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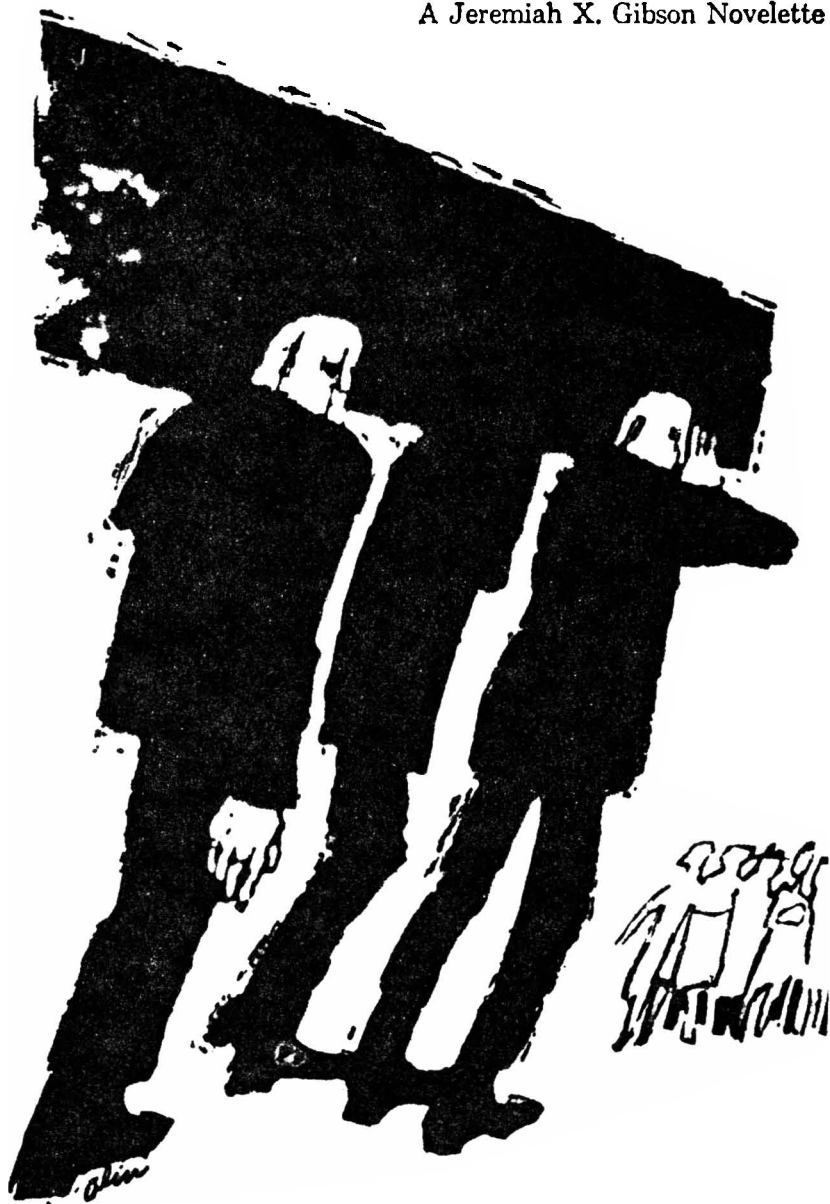
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A Jeremiah X. Gibson Novelette



# The Mourners at the Bedside

Franklin Frail would  
do anything for his wife—  
even murder her....

HAMPTON  
STONE



DO YOU KNOW ABOUT DA'S? THEY'RE important. They do important people important favors. Assistant DA's aren't important. They just do the work, and that explains why it would be Assistant District Attorney Jeremiah X. Gibson and Assistant District Attorney Just Plain Old Me who, when the DA wanted to do the Bardons a favor, had to go see the people.

We saw the small, shriveled remnant of the old man who was William Bardon, glimpsing him dimly through his oxygen tent. We saw the battalions of nurses who rustled softly about him. We saw George Bardon, M.D., who would certainly have been there even if he hadn't been family. George was an M.D. who wore his stethoscope as a Knight of the Garter wears his star. We saw Emory Kent; and he was to law what George Bardon was to medicine. We saw the family.

There was Hepburn Bardon, the old man's only surviving son. Even before any of this particular bit of nasty business had broken into the open, Uncle Hep had been one of the notorious Bardons, at least as notorious as his colorful young nephew, Everett Bardon. You may remember Everett. He's the one who was picked up for shoplifting and who through his trial and conviction was headlined as the Larceny for Larks Lad.

That was a trial. Everett had hooked, just to prove he could, a female bathing suit price-tagged at \$199.98. The judge, as a point of information, asked what could make a bathing suit cost that much. As a

point of information, His Honor was told that this bathing suit had incorporated into its engineering a fanny uplift.

Even in the face of that, however, Everett's Uncle Hep stole the limelight at the trial. Day after day in court, the reporters had been equally bemused by the splendor and variety of Uncle Hep's spats and by the splendor and variety of his blondes. Each day it was a different pair of gaudy spats and each day he had on his arm a different gaudy blonde. For attendance at his father's sickbed, however, he had no blonde. Otherwise, he was gaudily intact.

It was old William Bardon the DA had sent us up to see; but we never got far with the old man. Emory Kent took us to the bedside.

"Mr. Bardon," he said. "These are the gentlemen from the DA's office."

The old man looked annoyed. Dr. George Bardon made a try.

"Uncle William," he said, pitching his voice several notches higher than the lawyer's discreet tone. "You can hear me, Uncle William. These are the DA's men you wanted."

The old man looked more annoyed. Hepburn Bardon came forward.

"Papa," he bellowed. "We got you the murder men you wanted. You remember, Papa. It was about Sara."

"You don't have to remind me," the old man panted. "Nothing wrong with my head."

"Yes, Papa. Will you talk to them, Papa?"

Papa wasn't up to it. Just those few

words he'd spoken had used up his ration of strength for that day. Dr. George took over and we were ushered out.

"Cardiac?" I asked when the door had been shut behind us.

"Yes," Kent said. "Ninety-four his last birthday. Dr. Bardon is doing everything possible but it can happen any time. There's really nothing left."

"I could see that," Gibby muttered, "but still, the old man thinks he's being murdered and he wants us to prevent it."

They set us straight on that. It wasn't for himself the old man was concerned. It was for his granddaughter, a Mrs. Sara Frail. Promising us a full explanation, Kent ushered us into an upstairs sitting room. Like all of the rest of William Bardon's house, this was an imposing sitting room. Already ensconced in it we found an imposing pair of dames, one of middle years and very grand, the other young and brassily blond. At first sight, the older woman was every inch a Bardon and the younger one every inch one of Uncle Hep's showy babes. When we came on them, they were in the process of discussing Hepburn Bardon.

We hadn't been with them more than a matter of moments before it became evident that they could never have found any other topic in common. The lady was Agatha Bardon, Hep's sister and the old man's only daughter. The babe was one Dorinda Gibbs, familiarly known as Dolly. To Uncle Hep she seemed to be most familiarly known. In any event, he

became so much engrossed with her that we had little out of him for the rest of that session. He did suggest that any explanations might better wait till we would have his nephew Everett with us, but Agatha swept that suggestion aside.

"I," she said, "can speak for Everett."

We couldn't see why anyone should speak for the young man. Gibby said as much.

"The DA sent us up here about a matter of murder," he said. "He wants us to do what we can toward reassuring Mr. Bardon. I hope you understand we are here about the old gentleman's problem and about nothing else. There's certainly nothing we could do for his grandson."

Agatha sighed. "You can't start out with a prejudice against the boy," she said. "Do you know him?"

"We know of him."

"You have to know him. He's charming. When he was arrested and all that, the people down at The Tombs and later at Sing Sing, everybody was enchanted with Everett. And what's more, Papa wouldn't let us use influence or anything like that, but Everett served only the absolute minimum and you know that can be done only on good behavior and since he's come out, he's been a complete lamb."

"He's still on parole," Gibby growled.

"Yes, indeed," said Agatha, smiling happily. "You should know his parole officer. A delightful man and devoted to Everett."

"That," Gibby said firmly, "was a matter of larceny. What's the story on the homicide?"

Emory Kent and Agatha gave us the story. Old William had made his will and he was convinced that it contained provisions that were an invitation to murder. He was most concerned that this murder should be averted. He had complete faith in the DA and his office. Once he knew we'd been alerted, he wouldn't give the matter another thought.

There had never been anything secret about the old man's will. His heirs had always been aware of its terms. The major part of the estate was to go to his children and their issue. There had been four children—Agatha and Hepburn by his first wife; and by his second wife, two sons, now deceased. The shares of these two sons would be going to their issue, in one case a son—Everett Bardon—in the other a daughter—Sara Frail.

"And Mrs. Frail may be murdered?" Gibby asked.

"The problem," Kent said, "is her husband."

## 2.

And that was the nub of it. On that they were all agreed. Franklin Frail was a bad sort, a man capable of anything as long as it was evil. The old man had been providing Sara, as he had been the others, with an allowance, and on his death these allowances would, of course, stop. Each would then be having his individual

share of the estate instead. The Bardons were accepting it as axiomatic that Sara's husband had been kept safe only by the expectation of the continuing allowance. Once the capital sum would be in the man's hands, there would be for him no further hope of gain from not murdering his wife. At that point he would murder her. It was as simple as that and as preposterous.

"The bequests," Kent said, "are unconditional and outright. I've suggested that Mrs. Frail's portion be set up as a trust fund paying her a lifetime income, but Mr. Bardon says he gives money or he doesn't. He ties no strings to it. It's a matter of conviction."

"Conviction strong enough to make him endanger this young woman's life?" Gibby asked.

"That," Hep Bardon offered, "is where you gentlemen come in."

Agatha didn't disagree but she recognized that it might take some leading up to. She provided a history. None of the family knew Sara Frail. With the exception of the old man, none of them had ever seen the girl. Sara's father had gone West as a young man, evidently to escape the family; and he had lived out what remained of his life without ever coming home again. He had married and he had fathered Sara.

"When Sara first married the man," Agatha said, "Papa went out to see them. He told her she'd made a horrible mistake but Sara wouldn't listen. Papa told her she'd go on receiving her allowance. Since he didn't like

her husband, he was not increasing it and they would both have to make out on what she'd been receiving for herself alone. Then he came back to New York. His last word to her was that as long as she remained married to Frail, he didn't want to see her again. If she wanted to divorce the man, Papa would be glad to hear from her. Otherwise, the bank could handle all necessary communications."

"So he hasn't seen or heard from her since?" Gibby asked.

He hadn't. Agatha explained that they weren't a close family. Old William had seen this granddaughter of his three times all told. He had gone out to California when the girl was born. He had seen her the second time when he attended her father's funeral. The third time was when he went out to pass judgment on her husband.

I could think of nothing more nicely designed to exasperate Gibby and to outrage that precise mind of his. Gibby's is a mind that feeds on facts. It is impatient of vague suspicion, conjecture, and notions born out of emotion or prejudice.

"You've never seen the girl," he said. "You've never communicated with her, but you know all about her and you know all about her husband. You know that once a capital sum has been paid out and there are to be no further payments and nothing that could be stopped or revoked, at that moment, Sara Frail is going to need us to keep her husband from murdering her."

They knew more than we thought. They knew that the Frails were no longer in California. They had moved to Chicago about three years back. At the time of that move, Franklin Frail had come East without his wife and he had had the effrontery to come and call on his wife's relatives.

"The minute Papa saw him," Agatha explained, "he ordered him out of the house, but he had been here a bit before Papa came home. We all had the chance to meet him. Papa has never been more right. The man is capable of anything."

We explained that Chicago, no less than California, was out of our jurisdiction. That didn't matter. Sara was about to be summoned to her grandfather's bedside and they were certain she would bring that dreadful man with her. There was only the one reason she hadn't already been summoned. They were waiting until we would have set up the necessary precautions for her safety. They knew just what those precautions were to be. On Franklin Frail's arrival in New York, they wanted us to pick him up as a potential murderer and they wanted us to lock him up just on the potentiality. Kent was there and he was a lawyer. We reminded him of constitutional guarantees. We suggested that they simply refrain from calling the granddaughter to the old man's bedside.

"She must be brought here," Agatha proclaimed. "We must have them where the man can at least be watched. He is a criminal, after all."

Kent protested that. All he wanted

of us was that we reassure the old man. He hoped further that we might give a bit of advice on the best available procedure for protecting the life of his client's granddaughter. He wanted it to be a method that would also protect his clients, the Bardon family. He deplored their carelessness in matters of slander. He could deplore, but he couldn't silence Agatha.

"Am I to understand," she asked frostily, "that you can pick on Everett and you can't touch this horrible man, Frail?"

"Your nephew," Gibby said with strained patience, "committed a crime. He was legally charged with it. A grand jury found a legal indictment. He was brought to trial and convicted. He was sentenced to jail and he served the minimum part of his sentence. He is now out on probation, which means he's out on the State's hope that he can behave himself well enough to be worthy of the trust the State of New York has put in him. Meanwhile, the State has the right and the duty to keep a close eye on the boy and tell him how he must behave. He's getting the fairest break any law can give him. Nobody's picking on him."

"Sara's husband"—Agatha sniffed—"has done much better."

"You're prepared to accuse him of a crime? What was it? When was it? Where was it?"

"There's nothing to that," Emory Kent said quickly.

"Nothing?" Agatha protested. "He raped the child and she had to marry him."

Hepburn guffawed. "Sara's a Bardon," he said. "Who could ever rape a Bardon?"

"If you will allow me, both of you," Emory Kent growled.

They allowed him. There had never been any question of rape. The charge had been burglary. Sara Bardon had met Franklin Frail at some sort of party. The man had seen her home. Later that night, she had wakened. Someone was in her house. She had picked up the phone and called the police. When the police arrived, they surprised Frail in the living room. He had by then opened a wall safe and was in the process of emptying it. At that point, Sara had apologized to the police for bothering them. It had all been a silly mistake on her part. She should have known it was Frail. This was nothing. He had just come to get something she was keeping for him in the box. If he had wakened her, she would have got it for him, but he had been too considerate. So sorry, gentlemen.

"A month later," Emory Kent said, finishing the story, "they were married. She never brought charges. The matter died right there, so there's nothing to that."

He didn't have to tell us. You can't be in a DA's office without knowing all there is to know about that sort of deal. They do it all the time. You have them set to bring charges and they come down with the notion that they can do better than the law does. They'll reform the character. In a situation like this one at the Bardon house, Gibby wisely doesn't trust him-

self to speak. He lets me take over. I'm a milder type. As mildly as I could manage, I suggested that they hire a team of private detectives to watch over the young woman. Old William might find something of that sort reassuring.

"Anyhow," I said, "if the man does turn illegal at all, it'll be swiping money out of his wife's purse or taking her jewelry out and hocking it. On his record he sounds sneaky, not violent."

We rose to go. Agatha wailed a protest.

"What about Everett? Doesn't anyone care about poor Everett?"

Gibby took over on that. "Who's going to kill poor Everett?" he asked. He was trying not to sound hopeful.

It wasn't for her nephew's life that Agatha feared. It was for his freedom. Consorting with known criminals is a violation of parole. Sara Frail had to be called. Her husband would come with her. Franklin Frail was a known criminal and he would be under the same roof with the reformed Larceny for Larks Lad.

"I would suggest," Gibby growled, "that Everett take that up with his parole officer." We got out of there.

### 3.

I was ready to wash my hands of the whole thing; and when we saw the DA about it, he saw it my way. Gibby, however, was restive; and all he could say toward explaining his feeling was that once the cry of murder had been raised and raised to us, we



were in trouble. He agreed that there was no sane reason for expecting murder to happen as the Bardons feared, but he didn't like our having been forewarned of it.

"Murder," he said, "can always happen and if it just does happen up there, how's it going to make us look?"

At the time, the question seemed academic; and actually, before any murder did happen, we had another problem with the Bardons. We learned of it from a newspaper story date-lined Chicago. Mr. and Mrs. Franklin Frail, about to fly to New York because of the grave illness of Mrs. Frail's grandfather, had been delayed at the Chicago airport when Mr. Frail with one punch had flattened one Steve "Cockeye" Brooks.

You would have to know about Cockeye Brooks to begin to understand how very peculiar a story this was. You will recall that Mrs. Frail was that granddaughter of old William's about whom we'd been consulted. What you can't know is that Cockeye Brooks was a small-time thug. People don't punch Cockeye Brooks. Cockeye Brooks doesn't go running to the cops. Cockeye Brooks doesn't bring charges against anyone. It is always the other way about. People bring charges against Cockeye Brooks. People, in fact, on one of several occasions, had brought such charges and on these charges—simple assault—Cockeye Brooks had done time in Sing Sing. He had, in fact, been a contemporary of Ever-

ett Bardon's at that same institution.

See what I mean? The Bardons wanted Sara Frail at her grandfather's bedside. They wanted Sara without her husband. They consult us in the matter. We suggest private detectives. Cockeye Brooks turns up and, according to the Frail's, for twenty-four hours he follows Mrs. Frail wherever she goes. He makes himself so annoying that Mr. Frail has to do something about it. Mr. Frail does. Brooks doesn't retaliate in kind. Instead, he calls the cops and he brings charges. Mr. Frail is held by the Chicago police. Mrs. Frail has to come on to New York without her husband.

The Bardons had obviously made their arrangements and they were arrangements that didn't look well for Everett Bardon and for the terms of his parole. Since to some extent we in the DA's office were privy to these arrangements, they didn't look well for us, either. To me it seemed a simple nuisance. Gibby grumbled along with me but his grumbling was unconvincing. I had the feeling that he rather welcomed the opportunity for another look at the Bardon crowd. They had engaged the Gibson curiosity and curiosity is a passion with Gibby.

We had that other look. Even in a matter of days, the old man had slipped enough so that they were now watching at his bedside in relays. We asked to see Everett Bardon and it was arranged, though, of course, with Lawyer Kent hovering.

Everett was the big surprise. He

seemed every inch the respectable and dignified scion of a well-heeled house, a youth schooling himself to occupy with grace the position to which he had been born and training himself up to the responsibilities of that position. I had been looking, of course, for the Larceny for Larks Lad and I had been prepared for anything but so sober and sensible-seeming a young man. I wanted to think that Sing Sing had been all that good for him.

"May I tell you, gentlemen," Everett said as a starter, "that I do appreciate the kindness you are showing me? I know how busy you are and I know you can do nothing but work according to the rules. I understand that you're giving me a break and I am grateful for it. May I say thank you?"

"We'd rather you answered questions," Gibby said gruffly.

Everett answered them and all his answers seemed completely candid. He'd known Brooks at Sing Sing. They had been friends there. Brooks had been released first. Since that time, there had been no communication between them. While we were at it, a door opened and a young woman started into the room. She was youngish. She wasn't Dorinda Gibbs but she could have been another of Uncle Hep's blondes. She had the same sort of arresting dye job. On closer inspection, however, it became obvious that any resemblance would end with the dye job. This one was handsome, but she was not the baby-doll type. She had dig-

nity and even a forbidding sort of elegance, an impeccable black suit, impeccable white gloves, the exactly right sort of hat.

"Is this private," she asked, "or may I come in?"

"If you will forgive us, my dear," the lawyer began. He never finished.

Everett talked right past him. "It's private, Sara," he said, "but it's as much your business as anyone's. I'd like you to come in."

Kent hated it but he could do nothing. She came in. She was there, accordingly, while Everett was explaining that it was one of his beliefs that each person had the inalienable right of going to hell in a hand basket of his own choosing and that, therefore, he had never agreed to any of the family plans for separating his cousin Sara from the husband of her choice. She was still there when he suggested that he would go and sit with his grandfather and he would send his Aunt Agatha out to see us. She heard him ask us to take into consideration the great, if mistaken, concern his aunt felt for him. That, of course, brought up the whole business of Everett's parole and the record of his cousin's husband. The lady didn't take that kindly.

"I'm sorry, Sara," Everett said, "but you do know Frank has a record. You knew Grandfather had him investigated."

She snapped at him. She wanted to hear no more about that. She did, however, have to hear a lot more. She heard her Aunt Agatha freely admit that it had been she who was

consorting with Cockeye Brooks. Brooks had come to call on Agatha after his release from Sing Sing and he had brought her news of Everett. When it had come to hiring detectives and Emory Kent had chosen a firm more highly regarded for its discretion than for its effectiveness, Miss Bardon had considered such measures grossly insufficient. She had taken matters into her own hands.

"Mr. Brooks," she boasted, "went to Chicago as my agent. Everett knew nothing about it."

The whole plan, in fact, had been hers and it had all gone exactly according to her plan. Brooks provoked Frank Frail. He persisted in provoking the man until Frail attacked him. Now Frail was in Chicago awaiting trial for assault and Sara Frail was in her grandfather's house where she belonged. All that Agatha still wanted was that her niece should begin acting as though she did indeed belong.

"Go to your grandfather," she urged. "Take off your hat and those absurd gloves. He's been asking for you."

"And my husband?"

"Now, Sara, we've been into that."

"We have. Did Grandfather ask to see my husband?"

"You know how your grandfather feels."

"And he knows how I feel."

They kicked it around but the younger woman wasn't to be moved. She had been called and she had come. Of necessity, she'd even left her husband for it, but she'd made

it clear that she would be accepted with the man she'd married or not at all. Her grandfather had known that from the first and even the fact that her grandfather was now dying made no change in that. The hat and the gloves were her symbols. They would keep her family reminded that she felt herself to be excluded. By excluding her husband, they were excluding her.

She'd taken this stand even before she'd known that it wasn't just bad luck that had detained Frank Frail in Chicago.

Sara smoothed the gloves over her wrists. "The gloves," she said, "stay on, now with more reason than ever. They stay on to keep you reminded of the terms on which I am here. I am a visitor. I am a stranger. You seem to think you can take any liberty with the family. Just look at my gloves and remember that I do not consider myself to be family and I allow you to take no liberties with me." She paused for emphasis. "Or," she added, "with my husband."

"It may mean all that to you, my dear," Agatha said. "To me it is simply childish and ridiculous."

"And," Sara added, "when Frank gets to New York, he will come here and stay here with me."

Agatha laughed. That evidently was a contingency she expected she wouldn't have to face. She was wrong. That young niece of hers was a woman of steel and Agatha had talked far too much. Sara knew all the right words—perjury and subornation of perjury and conspiracy. A

lawyer couldn't have done a better job of outlining to her aunt the necessity for putting a stop to that farcical affair out in Chicago. When we hauled out of there that time, Sara had Aunt Agatha on the telephone. That redoubtable lady was calling Cockeye Brooks and telling him he would have to pull out on those assault charges.

It was a battle of wills right down to the end and nobody ever knew who won. The old man died without seeing his granddaughter. Sara did bring her husband into the house; but even though the old man had fallen into a coma from which he never again emerged even momentarily, Agatha Bardon had been adamant that her father's wish should be respected. Old William hadn't wanted "that man" near him. "That man" wasn't permitted to come near him. Sara had been equally adamant. She didn't go where her husband wasn't wanted. She'd been in the house when the old man died, but she had been in another room.

#### 4.

Why Gibby and I went to the old man's funeral I've never really known. With me it was mainly a matter of simple curiosity. With Gibby it seemed to be something else, a nervous feeling that we had come to that time of which we had been warned. He couldn't make himself disregard that warning, however absurd it had been.

Be that as it may, from the first

it was an arresting occasion. It would have to be with the Bardons. Uncle Hep was there and there was a swarm of Uncle Hep's blondes. One of the cuties hung on his arm, and in the pews behind him sat all the others. Among them I spotted Dorinda Gibbs and with her another woman, also blond but the only one in the entire covey who looked to be more than a matter of months out of her teens. This one could have been one of Uncle Hep's babes some twenty years back. When we greeted Dorinda, however, she disabused us. This older babe was her mother but we'd been making a mistake anyone could have made. Mama Gibbs was not a motherly type.

We greeted Aunt Agatha, correct in her wisp of black veil and leaning on her nephew. With them were George, M.D., and Emory Kent, and they looked and behaved as expected. I looked for Mr. and Mrs. Franklin Frail and if she seemed possibly a bit too much the mourner, he at least also seemed to be looking and behaving as expected. He had that look of the man who drinks hard, plays hard and works hard. It's a type we all know, the sort that men like and women tend to adore. Ordinarily, people are so much bemused by the charm of this type that it never occurs to them to look deep into the man's eyes in search of the killer look. Even there at the funeral, you could see it in Frail's eyes, that cold, implacable toughness. I honestly hadn't expected to find it there; but studying the man, I caught my-

self reassessing the fears the late William Bardon had felt for Sara Frail's safety. Frail was clearly a man who would have what he wanted and who would without a quiver do what he had to do to make certain he would have it. I had only the one question on that score. Was money the thing this man wanted? He would kill for the thing he wanted, but was money that thing?

All through the preliminary waiting, the man's behavior couldn't have been more correct. He was all solicitude for his wife. He was taking off her any burden of affability that might be imposed in contacts with old servants or old friends of the family. None of these people had ever known her, but they had known her father. They pressed their attentions on her.

All these people were meeting her after a fashion, but I don't think any of them was getting much notion of what she was like. Where her Aunt Agatha was content with just a token wisp of black mourning veil, Sara Frail had gone the full route. She had one of those inkily impenetrable jobs that came all the way down to her shoulders and a little below; and all the kind people got out of her was a murmured politeness, an opportunity to press her black-gloved hand and a close look at the Stygian drapery of that veil.

Her husband, however, was making up for her. He told people how wonderful it was that everyone should be so kind. He told them how deeply their kindness moved his wife. He clapped the men on their backs, hard

enough to be sufficiently hearty but never as hard as he easily could have done. With the women, he held their hands firmly and gently in his and there wasn't a one who didn't flush with pleasure. As soon as he'd relinquished a woman's hand, however, the woman would scuttle away. They enjoyed it, but they wanted to be at a safe distance. I wasn't imagining it. Only a most extraordinary woman would ever consider taking this man on. We went over and greeted the lady. She introduced us to her husband and he gave us the treatment, clapped us on the back, and the force of it had been perfectly measured. People who had known the lady's father came up behind us. We pulled away.

"I can see what the old man meant," I muttered.

"Looks just right for his record," Gibby said.

"Larcenous?" I murmured. "He looks more than larcenous."

"So does his record," Gibby told me.

He'd been doing research on it and he filled me in. There was considerably more than the Bardons or their attorneys had seen fit to tell us. In the actual criminal-record department there wasn't so much. There had been one burglary conviction and he'd served his time on that; and since, except for the deal where Sara had decided she would bring no charges, he had been clean.

There were, however, other records on Franklin Frail and it was those Gibby was chewing over in his mind

as he watched the man perform. This Bardon girl was Frail's second wife. The first had been one Muriel Lodge and a couple of years after they were married, she was picked up on a blackmail charge. She'd hit some Hollywood executive with a packet of love letters he had written her. The executive yelled for the cops and for a while it looked as though he'd made the worst mistake an executive ever made. She did have letters and in his handwriting and bearing his signature and of a content that was more than enough for hanging any man.

The man denied writing them and somehow he got lucky. He managed to prove it. Good as those letters looked, they were forgeries. Muriel Lodge Frail had done them herself. She was enormously talented in the handwriting line and one thing led to another, like some checks she'd been talented with. The State of California jailed her on a forgery rap. It was while she was in the pokey that Frail embarked on his second romance by way of Sara's wall safe. The man, however, had kept everything neatly legal. He had obtained a Mexican divorce during that gestation period while attempted burglary had been blossoming into love and love into marriage.

Two years later, the first Mrs. Frail had been released. She dropped out of sight for almost a year afterward and then she turned up again; but she turned up dead.

"Killed?" I asked. "Or just plain dead?"

"Dead," Gibby answered, "and in the company of Frail and the second Mrs."

If this was smelling bad to Gibby, he wasn't alone. Nobody else had cared for its fragrance, either. When it had happened, it smelled. Now, three years after the event, it still smelled. The Frails had been spending the summer in a mountain hide-away they had up in the High Sierras. They went there to be alone—no servants, no neighbors, just themselves and the great outdoors. It had been his story that they hadn't even known his first wife was in the vicinity. Then one day, they'd been off on a camping trip and surprise, surprise—Muriel had come stumbling into camp. This might have been a situation but for the fact that Muriel had been a very sick first wife, so sick that they had to heave her into the car and rush her over the mountains to a doctor. They didn't make it. They arrived too late for anything but an autopsy and the findings of that, Gibby told me bitterly, had been natural death, ruptured appendix.

"In the opinion of a country coroner who wouldn't know much even if he wasn't bribed?" I asked.

"That's what the L.A. papers thought," Gibby told me.

Gibby had read those old papers carefully and he had the whole story at his fingertips. The Frails buried Muriel in that mountain town. They never went back to their mountain cabin or to their home in the city. It was then they'd made the move east to Chicago, leaving it to their lawyers

to dispose of their California properties and to ship their stuff on to Chicago. Of course, it did look as though they had fixed things up with that country coroner and had then skipped the jurisdiction before anyone would think to ask uncomfortable questions.

Everybody expected that there would be extradition back to California and a trial for the murder of Muriel Lodge Frail. The first step had been a court order for exhumation and a complete post mortem. The thought was that Frail had slipped up in not having had Muriel cremated, but he hadn't slipped at all. Top men did the second post mortem and the whole case fell on its face. Muriel was dead of a ruptured appendix and everything else came up negative. Also, Frail voluntarily returned to California and volunteered answers to all questions. They hadn't been fleeing the jurisdiction. They had merely been fleeing the gossip and they'd made no mistake there. It may have been a local scandal, but it had been a loud one.

The services started and Gibby had to break it off. All through the funeral, I was watching Franklin Frail. His behavior could not have been more correct, but that didn't matter. There was only the one thought in my mind. How had he contrived to murder his first wife and get away with it so neatly? You just couldn't look at that guy and think anything else of him.

I was still thinking it when we came out to the street after the serv-

ices. There, alongside the lined-up limousines, Sara Frail and her Aunt Agatha were at it again. Agatha was insisting that all of Papa's nearest and dearest must be together in the first car. Accordingly, she was consigning Franklin Frail to the second car along with Cousin George, M.D., Emory Kent and Uncle Hep's blonde for the day.

Sara would have none of it. "Where I go my husband goes," she said from behind her heavy draperies.

"You cannot impose him on your grandfather, not even now."

"As you like." Sara shrugged. "Then I'll follow my grandfather in the second car."

"Your place is with us."

"My place is with my husband."

She turned away to join her Franklin. He had stepped back from this fracas. He had taken a whisky flask from his pocket and unscrewed the cap. Now quickly he raised the flask to his lips, snatching this moment of lull. Sara hurried toward him, expostulating as she went.

"Really, Frank," she said. "Couldn't that wait? After all, he was my grandfather."

Frail never answered. A cramping spasm twisted his face and the flask dropped from his hand. It hit the pavement only a moment before he toppled and crashed down beside it. The glass shattered and the whisky spread over the sidewalk. The unmistakable odor hit my nostrils just as that unmistakable mottling of cherry red began to come into Franklin Frail's face.

Both Gibby and George Bardon, M.D., jumped for the fallen man; but, of course, it was no good. When it's cyanide, nobody can be quick enough; and it was cyanide.

Sara faltered. I saw her sag and I was standing close enough to catch her. George came away from the dead to minister to the living. We laid her flat on the pavement and I threw back her veil while he loosened the collar of her black suit. The crowd closed in around us until Gibby got the police to move them back. It was just as well he did, because much of that crowd was made up of Uncle Hep's blondes and just then Sara needed air, not perfume.

## 5.

We didn't go out to the cemetery. It was obvious that Sara wouldn't be up to going and it was even more obvious that we would now be having business with the rest of the Bardon family. They were ushered back inside and nobody was pretending that they weren't under police surveillance even though we did work at making it as discreet and polite as we could. That first car, into which some of the Bardons had already climbed, was driven away for examination. Gibby ordered that. He was taking no chances on the possibility that further supplies of cyanide might have been concealed somewhere in that automobile.

Aunt Agatha and Uncle Hep were indignant at the delay. Emory Kent sought to soothe them down. Cousin

George was busy ministering to the newly widowed Sara; and Everett came to us to volunteer information.

"That was cyanide in his whisky," he said.

"How do you know?" Gibby snapped.

"Because I know cyanide," Everett answered, "and because there isn't a chance that it isn't my cyanide."

"Just like that?"

"I do silversmithing for a hobby," he explained. "I use cyanide for cleaning the stuff. There is always a supply of it on the workbench in my room at home."

"I seem to remember you have another hobby," Gibby told him. "Letting people go to hell in hand baskets of their own choosing. You're the only one of the family who didn't want detectives around. You didn't want anybody watching."

"Does that make me smart or an idiot?"

"An idiot, perhaps, with flashes of sense. I'm going to have to search you."

"You don't think I have cyanide on me now, do you?"

"I don't know. I remember Hermann Göring. He had it on him for when the going would get tough. You have tough going ahead, boy."

"I don't mind being searched," Everett said.

We got him off in a room by himself and he stripped for us while we went over him inch by inch. We got no cyanide out of that but we did get talk. Everett had a theory and he was snatching at the opportunity to toss



it at us. He explained that he'd always made it a point that everyone in the house should know that he had the cyanide, just how dangerous it was, and where he kept it. The idea was that everyone would be forewarned. Nobody could have an ignorant accident with the poison. Servants, family, house guests always were informed.

"Your Cousin Sara and her husband?" Gibby asked.

"That's it," Everett answered. "That's where I slipped. I was too much impressed by Sara's in-the-house-but-not-of-it routine—the hat and the gloves and the attitudes and the way she kept Frail hanging aloof, too. It never occurred to me that I had to warn them. They were keeping to themselves. They weren't making themselves at home at all. How could I imagine that he would go up to my room and make himself at home there?"

"You want us to believe that the poor man found himself not loved enough in the Bardon house and that he stole your cyanide to commit suicide with it?" Gibby snarled.

"I'd like you to see that he had an accident with it."

"Like how?"

"Like boredom. It's easy to see he was having a dull time of it. Sara kept sitting like a frozen image and she wanted him to sit with her and match her freeze for freeze. He got bored and he started idly wandering the house. I know our house. I can figure he didn't find much to amuse him till he came to my room."

"A delightful bottle of cyanide," Gibby said. "Such fun."

Everett shook it off. "You'd have to know what I'm working on," he said. "Uncle Hep has a birthday coming up and I'm making him a surprise. It's a set of silver buttons, embossed, a different bare-butt babe on each button. He'll wear them on one of those red waistcoats of his. I'm guessing Frail came on those and got a kick out of them."

He went on with it. The glass pocket flask had been the man's most constant companion all the time Frail had been in the house. Left to himself, he would probably have been glad enough to drink the Bardons' whisky but Sara wouldn't allow that. She'd taken a position. They were in the house to be available just in case her grandfather should change his mind about her husband, but she was accepting no hospitality. She had their meals sent in from a restaurant and they ate the meals in their room. She also ordered in their own whisky and he drank only that. Therefore, the pocket flask. It was for times when he was out of the room, even briefly.

As Everett's theory went, Frail wanders and comes on the workbench and the amusing buttons. From them, he idly turns to the rest of the workbench. He sees the bottle with all that "Poison" and "Don't touch" on it and he's curious about it. About this time, it hits him that he's been more than long enough between snorts. He has the cyanide bottle open and he pulls his flask out to slug himself a little with his whisky. Somehow, in

handling the cyanide bottle, he gets a little of the cyanide on his hands. He drinks his whisky and somehow in recapping the flask, he gets a little cyanide from his hands on the mouth of the flask or on the stopper.

"It doesn't take much, you know," Everett said. "And if it was all on the mouth of the flask or on the stopper, that would mean he got all of it when he next put the flask to his lips and started sucking on the whisky."

"Possible," Gibby said. "Awfully elaborate. Highly improbable."

"The probable accidents are usually avoided," Everett argued. "It's mostly the elaborate and highly improbable kind that get to happen."

"But not opportune, as well," Gibby objected. "Your aunt, your uncle, and you all want Frail removed. He's stupid and careless with your cyanide and his whisky and he is removed. It's too convenient."

Everett found it necessary to correct Gibby. Everett had never wanted Frail removed and he was also asking us to understand the feelings of his aunt and uncle.

"When you start investigating Frank Frail," he said, "you'll learn that he had a first wife and that she died under the most suspicious circumstances. Actually, it seems to have been pure bad luck. Appendix ruptured, too far from any doctor, that sort of thing. You can't blame Aunt Ag and Uncle Hep for feeling as you do, though, reluctant to believe in the improbable and elaborate accident, particularly when it happens to be too convenient as well.

They've always believed he killed his first wife and that he did it with enough cleverness to get away with it. They have been afraid for Sara. That's a far cry from wanting to murder the man."

"Up to now," Gibby said, "you've all been most carefully not mentioning this first wife."

"I know," Everett conceded. "That was Kent's doing. He kept hammering on that. It was best to say nothing at all, but it was most important to say nothing about the death of Frail's first wife. The man had been completely cleared on that and we had to make only the slightest slip and he'd have us for slander or something. You're lawyers. You'll understand that better than I can."

The young man seemed genuinely distressed, but he also seemed inordinately pleased with himself and with his theorizing. So much so that it astonished him, when the cortege finally did start for the cemetery, that the Bardons had with them in that first car, in the seat which had been intended for Sara Frail, a homicide-squad detective, instead. Hadn't Everett explained everything? Police surveillance after that seemed to him excessive.

## 6.

Gibby and I remained behind with Sara Frail and we escorted her back to the house. She insisted that she was quite all right. She wanted only to be alone. She wanted to lie down and be quiet for a while. We didn't

keep her from it very long. Gibby asked her about her husband's whisky and when she said there were supplies of it in their room, he told her we would have to get the bottles out of there.

"Now, Mr. Gibson? I would like to be alone."

"I understand, Mrs. Frail. You must also understand. Your husband's whisky was poisoned. It may have been just that flask or it may have been the whole bottle. We'll have to know which and we must play it safe. I'm thinking of you, Mrs. Frail."

"Don't bother. I loved my husband. It doesn't matter much now whether I live or die. Either way, my life is over. I don't care."

"We care," Gibby said. "We have to care."

She shrugged and led us upstairs to their room. It was a big, front room, right next door to that upstairs sitting room where we had first met her.

"If you think I might try to kill myself," she said, "have no fear. We Bardons are a tenacious lot. Nothing ever makes us so unhappy that we're ready to let go of life. If it's an accident you're afraid of, I don't drink, Mr. Gibson. I've been wishing I hadn't made it so clear to my dear relatives that I never drink. I didn't know how easy I was making it. They had every assurance that if there was whisky around, I wouldn't touch it and Frank most certainly would. But I suppose that doesn't matter. Some way would have been found."

She showed us the whisky and we gathered up the bottles. Two still had their seals unbroken. A third had been opened and was about half full. There was no smell of cyanide, but we took them, anyhow, for analysis. Sara showed us to the door of her room and she shut it after us. We took the bottles downstairs and Gibby stowed them in the trunk of his car.

We were out front and he was busy with his trunk lock. It was a quiet time of day and there weren't many people in the street. I could hardly help noticing the two blondes who were strolling along on the other side of the street. They were Dorinda Gibbs and her mama. I remarked on them.

Gibby locked his trunk and thoughtfully regarded the undulating bottoms of the two sauntering babes.

"Maybe," he said thoughtfully, "that's something for the vice squad and maybe it's just peaceful picketing because it was another mouse the old goat had at the funeral with him. Anyhow, our work's back in the house."

We went in and looked for Everett's room. That was the first order of business, picking up any loose cyanide that might still be around. We left Mrs. Frail alone and we didn't bother about that sitting room next door to hers. We knew neither of those was Everett's room. At the back of that same floor, we also quickly ruled out the late William's apartments and we went on upstairs. On the third floor, there were rooms

at the back, overlooking the garden, and they were too feminine to be anyone's but Aunt Agatha's. They were ornamented with photographs. We saw a picture of Hepburn and one of the old man. All the others were of young Everett, and they were innumerable. She had him at every age and in every pursuit. I remarked that she showed a great partiality—so many of the nephew, not one of the niece.

"Could be partiality," Gibby murmured. "Could be nobody ever sent her any of Sara."

We pulled out of there and checked the front rooms on that floor. They identified themselves readily. One was Uncle Hep's, the other Everett's. Everett's was advertised. There was the workbench of which he had told us, the buttons he was making for his uncle, and there was the cyanide bottle—about half full. We'd just located that when the doorbell rang through the silent house. Gibby went to the window and looked down. It was Dorinda and Mama. It had come on to rain and it was evident that they wanted in. I trotted down to let them in. Gibby remained in Everett's room. All the blondes in Uncle Hep's extensive stable could have been on that doorstep and he wouldn't have had the time for them, not until he'd satisfied himself that there was no further cyanide loose around that workbench.

I opened the door and I got a smile and a thank you from Dorinda. I got only a scowl from Mama. Dorinda said they didn't want to be any trou-

ble. They would just wait for Hep. I wasn't to bother about them. Dorinda knew her way around the house. She pushed a door open and ushered Mama into a ground-floor deal that looked like a drawing room or something impressive like that.

I started back up to rejoin Gibby. As I passed, I noticed that the door to Sara Frail's room was open a crack. She called to me softly. She was a bit distressed that I'd let the women in. She wondered if I'd mind asking them to go up to the second-floor sitting room where they could be a bit out of the way.

"I'm afraid there will be reporters and people at any moment now," she said. "If Uncle Hep and his women make a circus of grandfather's funeral, I can't say I like that, but now it's Frank as well and I'd much rather not. You understand?"

It did seem to me that the Gibbs babes looked more the late Frank Frail's speed than did his own wife but I refrained from saying as much. I started down to do her errand. I was spared the trouble. The Gibbises were already on their way upstairs. They explained that they didn't want to get mixed up with a lot of people and they'd decided to come upstairs to wait. They wanted to see only Hep. Would I tell him when he came in?

I opened the sitting-room door for them and I shut it after them. Quickly they reopened it. They were taking no chances on missing Hep when he would be coming by. I went back to Gibby and together we did the complete search of Everett's room. The

one cyanide bottle proved to be all the boy had. We'd just about satisfied ourselves of that when the Bardons arrived home from the cemetery. What with family, servants and police escort, it made quite a crowd.

Everett, tailed closely by a cop, came upstairs. He reached for the cyanide bottle.

"It will have to be checked for fingerprints," Gibby said, not letting him have it. "When did you last see it?"

Everett thought carefully before he answered. It had been the night of his grandfather's death. He had been at his workbench when he had been called away from it to go to his grandfather's room for the last time. He hadn't been near the workbench since. When asked if he remembered how much cyanide the bottle had contained, he remembered clearly that it had been almost full. Gibby held the bottle up so the boy could see the level of its contents. Everett went white.

"That," he said, "is a lot more than any bit of the stuff he could have got smeared on his hands."

"How much more?" Gibby asked.

"Almost half a bottle, enough left over from killing Frail to kill all the people in this house."

"And you have no idea where it is?"

"Wherever it is, you've got to find it," Everett stormed. "Don't you see? I was all wrong. It wasn't an accident, so that means it has to be Aunt Ag or Uncle Hep. Why would they take so much? I can tell you why. They're

not killers, so for either one, it would come to a little for Frail so that Sara would be saved and then a lot for themselves. I don't know which of them it is, but one of them is going to kill himself and you've got to stop it. Don't you see?"

He was storming along that way when his uncle came upstairs. Hepburn Bardon took over. He'd heard what Everett said and the boy had it all wrong. It never had been an accident and it wasn't murder, either. It was attempted murder and it had gone wrong.

So then we had another theory and this one seemed to be the joint enterprise of Hepburn Bardon and his sister, Agatha. They had been right about Franklin Frail all along. Their only mistake had been in underestimating the man's greed and the vicious scope of his evil plans. Frail had recognized that come what may, Bardons leave money to Bardons. Where else would one leave it? His wife would be coming into a one-fourth share of her grandfather's estate. Frail had seen a way to make it a larger share.

"He had that flask," Hep explained. "He thought he'd be in the car with us, riding to the cemetery. He thought we'd all be needing picking up. He would bring out his flask. He would pass it around. It's no more than manners for a man to offer a drink before he drinks himself. Agatha and myself, possibly even Everett. You know, an occasion of special strains in spite of this probation nonsense. He would get the lot of us and safely because he would

have used this poison of Everett's. See how clever he was? Agatha and me poisoned. Everett in the electric chair for it. That would leave Sara to inherit the whole lot and only then he would have come around to killing Sara. In all our worries about the girl, it never occurred to us that she would be safe until he'd finished with his preliminaries and that we ourselves were to be those preliminaries. Really horribly clever."

"Horribly," Gibby said dryly. "What made him change his mind?"

"But he didn't. He just misjudged himself. You have to have known Frail. With him, taking a nip out of that flask was automatic. He'd have done it without even thinking, the way another man might have blinked an eye. He'd sat through the services. For him that was a long time between drinks. He was drinking out of that flask before he even knew what he was doing."

The more Hep talked about it, the more he warmed to the idea. He was thinking up elaborations and we couldn't get rid of him. Suddenly I remembered something that would do it. I told him that Dolly and her mama were in the sitting room waiting for him. It worked. He went off to join them, but we weren't rid of him for long. As soon as he got into the room and before I even had time to wonder how it was that the door Dorinda had set ajar could have been closed, Hepburn Bardon was screaming. Mama and daughter were in there, but they had given up waiting. They were dead of cyanide poison-

ing. We found the glasses from which they had taken their fatal highballs. On the bar we found the bottle of sour-mash whisky, Franklin Frail's brand, and enough cyanide in it to account for every last bit of the stuff that was missing from Everett's supply.

## 7.

That was when the impossible happened. I'd never expected to see that Bardon family pulled together, but the death of those Gibbs babes made the difference. It brought Sara Frail back into the bosom of her family. Sara embraced her Uncle Hepburn's theory. Now, that was a touching scene. Sara blamed herself and she blamed the blind selfishness of her pride. She had known her Frank. She had loved him and she had feared him. She had known just how right her family was in their judgment of him, but she had been too proud to acknowledge it.

Then her Frank had died and she'd known immediately how it had happened. This was the mixture as before, just as we'd already had it from Uncle Hep. Reaching for a drink was automatic with Frank. Frank would already have taken it down before he would even have known he was reaching. It had happened just as Hep believed except that Frank had been more thorough in his planning, horribly more thorough. He had anticipated the possibility that they wouldn't all be in the same car or the possibility that they

wouldn't want to drink in the car. He had included that in his planning. When they would be home again, they would be the stricken family and he, relatively an outsider, would be less stricken. He would be ready to let bygones be bygones. He would minister to them in their grief, mix them drinks, buck them up. He would mix the drinks from his own bottle, just as a gesture of friendship. That would have done it.

"I didn't know there was any more," Sara wailed. "I thought he'd made his mistake and he was dead of it. In my pride I thought I could leave it without telling you. I knew my aunt and uncle were innocent and I was confident that nothing could ever be proved against either one of them. The thing would remain a mystery. I wouldn't have to humiliate myself. So now I've been punished for it, bitterly punished. Those two innocent women, strangers, people we didn't even know. It's horrible."

It might even have remained that way, even though Gibby wasn't at all satisfied. But then he was suddenly much happier when the routine work on the cadavers of the Gibbs women brought in something that he could fasten upon. He fastened. It was the intelligence that Mama Gibbs had had a criminal record. She had served time. She had served it in California. She had served it in the same jail that had housed Franklin Frail's first wife and she had served it at the same time. The crime had been blackmail and extortion.

Grabbing that up, Gibby took off for the Bardon house. I followed along. I could see that here was a new dimension. Buying off a blonde obviously could not have been a new item in Uncle Hep's career. He'd had too many of the babes in his time and it would be inevitable that he would have paid off to no few of them. This, however, would have been different. This one had behind her a professional, her mother; and with them was allied another professional, his niece's husband. It was easy to see that simple old Hep could never before have been that much surrounded; and when this man they had been fearing so much came into it, that would have been the last straw. Surrounded by tormentors, Uncle Hep had turned on all of them.

We arrived at the Bardon house in time to come in on a business session. Kent was reading the will. The legatees were signing the necessary releases. Everything was being hurried along for Sara Frail's sake. Everybody understood how that young woman couldn't remain in the house with the associations of grief and horror it must hold for her. She was leaving that very night, going back to Chicago and from there she didn't know where, but it would be someplace where she could work at wiping from her memory that monster she'd had the ill fortune to love.

"He was no lily," Gibby said, while we stood by and watched the signing. "He was no lily, but he wasn't as bad as you think. He didn't kill anybody."

"He planned to," Sara moaned, "and even if he hadn't planned it for those poor women, that doesn't make any difference. They're just as dead."

"Just as dead," Gibby said, toying with the signed releases stacked at Emory Kent's elbow. He fished Sara's from the pile. "Just as dead, Muriel. It's a pity you had to take your gloves off to sign this because now we can match it up with the fingerprint record the State of California has on Muriel Lodge Frail."

It did match up but we didn't have to wait till we had the word from California. As soon as Gibby had spoken, the girl who called herself Sara Bardon Frail lunged for that paper. She was clawing like a wildcat.

Nothing could have been simpler. Of course, it hadn't been the first wife but the second who had been allowed to die before they got her to that doctor. With the first wife talented as she was, they had no need for the unfortunate Sara and when Sara conveniently developed that bad appendix in the High Sierras, that had done it. It was simple enough for Frail to come back for questioning and all that. It was his wife who couldn't be seen in any of the places in California where she had been known; and it had been safe enough, or so he had thought, to bring her to New York for her grandfather's last days. She could be stubborn and stay out of the old man's room and none of the others had ever seen Sara Bardon Frail. Meanwhile, they would be

on the spot so they could make certain they weren't jobbed on the old man's will.

He'd made his mistake in doing that. She was safe, but he wasn't. He was taking her into a house where Sara Frail was loved and where her husband was hated. Once he'd established her there, she had no further need of him. She could improvise and for her improvisations she had all those Bardons on whom suspicion could fall.

"His luck ran out," Gibby said. "But so did hers. Hers ran out when it happened to be cyanide that came ready to hand for murdering her husband. For a Californian cyanide was bad. The stuff has gas-chamber associations. She thought she could take it but when the moment came and she smelled the stuff and saw him drop, she weakened. That's where her luck ran out. She fainted and while you were helping her, you put up her veil. That did it. Mama Gibbs saw her and that meant Mama Gibbs had to be silenced. Muriel knew the dame well enough to know her preference in liquor and while you were downstairs letting the Gibbses in, she did a quick job of poisoning the bottle and setting it out on the bar."

So that's the way it was. For all of Gibby's brilliance, in this one it was I who cracked the case. I caught the gal when she fell. I lowered her to the sidewalk. I threw back her veil and with that last act, I finished her off. I have my uses.