the provisions we’ve been able to save from the flood.” She stopped and then added as an afterthought: “Oh, and Bobby’s Shem.”

Bobby turned very slowly on, the beam and gave her the benefit of his most ferocious scowl. “Silly,” he boomed. “I’m not Shem; I’m Ham.”

“You’re Shem,” said my daughter.

“I’m Ham,” screamed Bobby and struck at her feebly.

Fanshawe ran in then. He stared up at the children for one second, as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. Then his face thawed out of its icy anxiety. He reached up and snatched Bobby down from the beam into his arms.

“Thank God,” he muttered. “I’d—I’d given up hope. I never thought—”

“Ham,” said Bobby loudly.

“Shem,” retorted Dawn.

My relief turned into sudden, uncontrollable fury.

“Come down off that beam, Dawn,” I bawled. “And if either of you says Shem again I’ll hurl you into the sea.”

Faintly intimidated, Dawn scrambled off the beam and into my arms. Fanshawe was already carrying the squirming Bobby into the main body of the skeleton church. I followed with Dawn. The walls were doing impossible things. Any second they would come crashing down. Stumbling, flopping around, clutching the children like sacks of potatoes, Fanshawe and I managed to make the gap in the wall and to lurch out once again into the storm.

We had progressed only a few yards from the church into the wilderness of waste and water when a splintering roar behind us told that one at least of the walls had gone.

Our escape had been as narrow as that.

As we waded ploddingly on I began to feel vaguely heroic. Now that the danger was over I saw our exploit as a paragraph in the newspapers. Fanshawe and I had fought a preposterous storm and saved our children from certain death at the last second.

I let these pleasantly satisfying thoughts linger. Dawn was half plodding at my side, half leaning on me. The closeness of her small, live body was soothing.

This would draw us closer together, I reflected. Even into her old age Dawn would remember how her father valiantly saved her life.

My daughter's voice sounded then, breaking into my musings. It was shrill and rather peevish.

"I knew you'd do this, Daddy. I told Bobby. I knew you and that old Mr. Fanshawe would come along and spoil all the fun. It's always that way—you always come along and spoil everything."

A wave broke over us. Dawn lurched against me, and something shiny and wet and loathsome slapped me in the face.

It was her piece of baloney.

"You," I screamed, "and your fun and your baloney!"

I clutched savagely at the sausage, tugged it out of my daughter's hands, and hurled it away into the ocean.

Dawn started to whimper.

I didn't feel like a hero any more.

XXIII

The return trip across the dunes was laborious. But at length we reached the Talisman Inn. It seemed to have weathered the siege. We reached a door. We banged until it was open.

Our bedraggled entrance was dramatically received by the group in the damp and disordered lounge. Mitchell and Valentine ran to close the door behind us. Sergeant Barnes and Mr. Usher hovered. It was Marion Fanshawe, however, who was the most conspicuous figure.

She was standing by the stairs. Her dark, flowerlike eyes moved from Virgil to Bobby. Their expression was heart-breaking, dazed at first, and then changing as she began to realize that something which she had thought of as a hallucination was true.

Virgil was looking back at her holding Bobby's hand in his.

The silence between them was so tens that it charged the atmosphere.

Bobby, a ludicrous figure with his shredded sailor blouse and his absence of pants, stared at his mother. Then he sneezed.

That small human sound seemed to break the spell. Marion ran to her son, gathered him into her arms, and hugged him to her.

"Bobby," she whispered. "My Bobby." She looked at her husband. "Virgil, you saved him. Virgil darling, you saved Bobby's life."

Her hand went to Virgil. All that keyed-up revulsion had gone. She was any young wife who had been frightened for her son and her husband and wasn't frightened any more.

Virgil's face was haunting too. The hurt seemed to go out of his eyes. A slow, almost incredulous smile moved his lips.

"Come on," he said gruffly; "we'd better get Bobby out of those wet clothes—what's left of them."

"Yes, yes." Marion put Bobby down on his feet. She took one of his hands. Virgil took the other. The three of them started to move toward the

stairs. They were oblivious of the rest of us. Marion was smiling radiantly at her husband.

“And you, darling. You’re soaked too. We must get you dry. We don’t want you to catch pneumonia.”

A minor miracle had happened. And yet it was not so miraculous at that. It had its own peculiar sense. Virgil had risked his life to save Bobby. That act had rehabilitated him and laid the ghost of Marty in Marion’s wounded mind. The ice around her heart had melted. She had come back to life again.

The elements were still howling outside. I listened to them almost with affection.

There would still be tough times ahead for the Fanshawes. But Cape Talisman’s supertempest had had a silver lining tucked away after all.

Now the spotlight was turned on Dawn and me. Unhappily we could offer no touching domestic scene. We were just a wet and irritable father with a wet and naughty child. Leaving most of the eager questions unanswered, I lugged Dawn upstairs and ordered her into a hot bath while I took one myself. Finally I tumbled her into bed and piled blankets on her. The storm had been kind to her room. There were no leaks. And her own cast-iron constitution had stood her in good stead.

There was every indication that she would suffer no ill effects from her fabulous and evil escapade.

Now that I had her trapped in bed I was able to get the story out of her. It was much as I had imagined it to be. Dawn had infected Bobby with her allergy toward Aunt Mabel and her mode of life. Together they had plotted to wave good-bye to me on the train, to get off at the first stop, and find their way back to Cape Talisman, where they would live the free-and-easy life of nomads—released from parental control. Dawn had read something about gypsies. I think that’s part of what started it.

They had chosen the grisly old church as the ideal head-quarters. They had extracted from me the mystic three dollars and forty-six cents to cover a provision budget—viz.: the baloney. After a couple of days they had intended to reveal themselves and to confront us with their coup as a *fait accompli*.

The storm had not been on their schedule, but they had adored it. The high spot had been when the roof blew away. That was divine, they thought.

As I listened to this mad tale my flesh crept at the thought of those two children living there, defenseless, in the old church, of all places, while maniacs and murderers played havoc around them.

Dawn did not refer to the murders, however. She seemed to have forgotten them or to consider them beneath her notice.

Just to try to keep my own sanity I asked: “But why did you do this thing? You knew I didn’t want you to stay.”

My daughter blinked unconcernedly. “Oh yes, we knew about all that. But we had to find the black diamond.” She smiled then, one of her exasperating, secret smiles. “And we would have found it too. Maybe we will even now.”

Somehow as I looked at her small, guileless face couldn’t get stern. I thought of the danger she had been through; I thought of my own agony of suspense when I battled through the storm; I thought of the crash as the walls of the old church had collapsed scarcely a minute after we had left it. I’d almost lost her—and now I hadn’t lost her after all.

Instead of castigating her I bent forward and kissed the end of her nose.

My daughter has a horror of displayed affection. But she was smart enough to put her hands up and twine them around my neck.

“I know it was terribly bad. You’re not—mad?”

With her tawny hair screwed into rattails she looked like a holy and unfortunate orphan. I grinned. “I’m very mad.”

She knew there was nothing more to worry about. She wriggled away from me and sat up primly in bed.

“Bobby and I were just going to have lunch when you came and spoil—I mean came and saved us. Lunch was going to be the baloney, and then you threw it away, so don’t you think it would be kind of good for me to have maybe some ham and bacon and sausages and—”

She was back to her unwholesome craving for pork. I got up weakly and went down to the kitchen to see if the chef had anything edible left over from the wreck.

The domestic drama of Dawn's peril had banished all other concerns from my mind. Once I had taken her up a makeshift meal, however, the old detective thing started up in me again. I had still to ask Barnes the crucial question that could mean so much to my case.

But I needed more than a talk with Barnes now. The storm which had engulfed the old churchyard had also undermined my scheme for bringing the murderer to justice. When I left the penitentiary everything had been neatly plotted in my mind. Things were very different now—so different that, although my solution was technically perfect, it might well be stranded without one jot of evidence to support it.

If that happened Inspector Sweeney, instead of staring at me in wide-eyed admiration, would laugh in my face. And the “maniac” murderer of Cape Talisman would be able to settle down to grow roses.

I was worried about everything. I saw no way out. There was Barnes, of course.

I hurried downstairs in search of the sergeant.

He wasn't in the lounge. Instead, I was confronted with an animated picture. The Fanshaws, Mitchell, and Buck Valentine were all there, chattering and scrambling into raincoats.

I hurried to Mitchell. “Is Barnes still here? I want to talk to him.”

“N-no.” Mitchell looked over the flapping sleeve of a half-put-on raincoat. “He's just left. They sent a boy over from the village. The storm—it washed away the promontory of the graveyard and all the coffins. The coffins are floating away in the sea. The villagers are trying to save them.”

The inhabitants of Cape Talisman trying to rescue coffins from an angry deep! This was the last straw.

Mitchell struggled into the coat while Buck hovered impatiently. “Buck and I are going too, Dr. Westlake. My father's coffin, you know. It's there. It's one of the coffins that have been swept away.”

Buck shot me a meaning glance. “We've got to get it. I told Mitchell he should have moved it months ago.”

The Fanshaws, both decked out in oilskins, hurried past us. “My father's coffin's out there too, Westlake,” said Fanshawe. “We've got to try and save it.”

They disappeared into the tag end of the storm. Mitchell and Valentine ran after them. Mr. Usher came down the stairs, a dreary black raincoat buttoned up to his throat.

“Come on, Dr. Westlake. We must all go and help—all of us.”

It came to me with dizzy suddenness that this crazy corpse chase was the one thing in the world that I was waiting for. Just a moment before I had been bemoaning the fact that my murder solution had no evidence.

I saw now how that evidence might be found. It just might ...

Somebody's raincoat was lying on a chair. I struggled into it and ran to the door. Usher came scurrying after me out onto the dunes.

The rain had almost stopped, and the wind had slackened to a thin, petulant breeze. The waves, too, had lost most of their theatrical flourish. For the first time I was able to see exactly how much damage the storm had done. The dunes had taken a terrible beating. They were nothing now but a flat, desolate expanse of sand. All signs of vegetation had been swept away. Not so much as a twig of Miss Heywood's bayberry remained. And the waves were breaking a hundred or so feet up the beach from the former high-water mark.

Cape Talisman would never be the same again.

I hurried on, oblivious of Usher's sanctimonious babblings, entirely wrapped up with speculations as to whether or not this latest escapade would bring me a profitable return.

Soon we reached the spot where the promontory carrying the church had thrust out toward the ocean. The destruction here was even more complete than I had suspected. There just wasn't any more promontory—only wrecked mounds of sandy dirt and one fragile wall which still stood as a monument to what had once been the church.

The whole village, it seemed, had turned out to witness the dramatic spectacle of salvaging the coffins. Most of them were huddled on a low dune which marked the new extremity of the beach. They peered down at the stricken sands, where the more active members of the community, fishermen in oilskins, foreign-looking women with bright scarves knotted around their heads, were running around at the water's edge.

The scene had a strange, unreal quality. The waves rose and fell, shooting up clouds of dirty yellow spray. The beach was piled with seedy heaps of sand and battered vegetation. Everything seemed to be in the sort of place where it had no right to be. The stunted fir tree, for example, which had stood sentinel for the dark goings on in the churchyard, was lolling on the humped backs of the breaking waves, its roots thrusting up towards the sky.

And then there were the coffins themselves. A bleak row of them stretched along a strip of beach, surrounded by villagers. These were the ones already salvaged.

Those that still had to be rescued added the final macabre touch by bobbing and lurching around in the breaking surf.

In the milling crowd I caught a glimpse of Mitchell and Valentine and the Fanshawes. Barnes's tall, bony figure in its shiny oilskins was much in evidence too. Usher, completely in his element, ran on to join the Weird fishing party.

I pushed my way past wet, eager villagers toward the place where the saved coffins had been cached. My pulses were doing funny, twitching things. So much was in the balance, so very much.

That pathetic, improvised graveyard had already taken on an aroma of piety. Most of the awed figures grouped there were Portuguese. Some were bending over the coffins, peering at the brass plaques. Others, who had found their long-deceased forebears, were unabashedly down on their knees praying.

Trying to look like someone with a departed relative, I started down the row of battered coffins. They had all been so long underground that, somehow, they had lost any human association. There was nothing harrowing about them. They were just long, rather gloomy boxes. I read the names inscribed on brass plates on their lids. There were about twelve of them. None were significant to me.

I was about to join the others at the water's edge when I ran into Gilchrist. He was hurrying down the beach, pursued by two very intense Portuguese women who were clutching at his sleeves and shouting. The

moment he saw me the doctor shook the women off and came to me, mopping his brow.

“When they made me district health officer,” he grunted, “I never dreamt it would end like this—fishing for coffins with a bunch of crazy villagers.”

I made a sympathetic noise.

“They’re just like children, Westlake. I’ve been trying to get them to move the coffins for months, for years. No sale. Then this happens. They all knew it would come sooner or later. But they go haywire. They shout; they run around wringing their hands; they blame me.”

He cast a disgusted glance at the awe-struck group around the coffins.

“The Portuguese are the worst. Apparently it’s a frightful omen if a dead relative gets washed out of holy ground into the sea. It means they’ll get lost at sea themselves unless they can rescue the coffin.”

“You seem to be rescuing most of them.”

“We’ll get them all before we’re through.” Gilchrist blew out his cheeks and wiped a rivulet of water from his eye. “Some of ’em are pretty smashed up though.” He smiled. “Teach these people a lesson, maybe. And then again—maybe not.”

A group of fishermen were staggering up from the surf, carrying another coffin. Gilchrist dashed off to cope with them like a sort of charnel traffic director. I turned my attention back to the breakers.

The job was almost done now. One more coffin was being dragged out of the surf. There seemed to be only two of them left still bobbing free.

The latest coffin, I noticed, had Fanshawe as one of its bearers. As the party slowly moved by me the artist gave me a wan look.

“Saved him, Westlake,” he murmured. “Poor old Dad, guess he had quite a hectic day. But we’ll see he has peace and quiet from now on in the new cemetery.”

They went on, carrying old Mr. Fanshawe’s coffin to join those of his dead friends and enemies. Marion was with them, too, hurrying, keeping close at her husband’s heels like a pretty little faithful dog.

Mitchell, Valentine, Usher, and Barnes were with the party that still remained at the water’s edge, staring out at the two last coffins. As I joined

them Mitchell exclaimed:

“My father’s coffin—it must be one of those two, Dr. Westlake. It hasn’t been located yet.”

At that moment one of the coffins tilted over the head of a wave and slid down it toward us. Instantly three fishermen and Buck sprang into the surf and grabbed it. Mitchell fluttered around them as they waded out. The old blackened coffin was dilapidated, half broken.

The hotel manager peered down at the tarnished plaque and then gave a cry of relief.

“This is it.”

I felt a queer twittering in the pit of my stomach. Buck and the fishermen started lifting the coffin. I ran to help them. Solemnly we carried the remains of old Mr. Mitchell across the beach and laid him down, under Gilchrist’s guidance, close to his fellows.

Mitchell and Buck stood on guard at its side. Gilchrist and I hung around. I was so tense now that I wanted to scream out what I thought and what I was afraid might happen. But now that the climax was so perilously close I found myself with no practical plan.

As we stood there another group brought up the last coffin. Barnes was their leader. He had the coffin placed on the end of the line. He turned to Gilchrist.

“Well, Doc, I reckon we got ’em all.”

Gilchrist looked lost, “We’ve got to get them somewhere under cover. I’ve been thinking. I guess the old schoolhouse just outside the village is the best place. Get all the men together. We’ll have to carry them.”

I tiptoed away to the last coffin which had been brought. I stooped over it, trembling with excitement. The stained brass plaque was barely legible. With an effort I made out the name:

Irene Lena Casey

Z

I stood there for a few seconds, staring at that name which had meant so much in the evil history of the Talisman murders. Everyone was milling and

shoving around me. Brawny fishermen were stooping and lifting the flimsy, storm-racked boxes onto their shoulders.

Soon there started along the ruined beach the longest and most fantastic cortege Cape Talisman had ever seen.

I was in an acute daze. Dimly I followed the interminable chain of bearers and belated mourners in their bleak progress toward the village.

A man was walking at my side. I looked and saw the gaunt, weary figure of Sergeant Barnes.

Someone with a flair for the macabre had started to sing a dirgelike hymn. The others took it up until the whole shore resounded with it.

The time had come to ask Barnes the crucial question. It was a gamble, a terrific gamble, but I took the plunge. I stared straight into his eyes and said:

“Sergeant, I asked you a question last night. You heard me but you didn’t answer.”

He started. “A question?”

“I asked you if you ever knew Irene Casey.”

Barnes’s expression was striking, very gaunt and uncertain. Huskily he said: “I heard you last night, but I made out I didn’t. I kind of got out of the habit of talking about Irene Casey.” He paused. “You see, I was hoping to make her my wife and—and then she died.”

So! Trying to keep my voice casual, I said: “What did she look like?”

“Pretty as a picture. Blond, blue eyes. Pretty, she was—real pretty.”

With sudden sharpness I asked: “And there was a mole—a large, conspicuous mole on her cheek?”

“A mole?” Barnes echoed the word with flustered blankness. “A conspicuous mole on her face? No, no, of course not. Why should she have had a mole?”

The head of the cortege had reached the outskirts of the village now. I could see the roof of the little abandoned schoolhouse ahead. Barnes was still staring at me.

“Tell me, Dr. Westlake, why did you ask that? Why—?”

“It’s nothing, Barnes. I just wanted to hear what you’d say. Now I know. Thanks.”

I left him, pushing my way through the hymn-chanting ranks of villagers. I felt a secret thrill of triumph. It had happened the way I thought it would happen. I had been right.

We reached the schoolhouse. Gilchrist directed the bearers, while one by one the coffins were taken into the building. The villagers clustered around the door, refusing to be shooed away. Fanshawe and Mitchell were among them, clamoring to be allowed to take care of their own dead.

Gilchrist tried to deal with them. He gave a little speech begging everyone to depart in peace. It did no good. Then, as health officer, he took the oldwifish line that, if they stayed, there was serious danger of infection from contact with the dead.

That worked like a charm. He disappeared into the schoolhouse, and people started straggling away until there were none left but Barnes and the group from the inn.

The time had come where I could go no farther without official support. The thing to do—the only thing—was to get to Sweeney.

But where? How?

I was still wondering some minutes later about “where” and “how” when the inspector appeared. He strode down the street from the village and joined Barnes.

“Gilchrist phoned me to come over. Said the storm had carried away the churchyard.”

“Yes sir,” said Barnes. “Carried away all the coffins too. We’ve had the whole village out collecting’em.” He nodded to the schoolhouse. “Gilchrist’s got’em all safe in there now.”

The inspector shot a glance around at the rest of us. “And Gilchrist?”

“He’s in there.”

Sweeney started up to the door. I followed.

He stared impatiently. “What is it?”

“It’s about the murders,” I said.

He smiled condescendingly. “Think you’ve got some dope on them?”

“I think so,” I said. And then with, I’m afraid, a certain deep satisfaction I added: “I know who committed them. I know everything about them. I thought you might be interested.”

The effect was more extreme than I had anticipated. Every imaginable emotion foiled around with the inspector's mustache.

"You know—" he gasped.

"Exactly."

He looked wildly at Barnes, who had moved toward us. "Hear that, Barnes? Westlake, he—he says he knows who committed the murders!"

Barnes's face went a lobster pink. "He does?"

I had had my moment of triumph. It was time to get started now.

"The sooner you hear what I've got to say, the better, Sweeney. Let's go somewhere and I'll tell you."

The schoolhouse door opened, and Gilchrist came out. Inspector Sweeney grabbed at his arm and repeated: "Westlake—he says he's got the murder case solved, Gilchrist."

The doctor stared. Sweeney stared. Barnes stared.

Then weakly the inspector said: "Where shall we go?"

"Anywhere," I said.

And that was that.

XXIV

Inspector Sweeney, Gilchrist, Barnes, and I were seated in Mr. Mitchell's office at the inn. The gray evening light, still muddied by the dregs of the storm, cast a pall of gloom over us. I was nervous because there were three very skeptical pairs of eyes fixed on me, and I knew it would not be simple to convince these men that I had coped with a problem which still defeated the authorities.

Sweeney was over his first shock of surprise and was growing impatient again. His fingers rapped an irritating tattoo on Mr. Mitchell's desk. I collected my thoughts, planning the most effective method of presenting my case. I tried to think of the most tactful one too. My investigation had burdened me with confidences. I knew, for example, the pathetic domestic secret of the Fanshawes and the truth about Buck's dubious parentage. I hoped to be discreet on all subjects that were not directly connected with the murders.

"Well, Westlake," snapped Sweeney, "you say you've found out who this maniac is. Tell me."

"The first thing I'd better tell you," I said, "is that there isn't any maniac. The murderer is a very sane individual."

"A sane individual!" Sweeney glanced at Gilchrist and then at Barnes rather derisively. "This guy goes around murdering women because they've got moles; he scrawls scarlet circles in lipstick all over them; he dolls them up with Chinese lanterns—and Dr. Westlake says he's a sane individual." He concluded with an explosive noise that sounded like "Pah!"

"I thought we had a maniac on our hands at first too," I said. "You know I did. Gilchrist and I between us cooked up the flossiest reconstruction of his complexes and obsessions. But I'm afraid we made fools of ourselves. The murderer set a smart trap for psychiatrists, and we fell slap-bang into it."

“And what,” asked the inspector with some tartness, “finally gave you the clue that the murderer was a—sane individual?”

“I guess it was finding Miss Heywood’s body last night. The maniac, as we had him doped out, only killed women with moles. Miss Heywood had the beginnings of a scarlet circle scrawled on her back, but she had no mole. That didn’t fit, did it?”

Dr. Gilchrist’s large hands settled on his large knees in a characteristic prelude to weighty utterance. “Perhaps the maniac had some mistaken notion that there was a mole, only to discover after the murder that there was none. Or, more likely still, once he had started to indulge his homicidal mania, the sheer blood lust itself got out of control. The desire to kill became stronger than anything else. He might have picked on anyone as a third victim.”

“That’s perfectly possible,” I conceded. “But just hear me out and then say what you feel. When we found Miss Heywood had no mole, I started thinking along other lines, and once I’d gotten away from the maniac idea, I found there was another theory which could tie together everything that’s been going on here, the hanky-panky in the graveyard and everything.”

“Your theory gives a logical explanation for the attempt to dig up graves in the churchyard?” queried Sweeney.

“It even goes back and connects up with Cape Talisman’s other big-time mystery. I always wondered about that Cora Mitchell affair. It seemed odd that two such sensational things should both have happened in a little place like Talisman. Lightning, they say, never strikes twice in the same place. Maybe they’re right—whoever they are—because I’m sure now that our murders and Cora Mitchell’s arrest twenty years ago are both part of the same lightning.”

Sergeant Barnes had been sitting lanky and silent in a corner, feeling himself too unimportant to take part in this big-shot conference. He pricked up his ears now.

“Cora Mitchell’s arrest, Dr. Westlake? You ain’t figuring these murders is connected up with Cora Mitchell? Why, she’s been shut up and out of the way—”

“I know, Barnes, Cora’s been shut up and out of the way and now she’s dead. But she’s as much involved in these murders as if she’d been out there digging in the churchyard herself.”

I was getting them interested then. I could tell that. Sweeney’s mustache bristled with curiosity.

“Wouldn’t it be a good idea to get down to facts, Westlake?”

“I’m getting down to them. It’s lucky Barnes is here. He was the one who arrested Cora Mitchell when she came back to Talisman to see her father. The details of that arrest are of crucial importance. He can check on them for me.”

The sergeant was preening himself now. “Sure, sure, Doc. I can tell you anything you want to know.”

“Okay. In the first place, Cora Mitchell got away with the Hogan black diamond, didn’t she? That’s definite. Her husband and the other man were caught almost at once. Cora was the one who had the jewel, and it was never found.”

“That’s right,” put in Sweeney. “The black diamond was never found.”

“And there was a rumor,” I went on, “that Cora brought the diamond with her when she came to Talisman and that she hid it somewhere here.”

“A rumor!” snorted Sweeney. “Rumors like that always start in small places. It doesn’t mean a thing.”

“Not necessarily. But in this case I think it does. Barnes, here’s the story of what happened on the night when you arrested Cora Mitchell in her father’s house. Stop me if I’m wrong.”

Barnes’s eyes were bright. He was obviously living again that most glamorous period of his life when newspapermen had wooed him night and day.

“As I understand it, Cora slipped into the house through the back door. The first person she saw was her brother.”

“That’s it,” broke in Barnes. “Mitchell had been in with Sweeney on setting a trap for her. He’d let Sweeney put that notice in the papers asking Cora to come back on account of her father was dying. Mitchell was right there in the kitchen when she came in. He and another cop was hiding in the back pantry like. I saw it all.”

“Then you can tell us exactly what happened.”

Barnes shot an awed glance at Sweeney, who nodded his permission to an underling to hold the spotlight. “Well, Doc, it was this way. Cora comes right in, and there was her brother. They weren’t on what you might call good terms. You know that. Fact is, Mitchell wouldn’t have nothing to do with her, wouldn’t even call her his sister. She came in all excited and tense. Right away she asks about their father. Mitchell tells her kind of blunt that the old man’s dead, that he’d died a couple of days before, and that his body was upstairs in its coffin right then. Cora went wild when she heard. She started running toward the stairs, calling out she had to go see her old dad. Mitchell ran ahead of her, barring her way, screaming out he wouldn’t let her see the old man, that she wasn’t worthy to have anything to do with him dead or alive. They started to have a big fight. That’s when I came in. I barged straight in from the pantry, and in a couple of seconds I’d gotten her handcuffed to me on one side and the other cop on the other. I wasn’t taking no chances.”

“Just what I thought,” I said. “After you’d arrested her Cora went on asking to be allowed to see her father’s body. You’d known her as a kid. You’d got her safely handcuffed. You weren’t worried she’d get away, and you were kind of sorry for her. So, in spite of her brother, you said it’d be okay for her just to go upstairs and see her father’s body. Right?”

Barnes was looking slightly puzzled, as if he had started to wonder why I wanted to know all this. “Sure. I figured it was only human to let her. She was carrying on so and all. Mitchell was mad as a hornet, of course, but he was always sort of stuffy about things anyway. So I said okay, and we all went upstairs, Cora handcuffed to the two of us and Mitchell.”

“And when you got upstairs the undertaker was there by old Mitchell’s coffin, doing whatever undertakers do at times like that, wasn’t he? And the undertaker was Mr. Usher.”

“Usher?” put in Gilchrist swiftly.

“Sure. Usher was up there,” said Barnes. “When Cora saw the coffin and everything she begged me to take the handcuffs off of her. She just couldn’t bear to think of having to take her last farewell of her old dad handcuffed to two policemen. That’s what she said. And since I was kind of

sorry for her—well, it didn't seem to hurt none. So I took off the handcuffs. Me and the other policeman and Mitchell and Usher—we didn't leave the room. We just kind of stood around respectful-like and let her go over to the coffin.”

I stared at him intently. “You watched her all the time?”

“Sure, sure, we did. It was real touching, it was. She just stood there a moment by the coffin, not saying nothing. Then suddenly she bent down like and kissed the old man. It didn't take but a minute. Then she came back to us, very pale and sort of solemn. She still didn't speak; she just stretches out her wrists for the handcuffs. We put'em on again and we took her away to the station. That was the end for Cora.”

“Right away after that old Mitchell's coffin was sealed and he was taken away to the old churchyard and buried.” I turned to Sweeney. “There's the picture for you. It's not very complicated, is it? I've asked you to accept the fact that Cora had the diamond with her when she arrived at Talisman. She certainly didn't have it when she was brought to the station. Where could she have hidden it? There's only one place, isn't there? Cora was handcuffed all the time except for those brief moments when she was by the coffin. She bent and kissed her father. Barnes hadn't searched her at that time. It would have been the simplest thing in the world to have slipped the diamond into the coffin.”

Sweeney's eyes were popping out of his head. “In the coffin?”

“Exactly. Even if the police had searched the house from top to bottom they would have had a decent respect for the dead. They wouldn't have fooled around in the coffin. And the very next day old Mitchell was buried in the churchyard. Cora was given a life sentence. If she hadn't died in prison she would eventually have been released, with the good-behavior parole and everything. Once free, she could have retrieved the black diamond from the coffin and lived in luxury for the rest of her days. I doubt whether her affection for her father was as beautiful a thing as she made out. I think she threw that loving-daughter act just to work on Barnes's sympathy, so that she could use old Mitchell's coffin as a cache for the diamond.”

I paused. “That, I believe, is what happened. And that, I believe, is the key to all Cape Talisman’s mysteries. The fabulous Hogan black diamond has been resting in peace in old Mr. Mitchell’s coffin for the last twenty years.”

I knew that sounded pretty lurid—a priceless jewel concealed in an old fisherman’s grave. But it was fitting that the theatrical career of Cora Mitchell should have closed on a melodramatic note. While my audience spluttered agitatedly I hurried on:

“I figured all that out after I’d visited the Haling Female Penitentiary this afternoon. Before then, I must admit, I hadn’t thought much about Cora Mitchell. I went there for quite a different reason. I went to see whether I could get any dope on Miss Heywood.”

“Miss Heywood!” exclaimed Sweeney, clinging onto the familiar name. “Why did you think you’d find out anything about Miss Heywood at the penitentiary?”

I could have given him a great many reasons as to why my suspicions had been aroused by the ladylike water colorist. But since that would inevitably bring up delicate subjects I merely said:

“I’d started wondering about her. I was pretty sure she was a phony, but I wasn’t certain what her game was. It was Gilchrist who gave me the clue.”

“I did?” asked the doctor blankly.

“Indirectly. Remember the other day when you and the kids came up to me on the beach? I was with Miss Heywood, and she scuttled away the moment she saw you coming.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I was sure then that she knew you and was very eager to keep you from recognizing her. Since you’re doctor up at the penitentiary, it occurred to me that she might be an ex-convict, an alumna of Haling. That would explain her reluctance to meet you. I played a hunch. And I was right. The warden at the penitentiary picked her out immediately from my description as a particularly irrepressible convict known as Lena Darnell.”

“Lena Darnell!” Gilchrist’s mouth dropped open. “But I know that name, I’m sure. I—Yes, yes, of course. But Miss Heywood wasn’t Lena Darnell. Lena Darnell had gray hair and—and—”

“Precisely. That’s why you didn’t recognize her. She’d had her hair dyed and her face lifted.”

Sweeney was looking very eager now. So was Barnes. But Gilchrist still looked as if he were going quietly mad. He flustered around and then said:

“Good heavens, Westlake, I see what you mean... Lena Darnell. I remember her well. She was Cora Mitchell’s cell mate.”

“She was, indeed. And she was more than that. When Cora was dying she became delirious. She was babbling all the time about the black diamond and her father’s coffin. Lena was a very devoted friend. She obtained permission to sit with Cora all through her last night.”

I turned to Sweeney. “Get what I’m driving at, Inspector? In her delirium Cora Mitchell gave away the secret of the black diamond’s hiding place. Lena was not the type to pass up an opportunity like that. She was due for release in a couple of weeks. Here was her chance for the real big money.”

I led up then to my climax. “Lena Darnell was no fool. She knew Gilchrist lived here at Talisman. She knew it would be fatal to have him recognize her. As soon as she got out of prison she had her face lifted and her hair dyed, and she took a new fancy name, Miss Heywood. She showed up at the Talisman Inn as a respectable lady artist. But she had only one thought in her unattractive mind. She’d come here to dig up old Mr. Mitchell and get herself the Hogan black diamond.”

I had them all gauping now.

“Lena Darnell,” I said, “turned out to be a good actress. She had everyone fooled at the hotel. But things didn’t come out so good for her. You see, Cora hadn’t known and Lena didn’t know either that the big storm three years ago had carried away all the tombstones on the seaward side of the churchyard. Lena Darnell knew Mitchell’s grave was there, but that’s all she knew. And Gilchrist, as health officer, was about the only person who had a record of exactly which grave was which. Obviously Gilchrist was the last person she could go to for information. She was definitely on the spot.”

Sweeney had found a cigarette and was smoking it furiously. “This is crazy, Westlake, but it kind of fits in. So the person you and your daughter

interrupted that first night in the churchyard was Miss Heywood digging for old Mitchell's grave?"

"That's right. By some roundabout way she must have found out the approximate position of the grave. Maybe she wormed it out of Mitchell. So she decided the only thing to do was to dig around on speculation until she hit the right one. As it happened, that night she got Irene Casey's grave. Maybe she'd been at it several nights before. In fact, I'm sure she had, because Barnes told us about the village woman who'd been scared by a gray ghostly figure in the churchyard. I told you Lena Darnell was smart. She deliberately wore that long, trailing gray dress; she deliberately used that Chinese lantern to give an eerie, spectral effect. That was for protection. She knew how superstitious the villagers are. Even if they did see her they'd have thought she was a ghost and would have run away, giving her a chance to scam."

"But the lantern," put in Sweeney, "you're not trying to make out Miss Heywood put the lanterns by the corpses too?"

"Oh, that's something else again. I'll come to that. I'm with Lena Darnell now, digging around in the graveyard. Digging up coffins, of course, is not exactly light work, but Lena Darnell had spent a large part of her mature life in jail, and jail, I guess, toughens the muscles. Okay, Miss Heywood picked the wrong grave on the night of the first murder. I expect she was scared pretty well silly by the news of Nellie's death. But her time was short. Any day Gilchrist or someone might have got onto her. She had to work fast. Murder or no murder, she had to keep right on. Matter of fact, she tried again the next day."

I didn't mention the fact that she had tricked Buck into assisting her.

"Yesterday she tried and was a little warmer, but not warm enough. That time she picked old Mr. Fanshawe's grave, and Fanshawe happened to come along and frighten her off before she got very far with it."

I went on: "Her last attempt came yesterday. She had the right grave then. She had the prize all but in her grasp. But she was too late. When she was right there in the half-dug grave, feverishly trying to get to the black diamond, she was—" I shrugged. "The Cape Talisman murderer caught up with her and snuffed her out for good and all."

“All right, Westlake,” Sweeney’s voice had lost quite a lot of its arrogance. “Maybe you’re on the track. Maybe that crazy business was exactly what Miss Heywood was up to. But what has it got to do with the murders?”

“Yes,” added Gilchrist. “Nellie Wood and Maggie Hillman were murdered. They hadn’t anything to do with the black diamond and all that crazy stuff. You mean the two things just happened to converge in Miss Heywood? You mean she was there, digging in the graveyard, alone—a perfect victim—and the maniac—”

“A woman convict, digging in a grave for a stolen jewel, who just happens to meet up with a maniac on the prowl for a victim? That’s a little too coincidental for human consumption, isn’t it?” I smiled at Gilchrist’s blank face. “No. I don’t see it that way at all. I see the connection between the two as being far closer. You see, Lena Darnell knew all the while that she was working against time. She knew someone was planning to murder her. And she did get murdered.”

I stopped then and looked from one to the other of my tense auditors.

“Miss Heywood was murdered by someone else who was after the black diamond too.”

Sweeney was watching me piercingly. “I don’t get it. Gilchrist is right. What connection could Nellie and Maggie possibly have with the black diamond?”

“None,” I said. “Absolutely none. That’s their whole point. That’s exactly why they were murdered.”

“Now, Westlake, this is getting—”

“Listen, here’s the position the murderer was in before anything happened. He knew about the black diamond. He’d pieced things together and he’d realized it was hidden in old Mitchell’s coffin. He wanted it like mad and he was ready to do anything to get it. But there was a snag. He knew Lena Darnell was after it too. And, what was worse, she knew he was after it. What could he do? He could run a race with Lena and try to get the diamond ahead of her. That was out, because he knew perfectly well that even if he did get it, Lena Darnell would be in a position to blackmail him for the rest of his life. Okay. There was only one other course left to him,

and that was to dispose of Lena Darnell—to kill her. There was no particular hurry. He knew she wasn't sure where the right grave was. All right. Let her search for it; let her even get it. She could spare him the considerable risk and effort of digging up the grave himself. And, once she had reached the coffin, he could be hovering there in the churchyard and kill her—and get the diamond. I think that's how he planned it, but, as it happened, things didn't quite work out that way.”

I was acutely conscious of the tension I was creating. Gilchrist and Sweeney were sitting stiff as dummies. Barnes alone was restless, squirming in his chair and scratching his head.

“The murderer,” I said, “was faced with one almost insoluble problem when it came to killing Lena Darnell. In spite of her dyed hair and her lifted face, if she was found murdered in Talisman it was inevitable that she should be identified pretty soon as an ex-convict from the penitentiary. Once that was done, her tie-up with Cora Mitchell would be disclosed and the whole business of the black diamond would almost certainly come to light. The murderer happened to be in such a position that the moment the motive for Lena Darnell's death was established he was bound to be one and possibly the only reasonable suspect. In other words, unless he thought up some brilliant camouflage, killing Lena would be virtually equivalent to putting a noose around his own neck. That's where Nellie Wood and Maggie Hillman came in.”

Gilchrist's face lightened. “Westlake, I'm beginning to see. I—Go on.”

“That,” I said, “was the murderer's one stroke of genius in the whole business. It was as bold as it was cold-blooded. If you want to hide a leaf you hide it in a forest. If you want to hide a murder you hide it in a lot of other murders. He knew he had several days' leeway. All right—several days was a long enough time in which to invent a homicidal maniac.”

“Invent!” echoed Barnes.

“Sure. The maniac of Cape Talisman was a sheer figment of the murderer's mind—a very clever figment calculated to start all the doctors for miles around shooting their mouths off about complexes and fixations and fetishes and things. He picked Nellie Wood as the maniac's first victim. He picked her partly, perhaps, because she was the first girl he saw with a

mole, partly, too, because her anomalous position with the Fanshawes and Buck would further cloud the issue by bringing up a whole raft of jealousy motives for her death. He killed her and then thought up every crazy trick he could to make the corpse look like the victim of a maniac. The mole was the main thing, of course—the scarlet circle around the mole. Something sensationally insane to establish the fact once and for all that there was a maniac at large in our midst. The folded arms, the closed eyes, all that added color. And the Chinese lanterns ...”

“What about the lanterns?” said Sweeney.

“I think he took over that idea from Miss Heywood herself. They served two purposes. Firstly, they gave another insane touch. Secondly, he knew Miss Heywood had been using one in the churchyard. With any luck the lanterns might connect up with the digging and make the whole thing look like one and the same thing—a murdering maniac with an extra obsession for ghouling around churchyards in his spare time.”

I continued: “There he was then. Nellie Wood’s murder—completely motiveless otherwise—had established the existence of the maniac. But one corpse wasn’t enough. He needed at least one more to create a wave of terror. Maggie was the ideal second victim. She had a mole. She, like Nellie, was linked with Buck, which would heighten the confusion. Also, since she had actually seen the murderer accosting Nellie the night before, she was a possible witness and should be eliminated anyway. To make the maniac even more dramatic on the second death—to suggest mounting insanity—he staged that incredible tableau with the body floating out to sea in a boat, Buck’s boat, at that. That’s what happened, you see. Two perfectly innocent girls were ruthlessly sacrificed as a build-up to the one thing and one thing alone that mattered—the murder of Miss Heywood.”

Sweeney’s eyes, watching me, were bright as a bird’s.

“It was a staggering idea in a way. And it might have worked. It very nearly did. You’ve got to admit that, Sweeney. Yesterday when you found Miss Heywood’s body lying in a half-dug grave you were so sold by that time on the maniac idea that you took it for granted that the third murder was as unmotivated as the first two. You didn’t pay much attention to the dug-up grave. You thought that was just another wild setting for a body

chosen by the maniac. And, what was far more important, I doubt whether you'd have bothered to find out anything about Miss Heywood's past. To you she was just Miss Heywood, a guest at the hotel and the third victim of a maniac. She had lost her identity. If things hadn't happened differently, the fact that she was Lena Darnell might never have come out. And the murderer could have slipped away with the black diamond with nobody the wiser, leaving a new legend behind him, the legend of the Cape Talisman homicidal maniac who was never caught."

Sweeney looked down at his nails and then up again, expressions battling each other on his face.

"And the black diamond, Westlake? You mean he got it that night? He got it from the grave after he'd killed Miss Heywood?"

"No. That's where something went wrong. For some reason or other he had to kill Miss Heywood while she'd only dug halfway to the coffin. After that there wasn't time for him to go on and complete the digging. He wouldn't have thought it very important anyway. Now Lena Darnell was out of the way he'd have all the time in the world to get the diamond. So he went through with his plan. He rang the church bell to bring people running—his final master stroke in building up the maniac—and called it a day. He was fooled, of course. But how was he to know that the storm would come along the next day and sweep Mr. Mitchell's coffin away with the others into the sea before he'd had a chance to get at it?"

"Then you think," said Gilchrist, "that the diamond was still in the coffin this evening when we rescued them from the sea?"

"Sure," I said.

Gilchrist looked at Sweeney, who looked at Barnes. They all seemed exhausted by the effort of coping with my very peculiar story. Gilchrist was the first to speak. He said rather weakly:

"Does anyone else think a drink's a good idea before we go on?"

Barnes perked up. Even Sweeney became unofficial enough to murmur: "Excellent." The doctor disappeared and returned shortly with four highballs on a tray. He distributed them. Sweeney took a large gulp of his and said with a tinge of sarcasm:

“Okay, Westlake, whatever else you are, no one could call you boring. Now explain the mole business. I don’t understand that. You say he deliberately picked Nellie and Maggie because they had moles? Why—if his whole idea was to make Miss Heywood’s murder like one in a series of murders? Miss Heywood, as you pointed out, had no mole.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said. “And that’s where the murderer, quite unconsciously, gave himself away. I looked at the record on Lena Darnell at the penitentiary. She *did* have a mole—a large mole on her back just where the murderer began to draw the circle. She obviously had it removed when she had her face lifted. A mole was an embarrassingly conspicuous mark of identification. She wanted to get rid of it for her new life as Miss Heywood.”

Sweeney began: “So the murder—”

“That means that the murderer was someone who had known Lena Darnell pretty intimately before she changed her identity to Miss Heywood, someone who had known her well enough to be conscious of the mole on her back, but someone who had had no contact with her since she had the mole removed. You can see how that one little fact destroyed the murderer’s whole plan. He had banked everything on a ‘mole maniac.’ Everything had worked beautifully. Now, at the end, he had murdered Miss Heywood according to plan. Can’t you imagine him, trembling with excitement at the prospect of success, turning the body over, ripping the back of the dress, flourishing the lipstick onto the skin where he knew the mole to be? And then, at the last minute, with the circle half drawn, he saw that the mole was no longer there. Instead of the first two murders making Lena Darnell’s inconspicuous through the medium of the moles, they had done the exact reverse. Miss Heywood was the only moleless victim. It was that alone which put me onto the right line—that alone which is going to make him pay the penalty for his crimes.”

That remark had a chilling effect on my listeners. They all sipped at their drinks. Finally Sweeney, as spokesman, said:

“Well, well, I’ve got to admit that the story sounds ingenious. It fits everything into a pattern. It does everything—provided you have some sort of proof to back it up.”

I had been expecting that. It sent a little shiver of uneasiness down my spine. The greatest gamble still lay ahead. Maybe I would be able to get the evidence—then I would be triumphant. But maybe I would not be able to get the evidence; in that case, I trembled to think of what might happen.

“I’ve got all the evidence I need,” I said with a certain amount of bravado.

“Okay, Westlake. In that case, don’t you think it’s about time you told us the name of the murderer?”

It was, of course. I had some more drink to steady me. I didn’t relish what was coming next. Not at all.

“All right,” I said. “But first of all let’s figure out what we know about the murderer. We know he had his own way of discovering that Cora Mitchell had hidden the black diamond in her father’s coffin. He knew Lena Darnell had the secret, too, and was planning to retrieve the jewel. He knew that Miss Heywood in her Lena Darnell days had a mole on her back. He also knew that little Maggie Hillman had a mole on her thigh although she never wore a skirt short enough to expose it.” My heart was beating rapidly. I looked at Sweeney. “There’s only one person, isn’t there, who could possibly have known all those things?”

Sweeney stared back inscrutably. “That’s up to you to prove, Westlake.”

“Okay.” I took the plunge. “Let’s take this in order. Mitchell, Usher, and Sergeant Barnes here were all present at the moment when Cora Mitchell slipped the diamond into her father’s coffin. Any one of them, in theory, might have seen her do it. But that was twenty years ago. If they had seen it, if they had decided to get the diamond, they would hardly have waited twenty years to do so, would they? I think it’s safe in counting them out. The man who committed the murders was not someone who actually saw the diamond put in the coffin. He must have found out the truth in some other way.

“What other way was there? Only one—through Cora herself. Now the hiding place of the black diamond was Cora’s great secret. Under normal circumstances she would never have passed it on to a soul. But before she died she was delirious. Lena Darnell was with her, and that’s how Lena learned the truth. All right. That’s the one moment when the murderer, too,

could have found out about the diamond. You see, Lena Darnell was not the only person at Cora's deathbed."

I paused, feeling keyed up and very conspicuous. I turned to Gilchrist. "You should know that, Gilchrist, because you were the doctor who took care of Cora in prison. You were with her when she died, weren't you?"

Gilchrist's heavy face registered surprise. "Yes, yes, of course I was."

"You had as much chance as Lena to learn the truth about the black diamond from Cora's delirious babblings. Also, as prison doctor, you must certainly have attended Lena Darnell during the years she was there. Who else but you in Talisman would know that Lena Darnell, the inmate of the Haling Penitentiary, had a mole on her back? And then there's poor Maggie Hillman too. I guess Buck, in their tawdry little romance, might have discovered the mole on Maggie's leg. But he wasn't the only one. Maggie had poison ivy this summer, didn't she?—all over her leg. And you were the doctor who treated her. That adds up to quite a lot, doesn't it, Gilchrist? It adds up to the fact that it was you who killed Nellie Wood and Maggie Hillman and Lena Darnell in an elaborate plot to get the Hogan diamond."

I had shot my bolt then. Sweeney sprang to his feet. So did Barnes. Only Gilchrist himself remained seated, staring at me from eyes that were cold and steady.

"Is this some strange sort of joke, Westlake?"

"You wanted that black diamond," I said. "I guess I understand too. You'd been stuck here in this little one-horse town for years with a lot of ambition and no prospects. You had your last chance the other week to get yourself a man-size job in Boston. It came to nothing. You must have realized then that you were doomed to be a small-time doctor for the rest of your life. But before you went to Boston you had heard Cora raving about the black diamond. Probably then, while you still had hopes of the hospital job, you wouldn't have dreamed of doing this thing. But when you came back from Boston you were desperate, embittered. You saw no hope for the future. But here was your chance. All you had to do was to get the black diamond out of old Mitchell's coffin and you could buy yourself any kind of life you wanted. Of course, to a layman, the Hogan diamond would have been a white elephant. It was far too well known to dispose of. But you,

with your contact with the underworld through the penitentiary, could have sold it easily.

“But those two weeks you spent in Boston had lost you the chance of getting the diamond simply. For Lena Darnell had turned up on the scene. Although she did everything in her power to avoid meeting you, you knew she was after the diamond and you knew that, even if you did get it ahead of her, she would have a blackmail stranglehold on you. That’s why you worked out this plot. It was clever, immensely so. In a way, perhaps, that was another reason why you did it—to prove to yourself that you weren’t the failure that Boston thought you, to prove that you could carry through a dangerous and complicated job with flying colors. I guess you enjoyed the intricate workings out of your plan almost as much as you looked forward to the possession of the diamond.” I stared straight at him. “Yes, you were right in a way, Gilchrist. This was a kind of—maniac murder, after all.”

They were all staring at me in horror.

“Westlake!” That came from Sweeney. “Westlake, what in God’s name are you saying?”

“That Gilchrist’s a triple murderer,” I said, still staring into the doctor’s unflinching eyes. “It was smart to bring me into the case from the beginning. Another doctor—and a dumb one at that, you probably thought—was useful to back up your maniac theory. It was smart, too, to pound the maniac theory into Sweeney night and day, using all your prestige as his confidant to sell him on the idea that only a madman could have committed the crimes. But you talked about that maniac a little too much.

“And you did something else much more damning, something that gave you away completely. On the day after Nellie’s murder you and I went to the graveyard. You were to identify the first grave that had been tampered with. You did. You said, quite truthfully, that it was Irene Casey’s grave. You should have left it right there. But, oh no, you were too smart. You knew I had become interested in the grave digging. You were scared I might be on the right track. So you thought out a brilliant idea of throwing me off the track again. You told me that Irene Casey had a conspicuous mole on her cheek. That was wonderful. For days you had me fooled. I thought what you wanted me to think. I thought the murderer must be some crazy person

who had had some unfortunate relationship with Irene Casey in the past and was now wreaking his mad vengeance on other women with moles. It might all have been splendid, but you overlooked the obvious thing. You weren't the only person who had known Irene Casey. Sergeant Barnes here knew her very well. And Barnes just told me this evening that Irene Casey never had a mole, big, medium, or small, on her cheek."

I watched the doctor. "I'm afraid you're hopelessly tangled up in that lie now, Gilchrist."

For the first time Gilchrist's eyes faltered. His florid face had gone faintly grayish and unsure. He looked old and, for a fraction of a second, trapped.

But Sweeney's voice rang out again. "All this, Westlake—about Irene Casey and a mole—all this talk about what Gilchrist said to you—what's that to go on? Haven't you got anything more definite than that? For heaven's sake, you can't accuse a man of murder without—"

This was the moment for my final and very precarious gamble, the moment on which success or failure hung.

"Yes," I said, "I think I have all the proof in the world. I think I can produce the black diamond itself for you."

"The black diamond?"

"This evening all the coffins, including Mitchell's, got swept out to sea. Before that Gilchrist certainly had no chance to get the diamond. But when all the coffins were salvaged he had them taken to the old schoolhouse. As health officer he had full control over the churchyard. If the storm hadn't come he could have had Mitchell's grave dug up in his own good time. But now, thanks to the storm, there was the coffin in the schoolhouse, and he was alone with it. He couldn't possibly have passed up a golden opportunity like that. I'm sure he did get the diamond then. We picked him up after he'd only been in the schoolhouse a short time. In other words, if he did get the diamond then, he's had no chance to dispose of it since. Unless I'm very much mistaken, he's got the diamond on him right now."

I turned back to Gilchrist. "Okay. Will you hand over the diamond or do you want us to search you?"

Gilchrist's face was completely sure of itself again. He smiled at me with infinite contempt. He glanced at Sweeney.

"I don't have to tell you that this is all complete nonsense, Sweeney. Poor Dr. Westlake seems to be suffering from delusions of grandeur because he happened to help solve some other murder case in the past and developed a taste for the spotlight. However, since things have gone this far, I would be grateful if you and Barnes would search me and clear this matter up once and for all."

He turned back to me. I had never seen so much loathing concentrated in one man's face.

"Although you were pleased to call me a small-town horse doctor, Westlake, I have a certain position in the world of medicine, It may interest you to know that I will do my utmost to have you drummed out of every medical society in the country." He looked back to Sweeney and Barnes, who were hovering rather dazedly.

"Come on. Search me."

As the two men moved toward him my heart sank. I knew then that my gamble had lost, although I didn't quite see how it could have done so. Unless I was hopelessly, disastrously wrong, Gilchrist must surely have had that diamond on him when we arrived at the inn.

Barnes and Sweeney completed a most thorough examination. They found nothing.

Gilchrist smoothed back his slightly ruffled hair. He was quite on top of the situation now.

"Okay, Sweeney, you have heard the charges against me. If you think there is sufficient evidence, you are, of course, in duty bound to arrest me."

Sweeney was very flustered. "No, no, of course. There is no evidence at all. I—I don't know what—"

"In that case," cut in Gilchrist, beaming with contentment, "I will see that a libel suit is lodged against Westlake tomorrow"

I gulped. That didn't sound at all the way I wanted things to end. I racked my brain, trying to think of something, anything.

Nothing came.

There was a long moment of most uncomfortable silence. At length Gilchrist said:

“Very well, since Westlake’s absurd accusation has not been acceptable, I think I—”

He stopped. He looked sharply toward the door. So did the rest of us. It had opened with a great deal of dramatic violence, and two extraordinarily disheveled objects tumbled in to the room.

The principal object was my daughter. The secondary object was Bobby Fanshawe. Dawn was wearing what had once been her best pair of pajamas. They never would be again. They were soaked with water, stained, and ripped all the way up one leg. Bobby was in even worse repair. The thing he was wearing was a nightgown. It was blue and shapeless and trailed horribly around his short legs.

The two children marched toward me with great solemnity. Bobby was clutching a flashlight. Dawn looked prim and aloof, as if it were the most socially correct thing in the world to drift into a police conference in tawdry pajamas.

“We found it,” she announced. “It was awfully difficult, but we found it.”

I could think of nothing better to say than: “But—but you’re supposed to be in bed.”

“I know,” said Dawn airily. “But we sort of aren’t. You see, we were. At least I was. Bobby wasn’t.”

Bobby blinked his smudgy black eyes. “I was eating a pig,” he said very slowly. “A great big huge enormous pig.”

Dawn justly ignored that interpolation. “And I was in bed,” she said, “and my bed happens to be by the window, and so I was happening to look out of the window and I happened to see you and Inspector Sweeney and Sergeant Barnes and Dr. Gilchrist come in, and then later I happened to see Dr. Gilchrist come out through the side door and throw it in the bushes.”

I stared. “Throw what into the bushes?”

“It,” said my daughter. “So you see, I went and got Bobby and we went down and we searched and searched in the bushes until we found it because we wanted it, and that’s why we came back to Cape Talisman anyway.”

She opened a grubby fist then and stretched it out for my inspection.

Lying in her palm was a giant diamond. Exquisitely cut, it caught the light from the ceiling and sparkled with a dusky radiance that was almost unearthly.

I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it. Thoughts were scudding. Of course! Gilchrist had suggested drinks and gone out to get them before I had started my accusation. He had known what was coming. He had had sufficient foresight to dispose of the diamond.

"The Hogan diamond!" The words came hoarsely from Sweeney.

Bobby had trotted to Dawn's side. They were both staring down at the jewel critically.

"It isn't half as black as I hoped it would be," murmured Dawn. "But it's quite pretty. I think it was silly of Dr. Gilchrist to throw it away."

Bobby wiped his nose on the back of his hand. "Dr. Gilchrist is a silly man. He was silly last night in the church when he came in and rang that bell. Boom.... Boom.... Ringing a bell and we being trying to be asleep." He scowled. "Silly."

I stared at Bobby then. I loved him. During their fantastic camping out in the old church the kids had seen Gilchrist ringing the bell that had summoned us to the dead body of Miss Heywood. They'd seen that, and they'd retrieved the diamond. Between them Dawn and Bobby had changed my defeat into a triumphant victory.

Barnes and Sweeney had both turned ominously toward the doctor. Gilchrist was finished now. I knew that. In one arm I caught up my daughter, black diamond and all. In the other I grabbed Bobby. I kissed them enthusiastically, damp and dirty as they were.

Dawn wriggled uncomfortably, but Bobby nestled against me, being affectionate and twisting at the buttons of my coat. Suddenly his voice rose, throaty and pontifical.

"I'm naughty," he said. "Very naughty. I told a lie."

I stared at him through Dawn's hair. "A lie, Bobby? You mean you didn't see Dr. Gilchrist?"

"The pig," said Bobby "It was a great big huge enormous pig. It was red and white. It had two ears. But I told a lie." His black eyes watched me

yearningly. "I didn't eat it. Not really. It ate me."

"It didn't," said Dawn.

"It did," said Bobby.

"It didn't," said Dawn.

"It did," said Bobby.

"It didn't...."

Sweeney and Barnes were leading Gilchrist away....

THE END

About the Author

Patrick Quentin, Q. Patrick, and Jonathan Stagge were pen names under which Hugh Callingham Wheeler (1912–1987), Richard Wilson Webb (1901–1966), Martha Mott Kelley (1906–2005), and Mary Louise White Aswell (1902–1984) wrote detective fiction. Most of the stories were written together by Webb and Wheeler, or by Wheeler alone. Their best-known creation is amateur sleuth Peter Duluth. In 1963, the story collection *The Ordeal of Mrs. Snow* was given a Special Edgar Award by the Mystery Writers of America.

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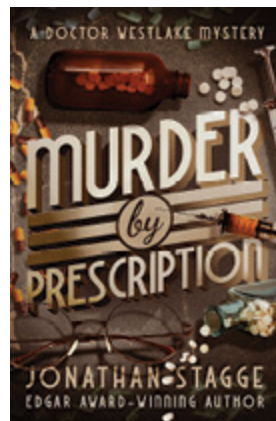
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