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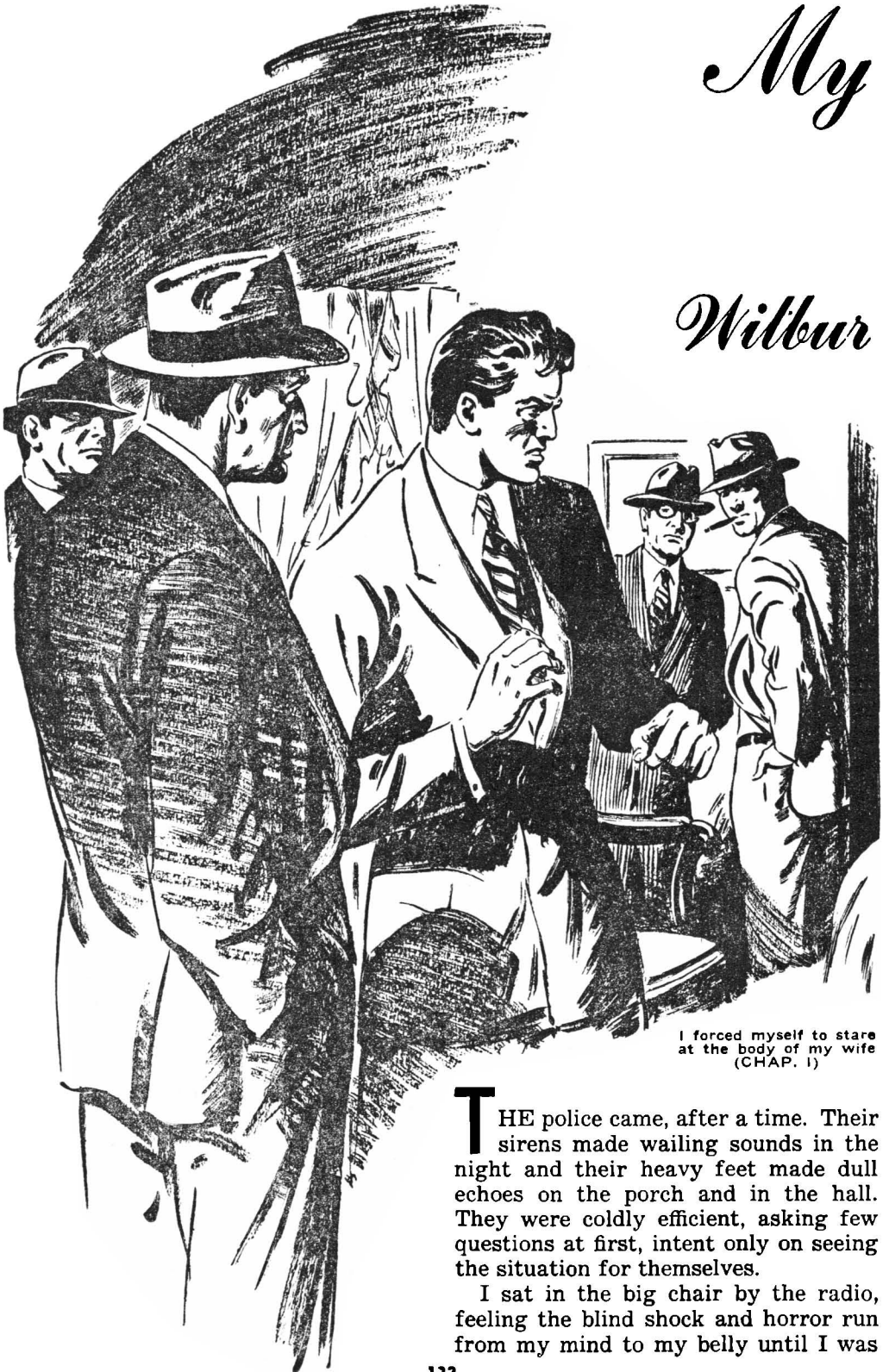
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My

Wilbur



I forced myself to stare
at the body of my wife
(CHAP. I)

THE police came, after a time. Their sirens made wailing sounds in the night and their heavy feet made dull echoes on the porch and in the hall. They were coldly efficient, asking few questions at first, intent only on seeing the situation for themselves.

I sat in the big chair by the radio, feeling the blind shock and horror run from my mind to my belly until I was

Best Friend is

DEATH

S. Peacock

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almost ill. I tried to smoke and the cigarette fumes tasted like the smell of burning leather. I tried to keep my thinking calm, but thoughts raced like trapped rats in a wire cage. A uniformed patrolman watched me closely from beside the door and his gaze drew perspiration in a thin film along my spine.

Voices sounded in the bedroom—the heavy unemotional voice of the detective who called himself Lieutenant Oliver and the dry raspy voice of an-

other man who had carried a doctor's satchel. I tried to catch the words but none made sense.

I tried to reconstruct the events of the past half hour but memories blurred one into another, until nothing was clear. I chain-lit a cigarette and looked up to see that Lieutenant Oliver was watching me from the bedroom door.

"She's dead," he said gently.

"Well, do something," I said and felt myself shaking. "Don't just stand there."

Oliver shrugged, crossed the room and sat on the edge of the couch. His features were young but his hair was grizzled. His eyes held no expression at all as they looked at me.

"Suppose you tell me what happened," he said.

"I didn't do it." My voice began to raise and I held it in check by a great effort.

"Nobody said you did," the detective answered. "Now suppose you tell me what happened."

I snubbed out the cigarette and immediately lit another. A flashbulb made a puff of light in the bedroom and I burned myself, holding the match too long.

"Well?" Lieutenant Oliver said.

I licked my lips. They were like sandpaper. "I found her—my wife—lying on her bed," I said. "She was dead, murdered."

"Oh!" Oliver twisted a stubby cigar in heavy fingers.

"Look," I said. "The killer's getting away!"

"Maybe!" Lieutenant Oliver shrugged indifferently. "Now let's hear your story in greater detail."

Somehow I managed to calm myself. The flashbulb flared again and I could hear voices of the police who were still in the bedroom. I swallowed heavily, shivering, remembering.

"I got up this morning," I said, "and made coffee. That was about eight. I drank a cup, then put on my hat and coat. I knocked at Miriam's door to see if she wanted anything downtown. She didn't answer, so I opened the door and went in." I caught my breath at the terror-filled memory. "She was dead, on the bed. I saw she had been shot in the temple."

"And?" Lieutenant Oliver prompted when I fell silent.

"I called—you," I said.

Oliver's fingers went still. "Just us?" he asked.

I swallowed. I knew I had made a slip. "I called a friend, too," I said.

"A friend—*who*?"

"Carter, Tom Carter."

OLIVER'S cigar was twisting again, over and over, until I wanted to reach out and slap it from his hand. I crushed out my cigarette, reaching for a fresh one in my pocket and saw the involuntary movement of the cop beside the door as his right hand reached for his belt gun.

"Carter's a lawyer, right?" Lieutenant Oliver said. "Why did you think you needed a lawyer?"

"I didn't. I—" Panic was building in my mind. "Look, Tom's my friend. I didn't know what to do. I called him and he told me to report to you immediately."

"He was smart, at least," Oliver said. "What's his number?"

I shook my head. "He's not in town. He's at his lodge at Bear Lake, upstate." I felt the constriction of my collar. "He's driving in."

Lieutenant Oliver glanced at his wristwatch and I could see he was figuring how long the drive would take. Bear Lake was fifty miles from town—to drive in would take an hour, even at top speed.

The doctor thrust his head through the door, blinking myopically behind thick glasses. He glanced at me, then turned his gaze toward Lieutenant Oliver.

"Thirteen hours, Oliver," he said, "give or take one either way. That's the most I can say right now. I'll run a fast PM once we get her downtown."

"Thanks, Dade," Lieutenant Oliver said and came from the couch. "Let's take a look, Mr. Cummings," he said to me.

"No!" My hands were gripping the chair arms.

Oliver's eyes seemed to frost. They stared as though probing deep into my mind. He put the cigar back into his vest pocket.

"Let's take a look," he repeated.

His voice was as unemotional as ever. He might have been asking me the time of day, instead of wanting me to go into the room where my wife lay in death.

I got up. I had no choice. I came to my feet, feeling the blind terror grip-

ping my heart again. Then I went past Oliver and into the bedroom.

Miriam lay almost exactly as she had when I found her. She was curled as if a stomach cramp had drawn her knees high toward her soft breasts. I could see the white sheen of her teeth through partly-opened lips. The mascaraed lashes made a dark fringe about her staring eyes.

I turned away and Oliver spun me back. He did it gently, but there was strength in his fingers. I forced myself to stare at the body of my wife, fancying that I saw the flicker of hate in her eyes that was always there when she looked at me.

"This the way you found her?" Oliver asked impersonally.

I hated him suddenly. He was like a block of gray ice, without feeling, without emotions.

"Yes!" I said.

Lieutenant Oliver nodded to himself, bending over the body. It faced us, head on the pillow. The head and rear of the bed fitted into one corner of the room. White curtains moved in the gentle breeze at an open window and from outside, I could hear the whistle of somebody passing on the sidewalk.

There was a gun on the table, a .32 automatic. Involuntarily, my hand went toward it, then came back as I realized whose it was.

"Your gun?" Lieutenant Oliver said.

I nodded. There was no point in lying. The numbers could be traced.

I saw then that three other men were in the room, the doctor and two detectives. The bigger detective jerked his thumb at me and Oliver nodded.

"Let Simpson make a mask of your hands, Mr. Cummings," Oliver said.

The bulky detective painted the crotch of my thumb and the back and palm of my right hand with hot wax. Simpson peeled the wax, then flushed the inner surface of the mold with a liquid from a bottle in a small laboratory kit. Blue specks jumped into prominence.

"Fired a gun lately?" Oliver asked.

"Well, yes," I said. "I was at my rifle

clubs last night."

Oliver nodded. "Okay," he said to Simpson. The detective began to pack his kit. "Now, Mr. Cummings," Lieutenant Oliver continued. "Let's run over your movements of last night."

I hesitated.

"I could warn you," Oliver said flatly, "that lying will gain you nothing. We'll check everything you tell us. It's surprising what comes out when witnesses begin to remember things."

"There isn't much to tell," I said. "I went to my rifle club about six, had dinner, then spent the evening on the range."

"By yourself? You weren't with any particular people or group?"

Perspiration was on my face, yet I dared not turn away from Oliver. Somehow I was deathly afraid of this gray block of a man. The fumes of the whiskey I had drunk the night before swirled in my mind, covering everything with an impalpable mist which made thinking hard and uncertain. I was afraid to lie to the man and yet I knew I had no right to drag in anybody else.

"I was by myself—that is, I went by myself but met others there."

"What rifle club?" Oliver was twisting his cigar again.

"The Claremont Club on Seventieth Street."

Lieutenant Oliver nodded absently, then bent and drew the sheet over Miriam's nightgown-clad body. One last glimpse I had of her staring eyes and crimson mouth then the sheet covered everything.

"Who do you think did the shooting?" he said.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"You didn't do it?"

"No." My mouth was dry. I needed a drink. Ordinarily I was on the wagon but after last night and this morning I needed a drink badly.

I wanted to get out of the bedroom. I wanted out of there as I had never wanted anything in my life. Lieutenant Oliver was being sadistic, brutally so, keeping me in there.

"You loved your wife?" Oliver asked.

"We were married," I countered.

"Oh!" He put the cigar away. "Simpson!"

"Yes, sir," the bulky detective said.

"Take Mr. Cummings down to Headquarters."

"Look," I said. "Why are you taking me down?"

For one infinitesimal second the expression changed in Lieutenant Oliver's eyes and what I saw there chilled my blood. I knew then the singleness of purpose, the raw honesty of this detective.

"To be booked," he said. "The charge—suspicion of murder."

CHAPTER II



THE cell was large. It held four bunks tiered, two on each side. The front opening gave into the corridor. There was the stench of disinfectant and soapy water coming from where a trusty mopped with more vigor than skill. He sang mournfully in a soft voice, the words going around and around until I thought they would drive me mad.

I lay on the bottom bunk, trying to remember all the details of the night before—but nothing made sense. I recalled only coming in, staggering against the hall table and almost collapsing into my bed because I was so drunk.

"Shut up!" I roared at the trusty, but he gave no heed. The *swish-swish* of his mop paced the meter of his tune.

The routine had been humiliating. Name, address, occupation, age—all had been written onto a stiff sheet of paper by a bored sergeant at the desk. A couple of reporters came up to the desk but were brushed off by Simpson. Then came fingerprinting and the taking of my pictures.

Everybody seemed more or less bored by the entire routine. Yet I had the feeling that everything I did was noted and filed away in trained memories.

Then at last came the cell, bare and uncomfortable, sterile in its indifference.

I waited. The minutes passed leadenly, one marching slowly behind the other. My thoughts were a maelstrom, going nowhere, angling one with another.

A door clanged heavily. Feet drew echoes from the floor, and then a uniformed cop was twisting a key in the door lock.

I looked up, gladness swelling in me as never before, at sight of Tom Carter's smiling face.

"Thank God you're here!" I said. "Get me out of this place, Tom."

"Thirty minutes," the cop said and relocked the door.

Tom shook hands, his smile fading. But now I could feel some of the confidence which was his so naturally and it was a good sensation.

"Got here as quickly as I could, Bob," Carter said.

"I'm glad you came at all," I said. "Now, look, get me out of here before I go crazy."

"Sit down," Tom said and seated himself across from me on the other bunk. "This is pretty serious. I haven't had a chance to talk to Lieutenant Oliver but from what I gathered upstairs, you're in pretty deep."

"I didn't kill Miriam," I said. "You've got to believe that, Tom!"

He spread broad hands. "I do," he said but a shadow of doubt lay across his eyes. "Suppose you tell me everything you know."

"I don't know a damned thing," I said, and lit a cigarette.

Tom said nothing, lighting a cigarette for himself. After a moment I was sorry I had lost my temper.

"You know how Miriam was, Tom," I said. "I don't have to explain how nasty and nagging and cheating she was. Well, things have been going from bad to worse with us until at last she told me she was filing for divorce."

Tom Carter blew a streamer of smoke, thought wrinkling his tanned forehead. "Did you tell the police that?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I didn't tell them

anything more than I had to," I admitted.

"All right, go on."

"Well," I had to force myself to tell this. "Miriam was cheating; she had a boy friend somewhere and I think she was giving him money along with seeing him a lot. That was one of the main things we fought over."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know. Oh, she was cagey, plenty cagey. She met him outside, never giving me an inkling as to who he was."

"And you don't suspect anybody?"

"Maybe Bishop," I said. "Lord knows he's hung around us enough. I tried to brush him off but Miriam liked him. We had enough to fight about without including him, so I let the matter drop."

Tom threw his cigarette butt on the floor. He scowled blankly at me, estimating and evaluating the situation. I watched anxiously, for I knew he was my only hope at the minute.

WE BOTH knew Bishop—a society tramp, who cashed in on his family name to get around. He was tall and blond and his tennis game was good enough to rank him high in the nation. But he never worked. He lived off his friends, somehow managing to remain a member of the better clubs, and to be seen at the better parties. I had never liked him.

"The police figure Miriam was shot about eight o'clock last night," Tom said at last. "Where were you at that time?"

I cast back in my mind. "At the Claremont," I said slowly.

"By yourself?"

I flushed. "With Betty. I met her just as I went in to dinner. We ate and then went down to the range. We were there until midnight. Any number of people can swear to that."

Tom Carter shook his sleek dark head. "That's bad."

"Bad!" I looked at him in surprise.

Tom nodded. "Look, Bob," he said. "I know you haven't been getting along

with Miriam. It's common knowledge. But this dragging Betty into it isn't good. She's in love with you, you know."

"You're crazy," I said.

But I knew then that he spoke the truth. I had known Betty for years. We'd grown up together. I think she was the first girl I ever kissed. I suppose, the way things go, I'd have married her eventually if Miriam had not appeared, blond and dimpled and having a way with her that turned my head like a weathercock.

"The police will make her the motivation," Tom said thinly. "They'll say you murdered Miriam so that you could marry Betty."

"They can't do that!" I was standing, perspiration sliding down my collar. "By God, they can't do that to Betty!"

"And you're in love with her," Tom Carter said gently.

I sank back to the bunk. I knew then that Tom had struck the blind spot in my mind. I knew that his words had said only what I had never dared let myself admit.

I'd been in love with Miriam when we had married five years before. I'd been head-over-heels in love with her, swept away by her attentions, completely infatuated with her smile. I hadn't realized then that she hadn't loved me, that she had married me only because she thought that money went with my name.

I had told Betty, not realizing she was in love with me. In my masculine conceit, I had thought of her as just a good friend. She had congratulated me then, smiling out of dark eyes, and I had been content.

But now, thinking back, I realized how stupid I had been. Knowing how I could hurt her now, panic swelled in my mind. "All right," I said, "don't mention her."

Tom shrugged. "The police will ask a lot of questions," he said. "Maybe we can cover up and maybe we can't." His tone hardened. "You're sure you never left the club at any time last evening?"

A gate crowded open in my memory.

"Only when—" I shivered suddenly as though a cold breeze had walked up my spine "—only when I was ill and went into the men's locker room to lie down for a while."

"Alone?"

"Well, no. Bruce, the porter, was there."

Tom Carter frowned. "What time was that?"

"About eight or eight-thirty. I don't remember exactly."

The big cell was suddenly small and stifling. The trusty's voice came soft and insistent, ". . . *over these prison walls I would fly.*"

* * * * *

LIEUTENANT OLIVER bulked solidly behind his desk. If there were disapproval in him over my temporary release under bail, he gave no indication. His gray hair was neatly brushed and his hands were as solid on the desk blotter as twin paperweights. His gaze went from Tom Carter to myself and then seemed to wander off into space.

"You're under bail as a material witness, Mr. Cummings," he said. "I think your attorney will describe to you just what the provisions of bail mean." His hand probed papers on the desk. "I have your statement here, which naturally will be checked."

"I can go then?" I asked.

"You can go," Lieutenant Oliver said gently. "There will be an inquest at ten tomorrow. I hardly think it necessary to serve you, to make certain you will appear."

"We'll be there," Tom said and I was grateful to him. Not many men would give up a vacation to return to work, particularly to something as dirty as this.

"Good!" Oliver's gaze swung back out of space and focused on us. "You may go now."

We left, taking the elevator to the ground floor. Cops looked up in professional disinterest as we went down the corridor to the outer doors. The sunlight was bright and hard after the semi-gloom of the building.

"We've got to talk this thing out," Tom said to me on the steps. "You're in one hell of a jam. We've got to clear up as many things as possible."

I shook my head. "Later—tonight," I answered. "I've got to see Betty and warn her to say nothing that will incriminate her."

"Listen, Bob," Tom Carter said harshly, "don't make things any worse than they are. Oliver's probably got tails on us now, this minute. You'll just drag her into this mess." He tugged at my arm, drawing me toward his Buick coupe down the street. "If you must talk to her, call her, use a telephone."

I looked up and saw that Lieutenant Oliver watched from the window of his office. I went cold, feeling his icy inscrutable gaze. He was still watching as I slid into the seat after Tom.

Tom shifted gears and slipped the coupe into traffic. The motor was powerful and we went ahead rapidly. Tom's face was dark and brooding over the wheel.

"We've got to get the porter's story," he said. "He'll vouch for the fact that you were in the locker room and didn't leave."

"All right," I said. I shivered, watching a blonde walk along the street. Her hips moved a shade too much and she carried her head as though listening for unheard sounds. Miriam had walked like that, conscious of every man she passed, supremely aware of herself.

Then a thought struck me, a vagrant memory. "How about Bishop?" I asked. "If he was playing around with Miriam he might know something."

Tom nodded, stopping the car for a traffic light. The corner patrolman glanced at us, then swung about, lifting his whistle. Traffic began to move again. Tom spun the Buick around the corner, idling along in the center lane.

I glanced at my wristwatch. "I'll take care of Bruce," I said. "Let me out at the club. You round up Bishop. Maybe you can trick him into talking. With me he'd naturally be plenty cautious."

"All right." Tom turned the car

down Seventieth Street. "But stay away from Betty. I'll ring her later, and maybe we can meet someplace." He drew the coupé to a halt at the curb before the Claremont Club. "Use your head now. Don't go off half-cocked. They may know about this here or they may not. Anyway it's your neck, so take it easy!"

"Yeah!" I said. Impatience was tugging at me. I slid from the seat and watched the car swing back into traffic.

Tom waved and then the coupé was gone. A few pedestrians stared in-curiously and further down the street, two newsboys matched pennies with solemn concentration.

CHAPTER III



I WENT into the Claremont, letting the door swing shut behind me, savoring the cool dimness of the foyer. A bad painting stared at me with lacklustre eyes from one wall and silver trophy cups were

dusty in a wall case at my left.

I went through the foyer, feeling my nerves tighten. It was as though the entire world knew what had happened and I knew meeting and talking to my friends would be hard. Luckily the lobby was almost empty. One member was at the shootboard, checking on cup entries and Ethel was at the small switchboard.

"Hello, Mr. Cummings," Ethel said. "Gee, I was sorry to hear—"

I cut her short. "Thanks, Ethel," I said. "Is Bruce, the porter, in?"

She shook her hennaed hair. "No, sir. Like I said, he hasn't been in all day." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "The police were here, checking up—"

"Yes, I know," I said impatiently. "Do you have Bruce's address?"

"Uh huh! He has the basement room at the Tremont Hotel. He's kind of an extra janitor and—"

"Thanks, Ethel," I said, and turned away.

I went back to the street, stopping in the afternoon sunlight to smoke a cigarette. I knew I had to talk to Bruce, but somehow seeing Betty was more important. She would be in one beautiful scandal if the police tried to tie her in with me.

I caught a taxi. I gave Betty's address and the driver nodded and shifted gears. I chain-lit a cigarette and leaned back, trying to puzzle out details.

I was no fool. I knew I was in this plenty deep. Lieutenant Oliver had me pegged for Miriam's murder. Right now he was pulling every string he could, uncovering all the details of my life, ready to pin a murder rap on me. Goose pimples dotted my skin at the thought. I tried to remain calm. But deep in my mind was the thought that he might be able to do that very thing.

I shivered. Heaven knew I could have shot Miriam to death. I could recall times when only sheer will power kept me from grinding her soft throat between my hands until her heart stilled its beating. Shooting would have been so very easy.

"You're a cheap punk," she'd said at one time. "I married you for your name and I'm going to walk up you like a ladder! I've already met a dozen who could buy and sell you with their cigarette money. Get white, get sore. On you it looks good."

That was only one occasion. There had been other times and other scenes. There were the charge accounts and the extra expenses. There were the trips and the expensive clothes. Not that I begrudged them. It was just that I didn't have any extra money, for every dollar was tied up in the business. I had tried to explain that to Miriam at first, thinking it was to her interest to know how things were. She had only laughed, knowing I would do nothing to humiliate her.

Yes, I could have killed her. The gun was mine, as was the deep desire. And I had the opportunity or so it seemed. I had been drunk the night before. I could have sneaked from the club's locker room, gone straight home and

shot her to death, then returned to the club for an alibi.

Yes, I could have done it. And because there was a blank space in my memory I could not completely convince myself that such had not been the case.

"Four-eighteen, Mac," the driver said.

I paid the fare and stood on the sidewalk for a long moment, wondering if Lieutenant Oliver had discovered this address. Remembering Tom's warning, I searched the street, trying to find lurking detectives or some car which might have followed my taxi. I saw nothing suspicious.

The door lock clicked as I waited after pressing Betty's buzzer. I went through and down the short hall to the lobby. A self-service elevator whisked me noiselessly to the fourth floor. There I knocked on Betty's door.

She had been crying; I saw that for her eyes were still pink. She held out her hands. I caught them tightly, wanting to draw her into the circle of my arms, yet knowing such was impossible.

"Hello, Bob," Betty said. "Come in."

I went past her, tossing my hat onto a magazine stand and dropping onto the couch. Paper rustled under the cushion. Drawing it out, I saw my picture on the front page, along with the headline **SOCIALITE MURDERED.**

THE paper hit the wall, unspringing from its wadded folds, cascading to the floor. I don't remember throwing it. The movement came and then the paper was on the floor.

"Bob!" Betty said but the cold rage was so naked and brutal and twisting in me that for a moment I didn't hear her voice.

"You see," I said and I knew my voice had raised to an almost hysterical pitch. "You see what she's doing to me. Even dead she's running me."

Betty slapped my face. Her hand struck one cheek and then the other. I gasped, shock driving rage from my mind. Then Betty was pouring a drink for me and I was holding the glass in shaking hands. The liquor calmed me. I realized then that I had needed that

drink since early morning.

"Better?" Betty asked and I nodded.

"Thanks. I needed that." I put the glass aside. "I came to warn you. The police will try to tie you in with me, make it look as though Miriam might have been—killed so that . . ." I floundered for words.

"So that we could be married," Betty supplied.

I flushed. "The police have dirty minds. They might twist our relationship into anything."

"Oh." She nodded and sat beside me on the arm of the couch. Her hand touched my shoulder and was immediately withdrawn.

I knew then that Tom had been right. She was in love with me and I with her. There was a friendliness, a comradeship here such as I had found nowhere else. Betty wasn't pretty. Her chin was too determined, her mouth a bit too generous. But there were character and a gentleness that came warmly through every time she smiled. I wondered then how Miriam had ever seemed the most desirable person in the world.

"What happened?" she asked gently. "I read the paper but the story didn't give details."

I lit a cigarette. My mouth was raw from smoking, yet cigarettes seemed to calm me. Betty watched, seeing the slight tremble in my fingers, then poured another drink for me.

"It was horrible," I said.

I told her of finding Miriam in the bed, of how the bullet had torn a hole in the gold hair at her temple and then gone almost through her head, lodging just below the skin of her right brow. I told of touching her and feeling her stiff coldness. I told it all in a rush of words that I could not stop. When I was through she sat and watched me, whiteness about her mouth.

"How terrible!" she said, and there was genuine sympathy in her tone.

"The police think I did it," I said. "They let me go after Tom did some fast talking. But they'll pick me up again when they want me." I caught her hand. "Stay out of it, Betty. If they

ask you anything just say you saw me for a short while last night, and nothing else. I'll do the same."

Betty shook her head. "No!" she said flatly.

"Don't be a fool!" I snapped. "A scandal will gain you nothing; just play it as though we were more or less old friend—"

"I won't do it, Bob." I saw the first glimmer of tears in her eyes. "They'll find out I took you home about midnight. They'll find out we went together before you were married. Nothing good can come from lying."

"*You brought me home?*" I asked.

I felt small and contemptible then. Somebody had brought me home. I remembered that much. But who it was I hadn't know. Oh, I'd made a complete ass of myself.

And then memory opened another gate in my mind and I could feel the cold perspiration congealing along my back.

"*I wish that target was Miriam's head,*" I remembered saying on the range. "*I'd put a bullet through her lying teeth.*"

I remembered that and it was as though Betty read my mind. Her eyes were suddenly frightened, and her hand was tight on mine.

"I threatened to kill her," I whispered. "Everybody must have heard!"

Betty shook me, her grasp firm on my shoulders. "You were drunk, Bob, terribly drunk. Nobody can hold those words against you."

"But—" I fell silent, brooding, seeing my life crumpling like sand before the pounding of implacable surf.

It was then that Lieutenant Oliver thrust a stiff forefinger against the downstairs buzzer.

I KNEW it was Oliver as surely as if the buzzer had spoken his name aloud. Betty turned startled eyes on me, and then went to press the lock-button.

"Lieutenant Oliver," I said. "He followed me."

The seconds passed. Then knuckles

sounded on the door, and Oliver came in as Betty turned the knob.

"Miss Masters?" he said. "I'm Lieutenant Oliver from Headquarters."

He saw me then, but there was no change of expression on his features. There was neither friendliness nor antagonism in his bearing, only a patience which was incredible to me.

"Come in," Betty said and he preceded her to a chair that was across from me.

WE EXCHANGED guarded nods. We were duelists, each cautious, each waiting for the other's first move.

"Mr. Cummings, of course, has told you the story," Lieutenant Oliver said finally. "My job is to run down each detail."

"She had nothing to do with this, Oliver," I said hotly. "For God's sake, must you tie *her* in too?"

The detective shrugged. "Mr. Cummings," he said, "you don't play quite according to the rules. I asked you if you were alone last night, and you said, yes. It now appears that Miss Masters was with you at Claremont Club. It also appears she drove you home about midnight."

Betty's mouth was firm.

"And—" she prompted, when he fell silent.

Lieutenant Oliver shrugged. "We have a strange situation here, I must admit. I—" He paused, and then pursued another line of thought. "Do you have a gray squirrel coat, Miss Masters?"

"Why, yes," Betty said.

"May I see it, please?"

"You want—of course, Lieutenant."

She left the room, walking with the grace which was hers alone. Lieutenant Oliver removed a note pad and fountain pen from his pocket. He had just finished writing a short note when Betty returned.

I remembered the jacket. Betty had worn it the night before. It was light and bulky, soft and warm, sleek furs lying in lines of beauty. She handed it to the detective and he looked it over

carefully, running his fingers deep into the pile.

"I shall have to take this with me, Miss Masters," he said. "I've written a receipt."

He handed her the small sheet of paper.

Betty didn't look at the paper. Her eyes were on the detective, puzzlement in their depths.

"I don't understand!" she said.

Lieutenant Oliver stood. "I had meant to ask a few questions," he said, "but since Mr. Cummings is here there is little need of that at the moment."

"Listen, Oliver," I said, "you're being pretty high-handed about this entire affair. What has Miss Masters' coat got to do with it?"

For the first time, I thought I saw the flicker of a smile lurking behind his frosty eyes.

"Didn't I tell you?" he asked. "There were hairs caught in Mrs. Cummings' clenched fingers—hairs from a gray squirrel coat."

He turned and, although he did not appear to move with any speed he was out of the apartment before either of us could speak. Only when the door was shut did we break the thrall which held us.

"Oh my God!" Betty whispered.

"Betty!" I came to my feet, holding her tightly. "Betty, you couldn't have..."

She was crying then, tight in the circle of my arms. She was like a frightened child and I was her bulwark for one long moment.

"Betty—" I began, and her words stilled my voice.

"You took my jacket into the locker room with you," she said. "You said you'd put it in your locker."

I turned and almost ran from the apartment.

I was shaking, agony in my mind, for I had seen the terrible belief growing in her eyes.

She knew, as Lieutenant Oliver believed, that I had slain Miriam and that some how her coat had played a part in the murder.



I WALKED for at least an hour, not watching where I was going, blind to the city around me. I had a dim recollection of horns squawking warnings at me on the street, and now and then of bump-

ing some pedestrian, only to move on with a muttered apology.

Things were happening too fast for me. I had never had to cope with such a situation as this. And now that I was tied so tightly with it, I could not see it clearly and objectively as I could murder cases of which I read in the newspapers.

The terrible thing, of course, was the uncertainty about myself. Every moment it became clearer that I had killed Miriam. One clue piled onto another, both fitted into a third. And while everything was not complete yet, I knew that the implacable Lieutenant Oliver was building a case which could have but one ending.

I thought of Betty, trying to fit her and the squirrel coat into the affair. It was ridiculous even to hint that she might have shot Miriam. She was in love with me, true—but by no stretch of my imagination could I place her as standing over my wife, gun in hand, solving a problem with a brutal leaden slug.

That left me.

That was the picture and it was not a pretty thing. I had always considered myself rather stable, capable of handling anything and everything in my life. Now, I was not so sure. Everything was confused in my mind.

There was a sense of loss, too. For even if Miriam had lived in a house of hate our lives had been bound together for years. The sudden severance of the ties in such a horrible manner was not something which could be summarily dismissed.

I looked up and found myself in front of a cigar store. I put several nickels

on the small shelf and wedged myself into a booth and began dialing numbers. I didn't locate Tom Carter until the fourth call.

"This is Bob, Tom," I said finally. "Oliver followed me to Betty's place."

"Damn it, Bob," he said, "why can't you follow orders? This isn't a game you're playing. It's your neck at stake."

I scowled at the holed dial on the phone. "I know it's my neck," I said. "But even so he has no right to drag Betty into this thing!"

"Surely he doesn't suspect her?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about anything. What am I to do, Tom?"

There was an interminable silence. "Take it easy," he said finally. "Meet me at my office in a couple of hours."

"Okay," I agreed, and hung up.

I caught a taxi. "Tremont Hotel," I said to the driver and leaned back in the seat.

I had made a fool play. I knew that now. As a result, Betty was mixed up in Miriam's death. True, Lieutenant Oliver hadn't really followed me to her apartment. His coming and demanding the coat made it clear he had checked at the club and learned she was with me. But even so, I hadn't used my head in going to see her.

I lit a cigarette, then scrubbed it out impatiently. Traffic whirled by and people moved and talked and laughed on the street. It seemed incredible that so much had happened in so short a time with the world uncaring and unknowing of what was happening to me.

The taxi stopped before the Tremont Hotel and, after paying the driver, I went around the corner, seeking the basement entrance. A few people were at the door and I pushed through to be halted suddenly by the outthrust arm of a uniformed cop.

"Where you think you're going, Mac?" he asked.

"Inside," I said impatiently. "I've got to see a man."

"Who are you?" the cop asked and then turned as a bulky man came to the

door.

"Let him in, Frank," Detective Simpson said.

Shock touched me lightly. But too much had happened already for surprise to overwhelm me about anything. I went past the cop, following Simpson.

"What's happened?" I asked.

Simpson spat silently. "What are you doing here, Mr. Cummings?" he countered.

I swallowed heavily. "I came to see Bruce, the porter at the Claremont Club. He can give me an alibi for last night."

The detective stared at me. "Can he now!" he said shortly.

THERE were other people at the doorway of a large room, more cops and some who were evidently from the hotel. Simpson pushed through and I followed. Two men in white coats were lifting a body to a stretcher.

I gagged, horrified. The man was Bruce, his face and neck cherry red, his hands floppily limp.

"There's the porter," Simpson said, and shrugged. "Looks as though your alibi is shot to hell!"

"What happened?" I choked.

"Gas! The medical examiner says he was drunk too. Probably got plastered and then kicked the hose off the heater." He scowled. "These damned fools who won't use pipe!"

I could smell the faint echoes of gas lingering in the air. Simpson was watching me. Nausea touched my senses and he put his hand on my arm.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm all right," I said.

An idea struck me then, an idea so simple and perfect I couldn't understand why I had not known it before.

I said, "This is murder! The same person who killed my wife murdered Bruce. He got him drunk and then pulled the hose off the heater. I tell you that's the story!"

"Come again," Simpson said.

"It's plain I've been framed," I said excitedly. "The killer did this so that Bruce couldn't give me an alibi for last night."

The detective shook his head patronizingly. "Who?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "That's your job, to find out who the killer is."

"Oh!" Simpson scratched his nose. His eyes on me were cold and without expression.

I shook his arm. "Can't you understand?" I cried.

Simpson nodded. "I understand," he said. "Now, suppose you trot along to Headquarters and tell your idea to Lieutenant Oliver. He'll do something about it. Jim!" His voice raised. "Jim, see Mr. Cummings to the street."

A patrolman took me by the arm and led me outside. I stood in the street, late sunshine brushing my face and fully understood then how stupid I had been. Simpson knew who had murdered Miriam; he knew it as well as Oliver did. And the fact that I had tried to drag an accident, a coincidence, into part of my wife's murder was just another count against me.

I laughed suddenly, without humor, conscious that passersby watched and circled me warily as they passed.

I turned away and went down the walk, seeing the utter futility of everything. I was near the bank where I had my account and automatically I went that way. I was no fool. I saw the road which lay ahead. There was but one thing to do.

Three minutes later the bank official looked at me out of curious eyes and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cummings," he said. "But until the court order is lifted you can make no withdrawals."

I mumbled my thanks. This was Oliver's doing. I was free. I could come and go. And yet I was bound more tightly to the town than if I had been locked in a cell. In all probability a detective was following me, recording every movement I made. Lieutenant Oliver would know within minutes that I had tried to draw enough money to make my escape.

Fear puckered my heart. This was a subtle sadism against which a man could not fight. There was something dia-

bolical in Oliver's machinations. He had freed me, permitting me to roam the town, yet he was closing all avenues of escape, drawing his net tighter with every passing hour.

I felt harried and hounded and for one wild moment, considered giving myself up and confessing if only to end the uncertainty. Then I felt a surge of anger. All right, so I had killed Miriam—she deserved it! Let them pin the killing on me. I wouldn't help them, one way or another. After all, I had the right to live, law or no law. With Tom Carter defending me, it would take a damned good prosecutor to convict me of anything.

A car stopped beside me for a red light and Detective Simpson waved from the front seat.

"I'll tell Oliver what you said," he called. Then he was gone and I was standing on the corner, hating him. . . .

EVENTUALLY, I went to see Leighton Bishop. Why, I do not know, other than that I suspected him of being Miriam's boy friend. He could have killed her. I'd seen him a couple of times in a vicious mood and I knew he was capable of murder. And despite my conviction that I had shot my wife, a nagging thought lay in my mind that I could be wrong.

Miriam was a fool. She hadn't known when to stop pressing a man. She could have played Bishop for a sucker only to have him turn on her in reality as I had long wanted to do abstractly. He could have come to our home the night before, while I was gone, and there murdered her. It could have been that simple.

When I passed out in the locker room he could have sneaked out, killed her and then returned, not necessarily to pin the murder on me but just because I wouldn't have too good an alibi. I had been snoring my head off on a cot in one of the private cubicles where members rest after shooting and showering.

I stood outside of his apartment house and wondered for the thousandth time where he got his money. The building was sleek and smooth with a uniformed

doorman in front. He looked down his nose at me as I approached, but held the door open subserviently.

Inside I rang Bishop's apartment, only to find that he was out and would not return for some time. I cooled my heels in the small waiting room just off the lobby. I was past thinking, so I just tried to relax while I waited. Almost an hour passed before Bishop came in.

"Come on upstairs," he said, none too graciously.

We didn't talk in the elevator. In his apartment Bishop tossed his coat and hat on a couch and immediately mixed drinks. I shook my head. Leighton Bishop was nervous so I tried to run a bluff, not really expecting to gain a thing by it.

"Miriam told me she was giving you money," I said bluntly. "I wanted to hear your story before going to the police."

Ice tinkled in his glass. "She gave me some," he admitted. "But I paid it all back days ago."

A muscle quivered in his cheek. Suddenly I sensed his fear. "You're a louse, Bishop," I said. "You accepted my friendship and at the same time made a play for Miriam."

He licked his lips. His yellow hair was too smooth, his nails too shiny. He looked as if he had just come from a beauty parlor.

"I swear to you, Bob—" he began.

I crowded him. "Miriam's dead," I said, "and the police are trying to pin her murder on me. Maybe they'd think differently if they knew a few facts about you, particularly about your playing around with Miriam."

He was sweating, perspiration beading his face to match the sweatbeaded glass in his hand. His eyes were frightened and some of his sleekness had disappeared.

"I had nothing to do with it, Bob," he said. "The police know that. I've just come from there. They had me on the carpet for a couple of hours."

"And you told them about last night?"

"What else could I do? Good Lord,

I wasn't the only one who heard you threaten your wife's life. Other members of the club heard the same thing!" He was suddenly ugly. "They know you did it and I know you did it, so don't try to pass the blame to me." His voice rose hysterically. "I don't know why you're out now. They asked enough questions about you."

I came closer. Bishop backed away, his drink forgotten, sidling along the couch.

"Miriam had other friends," he said. "How about Tom Carter? She saw him often enough. They were together yesterday afternoon. I saw them at the Paradise Bar out on the Highway."

I turned away, not because of his words but because I was sick of his cringing. I went to the door and passed through and took the elevator down to the street level.

CHAPTER V



BISHOP'S words haunted me but they made no sense. Of course Tom had seen Miriam. They were the best of friends, not as Bishop had tried to insinuate, just friends.

They had gone together before she married me but Tom's and my friendship had continued with neither of us letting my marriage throw us apart. I had even urged Tom to substitute for me when I was unable to take Miriam places.

I almost laughed. It was only too obvious, wild as my theories might have been, that Bishop hadn't the nerve to have murdered Miriam. But that Tom Carter could have done it was absolutely beyond belief, if for no other reason than that he was fifty miles away when she was killed.

I stepped from the apartment house and a man walked slowly to my side. I tensed, knowing this was the detective Lieutenant Oliver had had following me ever since my release.

"Mr. Cummings," the detective said,

"I have a message for you."

"What?" I asked. I wanted nothing more than an excuse to knock him down.

"Lieutenant Oliver said to tell you the post mortem disclosed that your wife was unconscious from a knockout drug when she was shot. Furthermore, he said to tell you that Bruce Peyton was also drugged before he died from asphyxiation."

"But—" I began.

Tipping his hat, the detective went rapidly down the street, ignoring my calls for him to halt. A moment later he stepped into a small sedan, sending it into the growing evening traffic.

I didn't get it. Why should Lieutenant Oliver have such a report made to me? What kind of a game was he playing now?

I whistled for a taxi. There was only one thing to do—talk to Tom and let him handle things from here on. I hadn't got anywhere. I'd just bumped along, gaining nothing.

Traffic was heavy. Fully ten minutes passed before I arrived at the office building where Tom had a suite of three rooms. People were scurrying past, hastening homeward from work.

I went to the fourth floor, entered without knocking and passed the empty switchboard on my way into Tom's private office. Tom was sitting at his desk, feet canted on the polished surface. His eyes swung to the door, as I came in.

"Where have you been?" he snapped. "I've been waiting for you."

"I've just come from Bishop's place," I said. "He spilled his insides to the police. I don't know everything he said, but he did tell about my threat to kill Miriam."

Tom shook his head. "That's bad," he admitted. "What about the porter?" "He's dead."

"Dead! Bob, you did—"

"It was an accident," I interrupted savagely, reading the thought in his unfinished sentence. "He got drunk and pulled the hose from a gas heater. The police were there when I arrived."

"Oh!" He played with a letter opener

while I sank into the heavy chair opposite the desk. "Bob, this is hard to say, but it seems the most logical thing."

"What?"

He flushed. "I talked to the D. A.," he said, "and he's pushing for a fast trial. I talked with the police and they've got a case which can't be beaten. As your friend and your lawyer I'm advising you to admit shooting Miriam. I suggest you make a deal with the D. A. and take a second or third degree sentence. At least that will save your life."

"You're crazy!" I roared. "They'd put me away for years!"

Tom Carter nodded. "I know," he said, "but there isn't much that either of us can do. I tell you frankly that you haven't a ghost of a chance at winning if the case goes to court." His hands went flat on the table. "I don't like it any more than you but I'm giving you the best advice I possibly can."

"No!" I shouted, hammering on the desk. "I'm not going to do it. I don't know if I killed her. Maybe I never will. But I am not going to talk my way into a cell for the rest of my life!" I lowered my voice, aware that I had been shouting. "It looks to me as if you were working for the police, wanting me to do that."

"Calm down, Bob," Tom said. "Make your own suggestion, if you have one."

I WAS silent then. I had no suggestions, no ideas. I was completely drained of everything but a growing fear like that which I had felt when I touched Miriam's cold body.

"Bob," Tom Carter said gently, "I was both your friend and Miriam's. You know that. If I had seen either of you yesterday before I left for the lake I might have sensed this thing you did was coming. I might have prevented it. But since I didn't the best I can do is try and save you as much trouble as possible."

I went around the desk and stood at the window. Maybe there was merit to Tom's words but at the moment I could not see it. The prospect of a lifetime

buried behind stone walls was sickening.

I heard a match strike and cigarette smoke drifted toward me. But still I stood, thinking, getting nowhere. And then a thought intruded, nagging, insistent. I watched Tom's reflection in the window glass.

"When did you see Miriam last?" I asked.

"Oh, two or three days ago. Why?" Smoke plumed from his cigarette.

I whipped about. "You're lying, Tom. You're lying! Why? What have you got to hide? *Did you kill Miriam?*"

I thought he would attack me for a moment. He flushed, and then all color drained from his face. The cigarette broke, sparks scattering to the floor, and his heavy hands clenched on the chair arms.

He was big and handsome then and it suddenly came to me that I had never realized the fact. I had just taken him for granted. Yet he was just the type of man for whom Miriam would make a play.

"I won't take it, Bob, friendship or no friendship!" Tom said. "I don't have . . ."

"Bishop saw you, Tom," I said. "He saw you and Miriam at the Paradise yesterday afternoon." A second thought came. "Of course, you saw her. In jail you mentioned my inheritance, yet the telegram came at noon, and I spoke of it to no one."

He was very calm, controlling himself by superb will power. He bent and retrieved the broken cigarette, placing it meticulously in a desk tray.

"I saw no point in telling you, Bob," he said slowly. "I was trying to help you and you would just have been hurt if you had known she talked to me. She wanted me to go to court and force you to turn the inheritance over to her, using any legal trickery I could. I turned her proposition down."

I said nothing. There wasn't anything to say. His answer was logical and my accusation had been made through fear and Bishop's vindictive words.

"I saw her about two o'clock, Bob,"

Tom Carter explained further. "We had a couple of drinks and then I drove up to the lake. That's all there was to it. I'm sorry you lost your head for a moment."

"Yeah!" I said, but I was thinking.

What could have prevented him from driving down early the night before, killing Miriam and then driving back? Ostensibly he would be at the lake. Actually he could have been committing a murder.

"You need a drink," Tom said and came from his chair.

He passed me, going to the small portable bar in the corner, lifting the lid and finding bottles and glasses. I stared blindly at the traffic in the street, coming back to the present only when he thrust a glass into my hand. The liquor was good and I drank, feeling its faint warmth. The whiskey seemed to clear my thinking a bit.

"Look, Bob," Tom said then, "if you need any further convincing that I had nothing to do with Miriam's death, call Bear Lake. Half a dozen people are still at my cottage."

"All right," I said and reached for the phone. I put a call through, avoiding Tom's gaze, yet watching him surreptitiously.

TOM CARTER watched, sipping at this drink now and then, his gaze speculative as it centered on me. I felt a sense of shame but my life was at stake and I was passing up no leads at all.

"Hello!" I said, when the connection was made. "Who's speaking? . . . Oh, Judge Cranford! Well, this is Bob Cummings, Judge, and I wanted a bit of information. . . . Sure. . . . Well, could you tell me if Tom Carter was at the lodge all of yesterday evening, say from five o'clock to ten? . . . He was? . . . You're sure? . . . Oh, cleaning guns and getting ready for today's hunting . . . All evening together, the entire group? . . . No, no thanks, just checking something. Thanks."

I hung up. "Sorry!" I said to Tom, and finished my drink.

"Forget it," Tom said. "I don't blame you for going off half-cocked. I would too in your place. Now let's get back to what we were discussing."

"Anything you say, Tom," I said and wandered to the window again.

I was through fighting. There was no point in bucking the inevitable. Let Tom handle everything from here on in. Miriam was dead and I was labeled her murderer. The police knew it, Tom knew it and there was little room for doubt in my mind.

I could see into the office across the street. Some girl was still at her desk, bent over a pocket mirror, wielding a lipstick. My memory tricked me, and suddenly I was remembering Miriam's waxen face, mascara still black about her eyes, her lips scarlet slashes.

"Something?" Tom asked.

"I was just thinking about Miriam," I said. "She looked sort of pitiful, her gown twisted and lipstick smeared a bit."

It hit me then. I had one answer. Lipstick, mascara and Miriam in bed! No woman went to bed with makeup on, least of all Miriam. She was utterly vain. Creaming and sponging her face were nightly rituals.

Tom was mixing more drinks and I accepted mine automatically.

"What is it?" Tom said.

"Makeup," I said. "Miriam was in bed but she still had makeup on. The killer put her in bed after she was dead."

"Why would he do something like that?" Tom's tone was patronizingly skeptical.

"I don't know," I admitted. I went about the desk and sank into the heavy chair again. "Tom, this is screwy. I just remembered how Miriam was lying. She was shot from the side and behind, yet the killer couldn't get behind the bed for it was against the wall. She was killed somewhere else."

"You're crazy," Tom said softly.

"She was drugged before being killed. Oliver told me that," I went on. "And so was Bruce, the porter. Oh, he was murdered, too. That's only too plain to see. He was killed so that he couldn't

give me an alibi. Somebody was making damned certain I got the chair for Miriam's death."

"You're getting drunk," Tom said.

I shook my head. The liquor had hit me hard but I wasn't drunk yet.

"I'm not drunk," I said. "I'm just getting things straight. Somebody drugged Bruce and then murdered him by leaving him in a room filled with illuminating gas."

My memory was playing tricks again, spinning and whirling. But at last I managed to still it, finishing the last of the drink and setting the glass on the desk. The whisky had blurred my eyesight and I had trouble setting down the glass without dropping it. My voice seemed to come from a deep well.

"When I asked for Bruce at the club," I said, "Ethel answered me in a funny way. She spoke as though I had asked about Bruce before. Somebody must have called and asked about him, maybe even pretending to be me." I laughed a bit, feeling the whisky numbness in my lips. "The police can check that, at least."

Tom Carter shook his head. It swayed before my eyes like a swelling balloon. I hadn't realized I was so drunk; this was almost as bad as the night before. *Squirrels*, I kept thinking, *little gray squirrels—dead!*

"You're just talking, Bob," he said. "You're making wild guesses. You haven't brought out a thing which would hold up in court."

"There's Miriam," I said. "I don't know much about death but she was curled up on the bed as though cramps had struck her. The police should be able to make something out of that."

"Rigor mortis does strange things," Tom said and his voice was a floating string of words hovering in the air.

"And there's the squirrel hair caught in her fingers," I said.

"*Squirrel hair!*" Tom Carter was a midget barely three inches tall or else I was looking through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars.

"Sure, squirrel hairs." I could feel my laughter but not hear it. "Oliver

thought—thought they were from Betty's coat. But he was wrong."

CHAPTER VI



SUDDENLY Tom was at my side and I realized I was half asleep in the chair. My head was resting on the leather, my hands in my lap. I yawned, blinking to keep awake. I felt calm and relaxed and it amused me that I could see the entire pattern now after a couple of drinks.

"He was wrong?" Tom said insistently.

"Of course," I said, head dropping for a moment. "They were from your Buick, Tom, from the luggage compartment. You had Miriam in there, didn't you, Tom?"

The room spun gently. The air was warm, and I was sleepy. It amused me to see the shock in Tom's balloon face. It amused me and I began to laugh.

Tom Carter slapped me. He swung his pillow hand and the tap was like being stroked with a feather.

"Who've you told this to, Bob?" his voice was a booming bell hidden deep in a cavernous temple. "Who've you told this to?"

"Nobody," I said. "I just figured it out. How and why did you do it, Tom?"

You're a killer, Tom, I kept thinking. I figured out your little scheme. You're in my power, my power!

I saw death in Tom Carter's eyes.

I saw it and then I knew what was happening. Miriam, then Bruce, and now me. I tried to rise, but my hands wouldn't move and my feet were still on the rug. Only my eyes moved and they were held on Tom's face.

"You're right, Bob," Tom said, "I killed Miriam and Bruce. Miriam gave me a brush-off yesterday. She told me to go to blazes after she found out about the money you've inherited. I killed her then—not literally, you understand. That didn't come until later. I doped

her drink and then helped her to the car. Outside of town, I forced more drops down her throat and shoved her into the luggage compartment of the car. Then I went on up to Bear Lake.

"I didn't leave the lodge all evening. But I killed Miriam at eight o'clock. I just stepped outside to try my twenty-two rifle. Once outside, I went to the car, opened the compartment and shot her through the head. It was that simple."

He stopped for breath and I managed a single word.

"Why?"

"Because if I couldn't have her, nobody else could. She wasn't yours. She never was. She gave your money to me." He laughed softly, without humor. "Yesterday she wanted that money back."

I was whirling in a vacuum of nothingness. Whatever Tom had used in my drinks was powerful. It had hit me incredibly fast.

"Bruce?" I asked.

"I knew he wasn't at the club. I went to him, after dropping you. I doped his drink, then pulled the heater hose." His head swayed alarmingly. "I had nothing against you, Bob, you understand that. It was just a case of self-preservation. Anyway, I figured I could get you off. But you had already built a circumstantial case about yourself. I just made it a bit better."

There was a gun in his hand, a sleek .22 Colt Woodsman.

"This won't hurt, Bob," he said, "and it's a lot faster than the chair. I'm sorry, Bob."

I saw the gun coming up. I made one final effort to tear myself out of the drug's power and failed. I saw the gun come higher, felt the cold metal brush my forehead.

"No, Tom!" My scream was a whisper.

"I'll clean the back of the Buick. I never thought about the squirrels I carried there on my last trip."

He hesitated. Even after two murders it must have taken panic or cold nerve to do what he planned to do.

"I was at the lodge, Bob," he said, "until one in the morning. Everybody was asleep. I drove into town, found you dead drunk in bed. I undressed and put a gown on Miriam. Rigor mortis had frozen her the way she was found the next day. I put the gun, your gun—Miriam was carrying it in her purse—on the floor and then left. I was back at the lodge by four o'clock and my alibi was perfect. When Miriam was killed I was with half a dozen respectable people, fifty miles from the supposed scene of the crime."

He cocked the gun, the noise sounding faint and far away. The muzzle touched my temple. Then flame crashed into my brain, flame and the racketing roar of shots. I went sideways, blasted by the slug, and knew no more. . . .

THE hospital was very quiet. I lay in the narrow bed and counted the cracks in the white plaster on the ceiling. My head throbbed but the nurse had jabbed a needle in my arm and smiled professionally. After she was gone, I felt better.

"So that's the way it was, Mr. Cummings," Lieutenant Oliver said from where he stood at the window. "I'm sorry I let the thing go as long as I did."

He was all in blue—suit, tie, shirt and Sox. Even his gray eyes had a tinge of blue in them. Today, they were not as icy as they had seemed to be before. Despite everything I felt a glow of friendliness.

"Mind going over it once more," I asked. "I missed some of it."

"Well, like I said," Lieutenant Oliver explained, "we knew your wife hadn't been killed in the bedroom. There was no blood on the pillow, not even dried. Her body was drawn up unnaturally. And while it was not conclusive she still had makeup on."

"We figured you had killed her some place else, then set a scene. That was why we let you go, figuring on following you until you made a slip of some kind. When we found the squirrel hairs in her hand we thought some woman might have helped you. That was why

I obtained Miss Masters' coat. However, our laboratory discovered the few hairs were comparatively fresh and untreated, unlike those of a fur coat.

"Yet even with the odd situation, you were tagged for the killing. Then the post mortem showed your wife had been drugged. Later the porter was killed and you made a rather sensational charge. A fast pm showed the same drug had been used on him. We got a different idea then."

"In checking your friends we found that your wife had had one particular buddy, Carter. By adding the squirrel hairs, coincidental alibi and a few other facts, we made out a case against him. The only thing which stumped us was his alibi."

"Narrowing the murders down to you and Carter, I had a detective give you specific information, thinking it would throw one or the other of you into a panic. I followed you to Carter's office and listened at the waiting-room door. I still figured you for the murderer and intended to step in and make an arrest, the moment you confessed."

"However, you brought up a chain of reasoning plus a few facts I didn't know. You went too far and Carter made a killer play. He intended to shoot you and then claim you had confessed and shot yourself, rather than take a chance on getting the chair."

"I had to wait until the last second to hear the final breakdown of his alibi. Even with what I had heard I couldn't figure out how he could be in two places at once. I waited and then shot. His bullet grazed your head. I didn't kill him. He'll live to get the chair. You'll be out of here in a day or two. That's about it."

I sighed. "That's enough," I said. "Then you didn't suspect me too much?"

Lieutenant Oliver shook his head. "Not too much," he agreed. "Particularly when we checked your movements and got the time elements. But we couldn't take chances. We let you go free, trying to panic you into a mistake. Our plans worked but in a different way

than we thought." He hesitated. "I'm sorry we had to do it that way. But our job is to catch crooks, not coddle suspects."

"Forget it," I said.

We shook hands and then he was gone, square shoulders erect, his eyes smiling at me as he turned a moment before going out the door. I relaxed, closing my eyes.

The nurse came in, fussing at the covers over my chest. I didn't look at her.

I was wondering where Betty was now, wondering what the future held in store for us—if there ever would be

a future for *us* now that this agony was over.

The nurse kissed me.

I blinked, astonished. I opened my eyes. I saw her then, standing over me, unshed tears in her eyes. She wasn't pretty but I knew I could never tire of her features. Somehow underneath, there was beauty there.

"Betty!" I said.

Then she was in my arms and I was holding her tight. I was whispering her name over and over again. Somehow the future looked very bright and promising and my eagerness for it to arrive was something which would never die.