

Mystery Book Magazine

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THE OTHER

Roy Murray hides out in a small town to write a play—and finds he has adopted the identity of a man marked for murder!

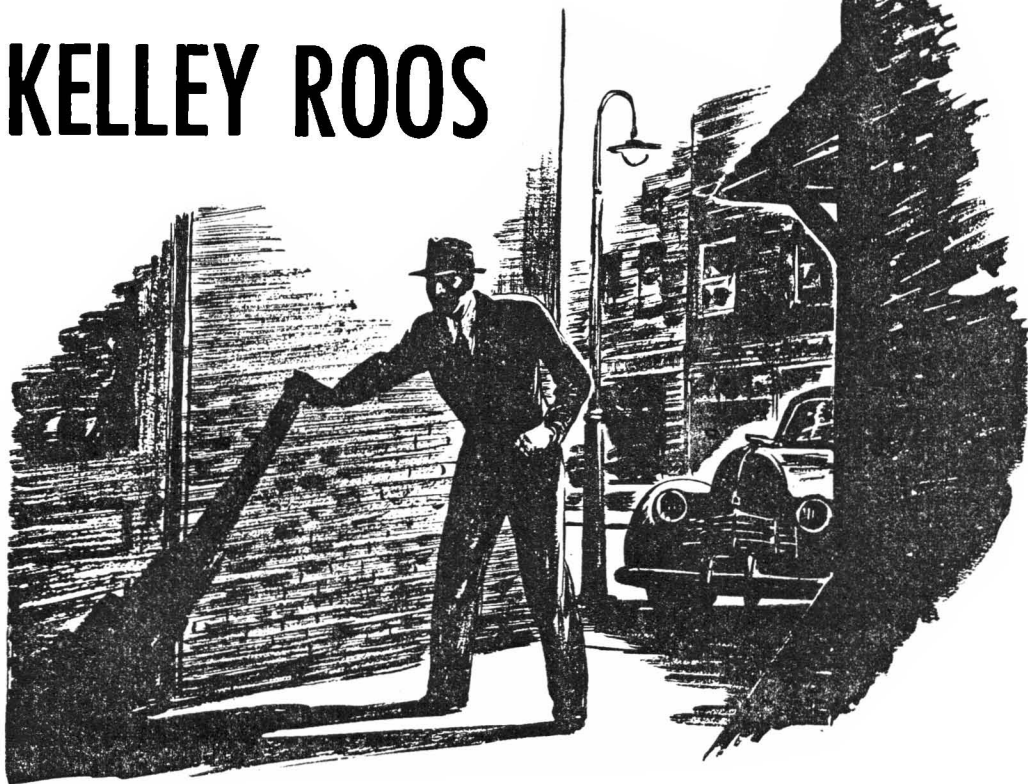


A car door slammed
and a man moved
stealthily toward them

**A Complete
NOVELET**

MAN'S SHOES

KELLEY ROOS



IT WAS one of the miracles of the modern world. It was the market place of the financiers, the laboratory of the scientists, the playground of the famous, the scene of the crimes of the notorious. It was the Mecca of the young American dream. Between the Yankee Stadium and the Battery, between the tip of the Empire State Building and the tiled splendor of the Lincoln Tunnel there was everything a young man needed to make him happy, wealthy and wise. Roy Murray looked out of the taxi window and smiled.

His smile filled the cab and turned the dour, harassed driver into a grinning cherub. Their eyes met in the reflector and they burst into a mutual laugh. The driver twisted in his seat and spoke in a bantering shout.

"Did your uncle leave you a million dollars?"

"No," Roy said, "he didn't."

"Your girl say yes?"

"No, not that."

"Well, it's certainly somethin'!"

"It's just that I'm leaving New York," Roy said.

"What's wrong with New York? Is there a better town? Except 'Frisco maybe. You goin' to 'Frisco?"

"I don't know where I'm going."

"Excuse me," the driver said quickly. "For being so nosy."

"Not at all," Roy said. "I really don't know where I'm going."

The cab turned off Fifth Avenue and started across Forty-fourth Street toward Grand Central Station. It was the end of a beautiful Friday afternoon

of a beautiful June.

Roy watched the smartest, best dressed, prettiest girls in the world march along, away from work. It would be quite awhile before he would see them parade again. He might miss that about New York, but not much more.

Charley Drexel, his pal and lawyer, had labeled him crazy, so he hadn't told another soul about it. Except for business reasons and to halt the possibility of his being reported missing, he wouldn't even have told Charley. He was afraid of being talked out of it. He was afraid that his escape would be nipped in the bud by the persuasive, witty tongues of his alleged friends.

It had taken all his will power to saw his way out of cafe society—but he had done it at last. His smile broadened still more as he thought of the surprise of the playboys and girls who wouldn't find him playing tonight. He laughed aloud at the thought of how well he would feel tomorrow. Tomorrow morning, wherever he was, he would start writing again—if he hadn't forgotten how to spell.

This time nothing would stop him from proving that he wasn't a one-play playwright. He had taken care of the main thing that had handcuffed him these past three years. He had got rid of his money.

Except for the five hundred dollars in his pocket, he had got rid of every remaining cent he had made from his first and only play—from the long Broadway run, the three road companies, the fabulous movie sale, the radio serial, the foreign rights. It was this stratagem of his that had made Charley Drexel groan and suggest that he see a psychiatrist. But he had been firm.

"Charley," he had said, "I'm a guy who won't work unless it's for food, clothing and shelter. As long as I have a checking account, I'll be a lazy, good-for-nothing bum."

CHARLEY had protested. "You're no bum, Roy—"

"All right, I'm idle rich and that's

worse. Last week somebody called me a darling of cafe society! If my dad were alive to hear that, he'd shoot me! And, Charley, I'd load the gun for him. I'm on my way back to work, Charley, and to work I need peace and quiet, the simple life without any temptations."

"Listen," Charley said. "When the newspapers learn that you're giving your money away, you'll be ten times as famous as you are now. You'll be hounded. You'll never get any writing done!"

"I'll take care of that. Charley, I'm going to a small town somewhere. I'll get up at five every morning, I'll take a fast walk, I'll eat a hearty breakfast and I'll be at my typewriter by seven!"

"By seven? You're dreaming, Roy! Won't you listen to reason? You can work here in New York and you don't have to throw away your money!"

"I'm not throwing it away." Roy had laughed and said, "As I told you, I'm bequeathing it. To worthy causes."

"Roy, you're crazy!"

"Be very legal, Charley. The money is in your hands. Split the stuff between The Salvation Army, the Milk Fund and those fresh air funds for kids. And give some to the Girl Scouts. A Girl Scout helped me across a street once."

Charley had shaken his head and muttered darkly, "You're crazy as a loon."

"Stop arguing, Charley. As soon as I'm settled, I'll get in touch with you. There'll probably be some papers for me to sign. So long, Charley."

"Will you please let me talk to you for ten minutes?"

"No. And do as I've told you with that money or I'll get myself a lawyer who will. So long."

He had walked out on the tough Broadway lawyer. It was when he had closed the door to Charley Drexel's office that he had started to smile. Now, after a full afternoon of continuous smiling his jaw was beginning to ache, but it was an ache that felt good.

The cab crept into the line of cars on Vanderbilt Avenue that were wait-

ing to get into Grand Central.

Roy said, "Driver, make it Pennsylvania Station instead."

"But we're here! What's wrong with Grand Central?"

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm crazy about Grand Central. But on second thought I want to put a river between me and New York."

"What's wrong with the Harlem River?"

"The Hudson is wider and deeper. Another thing, I want to go west. West is where young men should go."

"Well, you're paying the fare. If you don't have any better way to spend your money than on taxis, it's okay with me."

At Pennsylvania Station Roy consulted a time table. He ran his index finger down the list of cities and towns, from New York through Newark and Philadelphia and down toward Baltimore. He shut his eyes, moved his finger another half inch and let it rest. His eyes opened to discover that his destination was Wilmington. That was too large a town so he shut his eyes and tried again and once more he hit Wilmington. Well, if fate wanted him to go there, he'd go there. He bought a coach ticket for Wilmington.

Before the train pulled out from under the Hudson River he was thinking about his new play; he was working already. Characters began to walk around inside his head. They began to breathe and talk and live. He was too excited to sit still and went out onto the car platform where he could move his feet around and smoke.

This play would write itself, but he would go slowly. It had to be good. There were a lot of people he wanted to show a thing or two. He wasn't a flash in the pan. He was a writer.

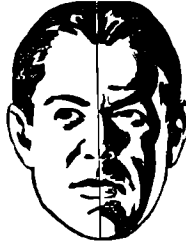
The train turned south, rolled into Delaware and on toward Wilmington. It stopped in a small town and Roy looked up the town's main street, admiring its picturesqueness and liking its warmth. Almost too late he realized that nothing in the world was preventing him from making this his town

while he wrote his play.

He scrambled for his bags and typewriter, then dashed toward the door. He was just in time. The train was already rumbling into motion as he clattered down the steps.

Roy looked at the sign on the station wall. He was in Hampton, Delaware and glad of it.

CHAPTER II



THE HOTEL, Hampton House, was as peaceful and friendly looking as the town. It might prove too expensive for Roy's new budget, but he would stay a few days until he got his bearings.

The elderly desk clerk glanced up from his New York tabloid, pushed the register toward Roy and returned avidly to his gossip column.

Roy didn't sign immediately. The clerk was obviously a man who enjoyed gossip columns, and if he was a man who remembered a name, he would know the name Roy Murray. That wouldn't do. He was going to be too busy to address women's clubs, give interviews to school editors, read the play the clerk's aunt had written and advise a dozen boys and girls not to go on the stage. Frantically, Roy searched for a name that wouldn't sound like the alias of a fleeing embezzler.

The clerk looked quizzically at him so Roy bent down and wrote George on the first empty line. In the nick of time he stopped himself from writing Washington. He thought of a cherry tree, wooden teeth, a half-dollar, Martha and then Mount Vernon.

He signed his new last name: Vernon. He was George Vernon from—from Philadelphia, Pa. That was a large town near Valley Forge.

"A room and bath," he told the clerk. "Anything will do."

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Vernon," the clerk said.

He banged the bell and a boy snatched up Roy's luggage and escorted him to his room. The boy unlocked the door, opened the window, showed him which was the bathroom and which was the clothes closet and then stood at attention. Roy handed him a half-dollar.

"Don't throw that across the Potomac," Roy said.

"Huh?"

"Nothing. George Washington and me, all of a sudden we're pals."

The boy decided to grin as if he understood everything. "Anything else, Mr. Vernon?"

"No, thanks—oh, say, how big a town is this?"

"About fifteen thousand, Mr. Vernon."

"Well, for awhile it's going to be fifteen thousand and one. I'll be seeing you, kid."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Vernon."

Roy took a shower and made a ritual of washing away the dust of New York. He didn't really need a shave, but what beard he had, had sprouted in New York so he shaved it off. He also changed his suit. Roy Murray, the Manhattan wastrel, was no more. Now he was George Vernon of Philadelphia, a working man. As he knotted his tie, he beamed at himself in the mirror.

"Mr. Vernon," he said, "may I call you George?"

Now he would go out and look for a beer. George Vernon drank nothing but beer. He went to bed early and he got up early. George was the type who got ahead. In high school George had been voted The-Most-Likely-To-Succeed and in the next few months George would justify his classmates' faith in him.

Roy laughed aloud. This man Vernon was quite a character. His classmates had also voted him The Best Dancer. George was a demon on his feet, not a clumsy clod like that chap Roy Murray. Furthermore, George was a brilliant bridge player, a daring horseman, a great golfer. He was equally at ease with a high caliber rifle or a fragile tea cup. George never forgot what was trump, fell off a horse or drenched his

hostess with Orange Pekoe like Roy Murray was inclined to do. Roy was proud of being George Vernon, a man of standing in his community.

He found his beer in a pleasant little bar across the street from the hotel. It was fairly crowded and the place buzzed with the chatter of tired business men and women glad that tomorrow was Saturday.

As Roy put down his empty glass, he thought that the girl had smiled at him. Then he decided he was wrong. He didn't know her. In fact, he had never seen her before. He would remember her if he had. Any man would.

ROY liked girls who were almost as tall as himself, who had long, chorus-line legs and broad shoulders and shining black hair that didn't need a twenty-eight dollar coiffure to make it breathtaking. He liked girls with wide, cool eyes that kidded you and wide, warm mouths that wouldn't stay still. Roy was sorry that it wasn't he she had smiled at.

He turned back from asking the bartender for another beer and found the girl standing beside him. She was looking directly at him, directly into his eyes and she was laughing with pleasure. She took his hand in both of hers and shook it affectionately.

"Well!" she said. "Of all people—George Vernon!"

"What!" Roy said. "Did you—?"

"George, don't you remember me? I'm Madge Pierson! Don't you dare stand there, George Vernon, and pretend you don't remember me!"

"Look," Roy said, "I'm sorry, but—" "You *don't* remember me."

She stepped back from him. The smile left her face. She was disappointed and hurt, then she was embarrassed and annoyed.

Roy tried to shake off the shock of this incredible coincidence. Not only had he taken the name of a man this girl knew, but he looked enough like that man to be mistaken for him. Before he could think of a sensible word to say, the girl spoke and smiled again.

"It's been so long, of course, you wouldn't remember me. I'm sorry. Forgive me for barging in on you like a—"

She looked toward the door and, quickly, Roy said, "Now don't go away. The old George Vernon memory is very short. Stick around and have a drink with me, Madge. I'm sure I'll place you in a moment."

"No, you won't. And if you pretend that you do—"

"I guess," Roy broke in quickly, "you've changed a lot. But, then, haven't I changed? A little at least? Take a good look at me."

She looked at him, then laughed. "Why, George Vernon, you rascal, you haven't changed a bit. Tell me," she said seriously, "how is your sister?"

"Oh, she's fine. Fine."

"The accident didn't leave any after effects?"

"No, she's better than ever."

"That's good," Madge said. "Ellie would have hated not playing tennis and swimming. Is she still in Columbus, George?"

"Oh, yes. I don't think wild horses could drag Ellie from Columbus. She loves Columbus."

"But I see that you've left Columbus, George."

"You know me, Madge. A wanderer."

"You still drink beer, George. You were always keen about beer, weren't you?"

"You bet," Roy said. "I can never get enough beer. What will you have, Madge?"

"I really don't have time for anything," she said. "I must be going. I'm late now."

"When can I see you again, Madge?"

"Now, George, please don't be polite!"

"No, I mean it," Roy said, "I want to see more of you."

"You've been very sweet to the little girl from the old home town and you needn't do another thing." She extended her hand to him. "It's been fine, George, meeting you like this. When you write to Ellie tell her that I—"

"Listen!" Roy took her hand and pulled her back to him. "Let me see you

again. And, incidentally, are you by any great good fortune a widow?"

"No, I'm not. Are you partial to widows?"

"Your husband enjoys good health, huh? Still able to get about?"

"George, you're forcing me to admit that I'm a spinster and I don't like you for it. Your manners haven't improved a bit."

"If there were more spinsters like you, Madge, there would be fewer spinsters."

SHE laughed and there was a sudden, amused gleam in her eyes.

"Why, your manners have improved! Now, really, I must run along."

"We'll have dinner," Roy suggested. "Then we'll go to a movie and afterwards we'll have a plate of ice cream. Any flavor you want, Madge."

"I don't accept presents from men who don't remember me, George." She crinkled her nose at him. "No matter what flavor."

"But I'm beginning to remember you, Madge. It's coming back to me. I can see you running around the neighborhood . . . Oh, you were a cute little tyke. Do you still hide under front porches and stick your tongue out at people? Remember the time you got your hand stuck in a milk bottle and I pulled it out for you?"

"Never in my life did I—"

"You're right, Madge. It was a thorn, wasn't it? I took a thorn out of your side. And you said—I can still hear the throb in your squeaky little voice—'Georgie Vernon, I'll do anything in the world you want me to, anytime.' Now is your chance to repay that debt, Madge. Have dinner with me."

"But I can't!"

"I wish I'd left that thorn in your side."

She laughed and said, "I'm having dinner and spending the evening with the Marions, George."

"I'll call for you. At eleven o'clock."

"The Marions live fifteen miles out on the Turnpike."

"I'll get a cab," Roy said.

"You're really insisting, aren't you, George?"

"Yes, and it isn't like me."

"Well, if you don't show up I won't blame you."

"I'll be there. Or my name isn't George Vernon."

"Don't keep the cab. I have a car. I'll give you a lift back."

"Swell! Now, listen, what will I tell the cab driver? The directions, I mean."

"He'll know where the Marions live. Everybody in this town does. So long, George."

"So long, Madge."

He watched her walk away from him; everybody in the tap room watched her as she went to the street door and passed through it. The men in the room smiled and those sitting with their wives understood very well why their mates' voices were a trifle testy when conversations resumed. Madge Pierson, George Vernon's old friend, was really something.

Roy shook his head at the wonder of the universe and its mysterious ways. The fact that he had accidentally taken the name of a man he looked like was fantastic enough. But the fact that this man had a friend who was the most beautiful, delightful, elegant young woman in the world and that she had come to him was a total miracle.

CHAPTER III



HE Turnpike weaved and twisted through low, rolling hills that stretched away into the west and became mountains. The road was so deserted that Roy wondered why. The cab driver told him that a new four-lane highway had stolen the old Turnpike's traffic and left it to be used only by the few people who still lived on it.

This was historic ground Roy was riding on and he thought of the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War. The remaining twenty-eight minutes of

the half-hour trip he thought of Madge.

He paid off the driver and forced himself to walk, not run, through the large formal garden in front of the Marion's large, rambling house. He sounded the wrought-iron knocker and stepped back, straightening his tie and smoothing his hair into place like a schoolboy. He knocked again, louder this time because he had noticed the unusual quiet of the place.

No one came to the door.

Backing down the steps and moving away from the house, Roy saw that its front was completely dark. He followed the hedged-in path that circled the house. There was no light anywhere. The two-car garage was shut and locked, but he was able to see that it was empty. The Marions were not at home. He had been stood up.

No, it hadn't happened to him. It had happened to George Vernon. It was on George Vernon that Madge had played this fiendish practical joke. Despite her cordiality at the bar, she didn't like George. Or, at least she had an old score against him to pay off, some vengeance to wreak. That was far from the attitude Roy wanted Madge to have toward him. The first moment he saw her he would straighten her out, tell her that he was Roy Murray—if he ever saw her again.

Roy walked back to Hampton.

He had never been very good at judging distances. A mile to him had merely been something that a horse ran, or a crew rowed. Fifteen miles had been fifteen times that.

When he limped down the main street of Hampton in the bright sunlight of early morning, he knew exactly how far fifteen miles were. It was the distance between New York and San Francisco and, definitely, not as the crow flies.

Before going back to the hotel he had breakfast. He surreptitiously slipped off his shoes under the restaurant table. It wasn't until he had eaten a sirloin steak, french fries, rolls and coffee, then scrambled eggs, home fries, toast and coffee that he began to be amused.

He had told Charley Drexel that he was going to get up at five o'clock and take a long walk before breakfast. Well, he hadn't quite done that. He had taken the long walk, but he hadn't gotten up.

The desk clerk said, "Good morning, Mr. Vernon," and handed Roy his key and a letter.

In the elevator he thought that first he would take a shower, then sleep an hour or two before starting out to find Madge. Abruptly he changed his mind. Sleep could wait. Mechanically, he slit open the letter with his key and began reading. It said:

My dear, I pray this note reaches you before it is too late. I know you planned to be at Hampton House on Friday and I am writing you there in the hope that what I say will . . .

He stopped reading. Nobody knew he was at Hampton House. Nobody in the world knew that he had planned to be here—simply because he had not planned to be here.

It wasn't until the train had almost pulled out of the station that he had decided to stop in Hampton. It wasn't until he had seen the little hotel from across the street, two minutes before he had registered, that he had decided to stay at Hampton House.

Roy flipped over the single sheet of stationery. The letter was signed, "Yours, Cynthia." If he had ever known anyone named Cynthia, he didn't remember who she was or what was her last name.

"Your floor, Mr. Vernon," the elevator operator said.

Roy stepped out into the corridor. The elevator's doors slid shut. He looked at the envelope of the letter and he saw what he now expected to see. The letter was addressed to: Mr. George Vernon, Hampton House, Hampton, Delaware.

HE WALKED to his room and sat down on the edge of his bed. He needed to sit down. This, on top of his experience with Madge, couldn't happen. It couldn't, but it had.

A man whose name he had dupli-

cated, who looked like him, was to have arrived at this hotel the same day he had. Or maybe the George Vernon the letter was meant for wasn't Madge Pierson's George. Perhaps, there was a third George Vernon. Perhaps there were a thousand George Vernons and The George Vernon Association of America was holding its bi-annual convention here in Hampton, Delaware, this second week in June.

He undressed quickly and stood under a cold shower for five minutes. Suddenly, he stepped out of the shower and hurried back into the bedroom. He fished his wallet out of his pocket and inspected his club cards, his driver's license. That reassured him. He was Roy Murray of New York City. It was nice being able to prove that to himself.

He picked up the telephone and got the desk clerk.

"Yes, Mr. Vernon?"

"Look," Roy said. "Is there another George Vernon staying here at this hotel?"

"Why, no, there isn't."

"Are you expecting another one?"

"No, sir. No other George Vernon has made any reservations with us." The clerk chuckled. "That would be quite a coincidence, wouldn't it, Mr. Vernon?"

"Wouldn't it? Thank you."

Roy hung up quickly. He didn't feel up to explaining to the clerk. He would watch the register and if a real George Vernon checked in, he would take the letter directly to him and explain to him. And he would immediately report the whole business to Madge.

Once again Roy used the telephone to speak to the desk clerk. He said, "I'm trying to get in touch with a young lady named Madge Pierson. And I wondered if by any chance you knew—"

"Miss Madge Pierson?" the clerk said. "Why she's in her room right now. At least, she was a moment ago. Four-oh-three, Mr. Vernon."

"Room four-oh-three? Here?"

"Of course. Shall I connect you?"

"No, thank you."

He walked the one flight down to Madge's room. He knocked on the door three times, affectionately. Then he remembered a certain fifteen-mile stroll he had taken and knocked three more times, brusquely. Madge opened the door.

Roy had always considered the negligée a greatly overrated article of clothing. He thought that what sports writers had done with their column-filling propaganda for Maxie Baer, the writers of fancy fiction had done for the negligée. After all, what were those things but Fifth Avenue bathrobes?

Now Madge Pierson stood before him in a green velvet negligée and he recanted to a certain extent. A negligée, a green velvet one with Madge Pierson inside it, was—well, he would wire Charley Drexel to bequeath a goodly sum of his money to any remaining descendants of the designer of the original negligée.

"Good morning," Roy gasped.

"Good morning, George!"

"You're surprised to see me, Madge—surprised that I'm back already?"

"What, George?"

Her innocent bewilderment almost convinced him that she didn't know what he was talking about. The woman was clever.

He said, "May I come in?"

"Well, yes. Do come in."

ROY walked by her and she closed the door behind him. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at him. He sat on the low radiator beneath the window and looked at her. Madge smiled at him. Then he smiled at her.

"Sleep well?" Roy asked.

"Fine."

"Nothing on your conscience? You didn't twist and turn all night in remorse at your dreadful deed? Your feet didn't hurt for mine?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I was at the Marions at eleven last night."

"No! You weren't!"

"Yes! I was! And since you gave me

explicit instructions to dismiss my cab, I did just that. Consequently, I had to walk home. Fifteen miles."

"I don't believe you," she said. "You didn't have any intention of meeting me at the Marions. You were stringing me along at the bar. I knew what you were thinking—if ever again you saw Madge Pierson—whoever she was—that would be too soon!"

"What am I doing here now then?" Roy asked.

"You're having some more fun."

"Wait, I'm not the person who's playing jokes. It's you! Do you even know the Marions? Were you invited out there at all last night?"

"Of course! When I got back here, after meeting you, there was a message that the Marions had suddenly been called to Richmond—sickness in the family."

She glanced at the door. That was the tenth or twelfth time she had done that. Her eyes were spending as much time on that door as they were on him. Roy interrupted her.

"Has that door got something I haven't got?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you afraid your mother will walk in on us?"

"My mother is in St. Louis, darling."

"If I can walk from the Marions, your mother can walk from St. Louis. But you are expecting someone?"

"Yes, any second. I'm afraid you'd better run."

"But there's something I want to explain to you, Madge."

"Later, George. I'm a working girl and I must get dressed."

Smoothly, deftly, she kept on talking and Roy found himself out in the hall with the door closing in his face. When it was six inches from being closed, she winked at him. His answering wink brought a mock look of shock to her face and she gave the door a sudden push that made it seem a slam.

He just missed the elevator. It had delivered a middle-aged, handsome woman to this floor. Roy let her pass him, then turned to watch her. She

walked to Madge's door, knocked on it. Roy liked that—Madge's caller not being a man.

He went to his room and immediately telephoned her. She couldn't have lunch with him. She couldn't be sure just when she could see him next. Finally, she promised to telephone him as soon as she was free.

NOT until noon was Roy able to stop thinking about Madge. At one point he had almost wired Charley—wired him not to do as he had told him, that he needed his money now, that he had met somebody he wanted to spend a lot of money on.

But he made the honorable decision. He would stick to his resolution. Why, now he had more reason than ever to write that play and prove he was a man with a brilliant future.

He got to work. For awhile, as he typed the notes of the ideas that had come to his mind on the train yesterday, all the women characters were named Madge and they all wore green negligees. But then he really got going.

He had gone through the stack of hotel stationery in the small desk drawer and he was halfway through it again, using the reverse side, when it became too dark to work.

He switched on a light, thinking that a storm must be on its way to Hampton. But his watch told him the gloom was that of night. It was almost nine. He had been working steadily for nine hours. Suddenly, he felt hungry.

Later, in a restaurant near the hotel, he gave his order for dinner, then discovered he had no money with him. He explained his predicament to the waitress and she obligingly showed him a short-cut to the hotel—out through the rear exit of the restaurant and in through the back door of the hotel. In a few moments he was in his own room.

He moved the straight-backed chair out of his way, pushed it close to the desk, and went on to the closet. The fold of bills in the silver clip was where he expected it to be—in his gabardine slacks, last night's marching pants.

Madge—why hadn't she called him?

Returning to the hall door, he clicked off the light. Then he clicked it on again and turned to face the room.

What, Roy wondered, had made him do that? Why was he standing here in the doorway? Why was he looking around his room? What was wrong?

Nothing was wrong. Everything was just as he had left it. His bed was still smoothly made, his suitcase was still standing on end in the corner, half-smothered with soiled linen, his typewriter was on the desk.

Suddenly he saw what it was. Yes, now everything was just as he had left it. It hadn't been before he had pushed the small chair from the center of the room back to the desk. That was where it had been when he left for dinner. While he was gone someone had moved it. Someone had been in his room!

He turned toward the hall, laughing at himself. It must have been the maid. What was wrong with him? He didn't have any nerves. He hadn't had any since that night three years ago when his play opened. Once more he turned back to the room and he was angry with himself for doing it.

Was he being silly, though? The bed hadn't been turned down, the morning paper still lay beside it on the floor, his ashtray was still littered with cigarette stubs. No hotel employee had been tidying up this room. But someone had been in it.

His money—that was in his pocket. Quickly, he crossed the room to the bureau and pulled open its top drawer. His cuff links and his pocket watch were there. Everything he had put atop the bureau was still there—everything and something more.

A note was propped up between his military hair brushes.

It was written on Hampton House stationery. It had no salutation. It opened with a sentence that used all of the first line. That sentence read: "I am taking my own life." Roy's eyes fell to the bottom of the sheet of paper. It was signed: "George Vernon."

Roy glanced toward the window. Be-

low it on the street the gears of some huge machine ground angrily and a klaxon sounded. Then it was quiet. The whole hotel seemed suddenly hushed. Roy read the note:

I am taking my own life. I have no desire nor any reason to go on living. There is no one in the world who will benefit by my death. No one wishes me dead. The few who care will understand and forgive me.

George Vernon.

He placed the piece of paper flat down on the bureau. It meant what it said. It meant that a man named George Vernon no longer wanted to live. A man named George Vernon was about to commit suicide. Or had committed suicide. A man named George Vernon—but *he*, Roy Murray, was now George Vernon. The note was in *his* room.

CHAPTER IV



IT TOOK all his will to calm his mind and make it move slowly, logically. He was now George Vernon but he had not written the note. He was not going to commit suicide. An employee of the hotel

was not going to come into this room, find his body and report to the police that George Vernon had killed himself. That was not going to happen—or *was* it?

Was he going to be found dead? If he was, it would have to be somebody else who killed him!

Think slowly, Roy shouted to himself. Think carefully. George Vernon was going to be murdered—murdered by someone who thought that he was George Vernon. Now it was clear. He was about to die—but when? It would be nice to know when.

Was somebody watching him now, waiting for a chance to kill him? No, that didn't make sense. The note wouldn't have been left where he would find it and be warned by it. It would not be left where he could see it when

he walked into the room.

He had come back unexpectedly! He had left the restaurant and come in through the back of the hotel and—

The bathroom door was no longer tightly closed. Now it was standing slightly ajar. The crack was wide enough for someone to see through, to fire a gun through. Roy leaped away from the bureau and slammed himself against the wall, the wall that held the bathroom door. That was the best he could do. The hall doorway was too far away. Now the person would have to step into the bedroom in order to see him. To see him—that mustn't happen. For the man to see him was for Roy to become a target for the man's gun.

He snatched the two brushes from the top of the bureau. The first missed the light fixture in the ceiling by inches. The bathroom door moved slightly. He threw quickly again, not daring to take time to get set. The brush hit the ceiling, caromed off it and struck the globe, shattering it and wiping out the bulb.

The room was totally dark, black. Unwittingly, his murderer had done Roy a good turn. He had lowered the heavy shade over the room's one window. Roy stepped away from the wall, his eyes on the spot where the bathroom door was.

He listened. It was quiet, as quiet as it was dark. Roy started talking, talking fast.

He directed his voice to that door, to the man behind it, to the gun in the man's hand. He said, "You, there! You're making a mistake. I'm not the man you want. I look like him, I'm using the same name, but I'm not the man you're after. Do you hear me?"

There was no answer, no sound.

Roy's hand moved across his forehead and it came away wet. Did his words mean anything? Were they even being heard? Were they making any impression at all on the man behind that door?

He went on. There was nothing else to do. The only weapon he had was

words. His life depended on his getting those words across, getting them believed.

"My name isn't George Vernon. It's Roy Murray. I can prove that. I'm from New York. I'm a writer. I came here to write. I took the name of Vernon so I wouldn't be bothered by people."

He paused to listen. There was nothing to hear.

"I just happened to pick that name. I picked it out of a hat. I don't even know any George Vernon. I never knew one in my life."

Roy stopped talking. It was useless. The killer's silence told him that. The man wasn't believing him—he was saying what any man who was about to die might say in a frantic attempt to save his life. The real George Vernon might have tried this way out, might have pleaded that he was another person with another name. Roy could swear that he was Roy Murray until doom'sday and he wouldn't be believed. But he could prove it.

He spoke again. "I can show you that I'm not George Vernon. Listen to me. I'm coming to the door. I'm going to hand my wallet through to you. The cards and licenses in it will prove my real identity. You can turn on the light in there and see that I am Roy—"

Sudden knowledge hit him like a whip. It made him angry, angry with himself for standing there in the dark pleading with a man who did not have a gun. If he had, he would have turned on the light in the bathroom, thrown open the door, taken careful aim at Roy and fired. Roy stifled an urge to rush the man. There was still need for caution. There wasn't a gun, but there might be another weapon.

HE WAITED—the two of them waited—each trying to force the other to give himself away by making the first move. Then Roy realized that he had the advantage. He knew where the man was. The man couldn't be sure now where he was. That advantage would only be momentary. He would have to act while he had it.

With infinite care he moved a step toward the bathroom door. There was the crackle of glass. His foot had found a piece of the light globe. Immediately, Roy heard another sound. The whisper of moving hinges. The door had opened. The killer and he were standing not ten feet apart, face to face. He couldn't be sure—it might be the man's breathing that he heard.

He flung himself sideward, hoping to take the man's legs out from under him. Something hit him on the shoulder and he crashed into the man, groped for him and lost contact. He pulled himself up on one knee.

There was a rush of movement. Roy got set, but the movement was away from him. It was a plunging flight. There was the crash of furniture and then a short-lived panel of light as the hall door opened and slammed closed. Roy leaped toward it and sprawled headlong on the floor. When he got to it, the corridor was empty.

He switched on the lamp on the bed table just inside the door. He picked up the straight-backed chair that had been used to block his path to the corridor. He found the leather mace loaded at one end with heavy shot—the blackjack. His left arm was numb from the blow. Rubbing it, he sat down on the edge of the bed.

It was no longer amusing. He didn't mind meeting the real George Vernon's lady friends. Getting his mail was no hardship. But being George's stand-in, his double for murder, definitely had its disadvantages.

Roy tried not to think too harshly of his namesake. It might be George's fault that somebody wanted to kill him, but it wasn't his fault that the killer thought Roy Murray was he. That was Roy's fault for taking George's name, for looking like George, for coming to the hotel where George had planned to come.

George Vernon—why was he to be murdered? What did he have that somebody else wanted? Or what had he done that necessitated his death?

In other words, Roy thought, why

am I about to die?

All that he knew about Vernon was what Madge had intimated in their first talk at the bar—George was from Columbus, he had a sister Ellie, he liked beer. That wasn't much to go on. Then he remembered the letter that he opened by mistake. This time he read every word of it.

My dear:

I know you planned to be at the Hampton House by Friday evening and I am writing you there, hoping that this letter reaches you and in some small way helps you. My decision, George, is irrevocable. We have never got along together. We never will. You know that as well as I. And I fail to understand, since you do know that, why you insist that "you can not live without me."

You must snap out of it, George. These fits of desperate depression that you allow yourself to suffer are dangerous at most, and at least unhealthy. Forget about me, George. You are a young man, you are strong and talented.

You can be happy and you will be happy—but not until you get over your mania that your happiness depends on our spending our lives together. I repeat—we have proved that is impossible and now, please, George, be sensible.

Sincerely,

Cynthia.

Roy placed the letter on his knee and slowly lit a cigarette. *You can not live without me. These fits of desperate depression are dangerous.* George Vernon's state of mind was suicidal. Those words could mean nothing else.

He walked to the bureau and picked up the suicide note. He held it in one hand, the letter from Cynthia in the other. The suicide note was a forgery. There was no doubt of that. Was the letter real? Or was it, too, a forgery?

THE letter might be a part of the plot against George Vernon's life. If Vernon was discovered in this room dead, the note would prove it had been suicide. The letter would provide the motive for that suicide. Vernon could not go on living without a woman named Cynthia.

But there was something wrong there. The letter had arrived before the murder attempt had been made. If the real George Vernon had received that letter, he would have known it was a forgery. He would have been warned.

There was an explanation for that, too—and Roy didn't like it. Vernon was

to have been killed last night, before the letter arrived. Roy Murray was to have been murdered last night.

Last night a girl had accosted him at a bar. He had fallen for her like a ton of bricks, just as she had planned that he would. He had asked to see her again, just as she had planned he would. Then she had tricked him into going fifteen miles out into the lonely country to an empty house. She had suggested that he dismiss his cab. Everything had happened as she planned it—except one thing. He hadn't been killed. Something had gone wrong and saved his life. Madge hadn't expected that to happen.

This morning when he had gone to her room, she had been surprised—surprised to see him still alive. Again she had tricked him. He had thought her surprise was at his calling on her, at his interest in her. Madge Pierson was one smart baby. It wasn't her fault he was still alive.

That couldn't be true—Madge mixed up in a murder plot, coolly leading the victim to his death. It couldn't be true, yet it was. Madge Pierson was as much a murderer as the man who had just fled his room. Roy reached for the telephone.

The desk clerk informed him that Miss Madge Pierson had checked out of Hampton House early in the afternoon. Whatever doubt remained in Roy's mind of her guilt dissolved with the desk clerk's statement. That she had sneaked away proved her guilt.

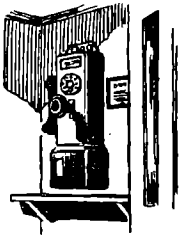
But she hadn't tried to kill him—Roy Murray. It was George Vernon she had tried to kill. But that didn't change the fact that she was a murderer.

Roy's eyes fell on the blackjack and he gingerly rubbed the circle of pain that was expanding on his arm. If it weren't for that, he wouldn't believe this thing had happened to him. He would think it a fantastic nightmare that he had been nearly murdered last night and that just a few moments ago he had again narrowly averted death.

There had been two attempts. There was no reason to believe there wouldn't be a third. Roy arose and prowled the room. What did a guy in his shoes do? No, they weren't his shoes—they were George Vernon's. What did a guy in George Vernon's shoes do? The answer was obvious: Get out of them.

But could he? If he left Hampton, he would certainly be followed, followed by someone he couldn't escape for the simple reason that he didn't know whom he was trying to elude. If he attempted to return to New York, he might be stopped. If he changed back to his own name the killer would believe he was George Vernon pretending to be Roy Murray. That was just the sort of thing a man running for his life would do.

CHAPTER V



IN DESPERATION Roy reached for the telephone. He needed help and he knew where to get it—the place where he always got it. Within forty-five seconds he was asking the switchboard girl of a

small hotel, just off Broadway in New York, to please connect him with Mr. Charles Drexel. A moment later the girl told him that Mr. Drexel was not in his room.

He glanced at his watch. It was a little early for Charley to be at home, but he would come wandering in any minute now. Roy decided to leave a message.

"Listen," he said to the girl, "the moment Mr. Drexel comes in will you tell him this? Roy Murray is in a jam. He needs Mr. Drexel. Will Mr. Drexel please get to Hampton, Delaware, as quick as he can? He's to come to the Hampton House and ask for George Vernon. Have you got that?"

The girl repeated the message to Roy and promised to keep an eye open for Charley. Roy hung up, feeling a great deal less alone. Charley would break his neck getting here and even with a

broken neck there wasn't any trouble the wise old lawyer couldn't handle. Roy's sense of relief crept toward an inertia that he forced himself to smother. He shouldn't sit on his heels until Charley arrived. There must be something he could do to help himself. Yes, there was something.

His one link to the murderer was Madge Pierson. If he could find her, it would be a step in the right direction. He scooped up his hat, locked the door behind him and walked to the elevator. The elevator was a long time coming. He had time to think of the real George Vernon, more time than he needed.

George Vernon was in no danger. There was no need to worry about him. As long as the killers thought that Roy was Vernon, Vernon was as snug as the bug in the rug. It would help, though, if Vernon checked in soon. It would help if he took over being the target for a murder. Or, they could take turns. Roy would work the day shift and Vernon could work the night shift.

Roy waited until an elderly couple bought some stamps from the clerk, then he approached the desk. The clerk smiled pleasantly at him. Roy appreciated that. It was a welcome change from being slugged with a blackjack.

"Tell me," Roy said, "were you on duty when Miss Pierson checked out this afternoon?"

"Yes, I was."

"Did she leave a forwarding address?"

"No, she didn't. But perhaps I can help you." He turned back the pages of the register. "Sometimes people write their full address when they check in and perhaps . . . no, she didn't."

The clerk turned the book so Roy could see it. Behind the easy, swinging scrawl that was Madge's name was the single word 'Chicago.' That didn't help any. He said, "When did Miss Pierson arrive?"

"Yesterday afternoon," the clerk said. "Just an hour or so before you did."

"Thank you." Roy walked to the bench where two bellhops were sitting.

He said, "Did either one of you help Miss Pierson with her bags this afternoon?"

The taller of the boys said, "Yeah. I did."

"Did you get a cab for her? Or did she have her own car?"

"Her own car."

"Did you notice the license plates? What state?"

"No. I'm sorry but I didn't."

"Thanks," Roy said.

He flipped the boy a quarter and walked out of the hotel. It was a pleasant night. There was a moon, there were stars and there was a warm, gentle breeze. Couples sauntered down the main street, not wanting to go home yet. Weary fathers and mothers, longing to be home and in bed, rushed along their children. The drugstores and ice cream parlors were crammed with customers. It was a small town after the movies. Roy didn't realize that he was nervous until he found himself watching the man cross the street move toward the corner he was approaching.

THE man was perfectly innocent looking. He might have been a prosperous clothing store proprietor. Or the local traffic court judge. Or a deacon in the First Church there on the corner. But Roy watched him—watched him to make sure that he didn't follow him. He gave the man a careful going over with his eyes to see if there was any indication that he was carrying a gun or a knife.

This business was too much for him. He wasn't going to be able to find Madge Pierson. Charley would find her. Even if she had turned herself into a needle and hidden in a haystack Charley would find her. But in the mean time, until the lawyer arrived, should he go to the police?

He didn't like the idea of explaining to them that he had come to this town and taken a phony name and why. It would sound silly to them. He might even sound like a suspicious character. He didn't know what to do. He was stymied.

He was standing before an attractive, red brick building. It was the Civic Auditorium. From it issued the sound of prolonged and enthusiastic applause. He glanced at the bulletin board perched above him on the terrace.

The Hampton Choral Club had just given a performance of "Pirates of Penzance." The applause swelled as the ushers opened the big front doors and Roy watched a woman hurry down the steps toward the street. She was a middle-aged, pleasant-looking woman, beautifully dressed.

Roy turned away, started walking and then stopped. He glanced at the woman again. She had hurried past him and was now unlocking the door of a gray coupe. She meant something to him, but he didn't know what. He had seen her before. She maneuvered the coupe out of the closely-packed line of cars and sped away. He shrugged and told himself that he had probably seen her in the restaurant this evening.

He moved on down the line of taxis that were waiting for customers from the auditorium. Suddenly he spun around and ran to the first cab. He jerked open the door and flung himself inside.

He said, "Driver, follow that gray coupe!"

He had remembered where he had seen her. She was the woman who had visited Madge this morning. Madge had got rid of him, she hadn't wanted him to see the woman. Roy leaned forward and peered out through the cab's windshield. The gray coupe jumped the gun on a traffic signal and crossed the intersection while the light was still yellow.

"Hurry, driver," Roy said.

It was impossible for the woman not to have seen him in front of the auditorium. She must know that he was following her. She was running from him. Her relationship with Madge, then, concerned him—his murder. His luck had suddenly changed. Talking to this woman was the next best thing to finding Madge.

They were out of the business district of the town now. The houses were

farther apart, the lawns larger, the landscaping more intensive. The double row of huge, overhanging trees made the street an ill-lighted tunnel. Ahead the coupe was nothing but a tail light. Abruptly, it turned right and disappeared.

"I thought so," the driver told Roy. "She's headed for the Manor."

"What's that?"

"A real estate development. Pretty ritzy."

When the driver negotiated the right-hand turn the coupe was nowhere in sight. He raced a hundred yards to a landscaped traffic circle and stopped. Like spokes from a hub, five or six lanes radiated from the circle. The coupe might have darted into any one of them.

"What now, mister?"

"I don't know," Roy said.

"If you stayed here," the driver said, "You couldn't miss her. I mean she can't get out of the Manor without riding back through this circle."

"All right, I'll do that."

HE PAID off the driver. After five or ten minutes the inactivity of waiting got on his nerves. He couldn't just stand here. The woman might spend the night somewhere in the development. He started up one of the lanes, passed three houses, then heard the sound of a car behind him. It wasn't the coupe. It was a car entering the Manor from the highway. He started his search again, scanning every driveway, peering stealthily into every garage that might hold a small gray coupe.

Half an hour later, in the fourth lane he scouted, he found it. It was one of a dozen cars before a large, brightly lit house. This wasn't quite what he had expected. He stood for a moment looking at the blazing windows, listening to the radio or phonograph music that came from within it.

He wasn't sure just how to go about this. Finally, taking his dilemma by the horns, he knocked resoundingly on the front door. It was opened at once.

A pert young maid, complete with

frilled apron and cap to match, ushered him into the house. She took his hat and, with a nod of her head, indicated that he was to go toward the music. He turned and saw the driver of the gray coupe.

Standing just inside the huge living room, she was smiling at him. She was delighted to see him. As he approached her, she extended a welcoming hand. She spoke to him and her voice was warm with graciousness.

"How do you do?" she said. "I'm so glad you could come, Mr.—Mr.—" Her friendly eyes pleaded with him for help.

"Vernon," Roy said. "George Vernon."

He said the name very distinctly and watched closely for its effect. It had no effect whatsoever. The woman remained a charming hostess who had momentarily forgotten the name of one of her guests.

"Mr. Vernon, of course!" she said. "Won't you have a drink? I'm sure you'll find something you like. Please have a good time!"

"Thank you," Roy said.

Her hand on his elbow had started him toward a bar set up before the fireplace at the far end of the room. He walked by small groups of people, all drinking, all talking excitedly.

The bartender grinned at him and asked what he wanted. Roy settled for a beer and got it in a chilled pewter mug. He carried it to a corner and, from there, studied the crowded room.

The woman, still at the door, had been joined by a handsome old gentleman with a shock of silver gray hair. The two of them were talking about Roy. They turned away when they saw him watching. But they kept on talking about him. Roy could tell by the furtive glances the man threw in his direction.

"And how did you like it?"

The voice was at his side and it belonged to a thin young woman with gleaming eyes in a pinched, pale face. She smiled and repeated her question.

Roy said, "I liked it fine."

"You didn't really! You agree with

me. I can tell by looking at you that you agree with me. Don't you?"

"I suppose I do," Roy said. "In a way."

"Gilbert and Sullivan are all right, of course. But there are other things!"

"Yes, there are. When you come right down to it."

"There's Ravel!"

"Where?"

"I mean, after all, there is Ravel! I've made a—what I call a 'dramusical' out of his *Bolero*. But do you think the Choral crowd will do it? No!" the thin girl cried. "No, they're hide-bound! Year after year they keep on doing the same things."

"Excuse me," Roy said.

He stepped away from the girl and went over to the bar. Standing before it, her back to him, was Madge Pierson. She was kidding the man behind it. He was laughing at her and she laughed back at him. It was all very gay and it made Roy angry. He strode toward her.

"Miss Pierson," he said.

CHAPTER VI



MADGE didn't turn immediately. She took her time. When she faced him her eyes were wide with surprise, but her lips were parted in a smile that made the surprise delighted, something that was strictly social. She's getting better with practise, Roy thought. Each time I turn out not to be dead her technique improves.

Now she was laughing, that provocative, tantalizing laugh which, before he discovered she had his murder in her mind, he had found a wonderful and exciting thing. At the moment, it merely increased his anger.

"George!" she said. "Georgie Vernon, the idea!"

"Sweetheart, you're good," Roy said.

"How dare you crash Mrs. Lindley's party!"

"In fact, you're terrific."

"Tell me, Georgie, how did you find me? Have you been following me?"

"You're better than terrific," Roy said with sharp irony. "Did anyone ever tell you that you should be in pictures? Or an actress on the stage? You're wasting your talent arranging murders."

"What did you say?"

"Stop it."

"George, what—?"

"Look, I want to be alone with you. Is there some place we can talk?"

"Why, Georgie! What will people say? You know small town gossip. If we're seen—" Roy stretched out his hand and closed it around her wrist. "Ouch!" she said and laughed. "All right, I'll go quietly."

She led him across the room, through the open french windows and out onto a terrace. He watched her look out over the garden that was foaming with flowers. He watched her look up at the moon and the stars.

She lifted her shoulders in a long sigh and said, "Isn't it lovely, George?"

"Call off your boys," Roy said.

"What? George, your incoherence tonight is positively annoying."

"You can stop this surprise business," Roy said. "It's cute, but it isn't necessary any more."

"Surprise business?"

"Last night I was supposed to have been found dead on a lonely road. Something went wrong. This morning you were surprised to see me alive. Tonight I was supposed to have been found in my room—a suicide. You and your pal muffed that, too. And now you're surprised to see me still among the living."

She shook her head. "What are you talking about?"

Roy said wearily, "Look, I'm tired and I—"

"But I don't understand! Don't you believe me?"

"No. But skip all that. What I want to tell you is this. You've got the wrong man. You're going to a lot of trouble for nothing. If you get the chair for my murder, it will be for nothing. Be-

cause I'm the wrong guy, see? I'm not George Vernon."

She was staring straight into his eyes. She said slowly, "Of course, you're not." She was smiling now. "You're Roy Murray."

"I'm—" He stopped. "Who did you say I was?"

"Roy Murray. And, Roy, you haven't changed a bit."

He turned and walked away from her. Behind him he could hear her laughing to herself as if she had just heard a wonderful joke, a joke she would remember and laugh at for years. He rubbed his hand across his forehead. He lit a cigarette and gave his mind a chance to start being of some use again. Then he came back to her.

He said, "You knew that I was Roy Murray?"

"Of course. Honestly, you have the memory of a mentally retarded duck! Do you by any chance recall having gone to a college called Allegheny?"

ROY'S face remained hard and unyielding.

"Yeah. I was there a couple of years. Go on."

"You wrote a one-act play there. It was terrible. Remember?"

"I don't remember it being terrible," Roy said.

"I was in your play."

"No. Madge Pierson—Madge—was that your name then?"

"Certainly. In your play I was the kid sister."

"No," Roy said. "The girl who played that part was a lanky, skinny thing."

"I suppose," Madge said, smiling, "that I have filled out since then."

"Yes, you have. And very nicely, too."

"Thank you. I really shouldn't have been furious with you for not remembering me. It's been almost ten years."

"But in the bar," Roy said. "You breezed in and called me George Vernon."

"I saw you arrive at the hotel and I was sure you were Roy Murray. Even after I checked the register and found

that you had signed 'George Vernon,' I was sure. But if you wanted to be incognito, that was all right with me. At the bar I was certain you'd recognize me. You didn't."

"I'm sorry."

"I told you my name. It didn't mean a thing to you."

"I apologize."

"And after I made up all that stuff about George—his sister in Columbus and all that—you kept on treating me as if I were someone who thought you were George Vernon. It made me furious. I was darned if I'd tell you I was that lanky, skinny thing in your play ten years ago. A girl likes to be remembered. Especially after she gives an author an unforgettable performance."

"You've taught me a lesson. But what about last night?"

"That was the truth. The Marions were suddenly called to Richmond."

"Well, thanks. If you hadn't stood me up, if I'd been in my hotel room last night, Madge, you probably saved my life. Thanks."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I imagine I was supposed to have been killed last night. Or, rather, George Vernon was."

She didn't speak for a moment. "I thought you were using words like kill and murder and suicide, but I couldn't believe my ears. And you thought that I—that I was—"

"I'm afraid I did."

"I wish you'd tell me what it's all about."

Roy told her, told her how and why he had become George Vernon, how, of all the names in the world, he had picked the name of a man who was to be murdered. He told her about the note, the encounter with his killer.

She said, "They still think you're George Vernon!"

"How can I convince them I'm not? They won't look at my driver's license or the scar behind my left ear. They won't cooperate at all. That cutie in my room undoubtedly thought I was pretending to be Roy Murray. To outwit him."

"They'll go on trying to kill you," Madge said. "Roy, the police! I wonder if they'd believe your story? I mean, I find it hard to believe and—"

"I don't blame you."

"If you had some concrete thing to show them you might convince them."

"Right. That was my plan. I was going to find you, show you to them. But now that you've turned out to be an old school chum instead of an accomplice in murder, I'm out of luck."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Roy."

"Don't apologize. Frankly, Madge, I was beginning not to like you, for wanting me murdered. That isn't a quality I admire in young ladies."

"Roy, how can you be so calm?"

"I'm not calm," Roy said. "I'm just pretending to be in order to impress you. You should have seen me in my hotel room. But now I'm mad, and that helps some. I want to meet the guy who's gunning for me. And I think I can arrange it."

"Must you?"

"No one followed me out here. I'm sure of that. So he's lost me."

"Stay lost, Roy."

"I couldn't. Murderers always find their victims. That's their job. Listen, could you drive me into town? No, just to the edge of town. I don't want you mixed up in this."

"Roy, I'm a big girl! Let me help."

"You stay out of this. This is my murder. And don't tell Mrs. Lindley my name isn't Vernon. I don't want to explain."

"Of course not."

A LOOK of understanding flashed over Mrs. Lindley's face when she saw Madge and Roy approaching. "Oh, Mr. Vernon!" she cried. "You're a friend of Miss Pierson's! You know I just couldn't place you. My husband couldn't either."

"I'm so sorry to have barged in that way. Thank you for being so nice to me."

"Oh, you mustn't go. I think it's a fine party."

"It's a wonderful party," Roy said.

"I mean," Mrs. Lindley bubbled on, "for being so impromptu. I didn't get the idea until after the first act and I simply flew home to get things ready. I'd phoned ahead, of course, and the servants came through nobly! Please don't go, Mr. Vernon."

"I'm afraid that I must."

"Well, some other time!" She put her hand on Madge's shoulder. "Aren't I lucky, Mr. Vernon? Getting Miss Pierson to paint my portrait?"

"Oh," Roy said. "Yes, you are lucky. In my opinion, Miss Pierson is one of the best portrait painters now in business."

"Indeed, she is! And if the Marions hadn't been called to Richmond I never should have got her. So fortunate!"

Madge laughed and took Roy's arm. She said, "I'm driving George back to town, Mrs. Lindley."

Roy sat beside her in the car and felt very sorry that he was going to be busy. It was a night to be with a girl, especially a girl who had that shining black hair and the coolest eyes and warmest mouth he had ever seen. It was definitely not a night to leave a girl like that and go looking for a man who wanted to murder you. A man of that ilk deserved no consideration. Roy would break his date with him, he would see him sometime next week.

Madge said abruptly, "I'm driving you to the hotel."

"No. Let me out here."

"I insist," she said. "There must be some way I can help. Two are better than one."

"Stop the car," Roy said, "or I'll scream."

"If I stop, will you listen to me for a minute?" She pulled the car to a halt under the last tree before the broad suburban parkway became the town's main commercial street. She twisted beneath the wheel so that she was facing him. She said, "You're not sure about me, are you? You suspect anybody."

"That isn't it."

"It is, and I don't blame you. It's your life."

"I don't want you involved. Why should you get hurt? Because you and

I went to school together and you happened to run into me last night? No, Madge."

"Roy, please."

"No, Madge. Listen, when you finish here at Hampton, what do you do then?"

"I go to Provincetown. I'm due there on the fifteenth. During the summer I teach in an art school there."

"I'll be in Provincetown on the fifteenth. And nobody will be following me. Is it a date?"

"It's a date."

"So long, Madge."

"So long, Roy."

He got out of the car and walked away from it. He heard the motor start and turned to see Madge swing into a U-turn and head back for the Lindley's.

Today was the fifth of June. Ten days until the fifteenth. What were ten days? They could be less than two weeks or, if he made any mistakes, more than the rest of his life. He wouldn't make any mistakes; he would keep that date in Provincetown. That was something he didn't want to miss.

CHAPTER VII



ON HIS way back to the hotel Roy crossed the street twice. Twice he about-faced and retraced his steps. Several times he stopped and watched. No one was following him. The killer was unaware of his contact with Madge. Roy dropped that worry from his list.

The night clerk, a young man Roy hadn't seen before, was on duty behind the desk when he reached the hotel. There had been no calls for George Vernon since he had come on duty and, if there had been any before, the callers had left no message. Roy thanked him and continued on his way to his room.

The lamp on his bed table was still burning, the broken glass from the overhead light was still scattered about the floor. So far as he could tell, everything

was just as he had left it. No one had been in the room.

Roy forced himself to sit down, to relax. There was something wrong with him. Suddenly he knew what it was. He was hungry. He hadn't eaten since breakfast. He would have to take care of that. The man with the designs on his life probably wasn't missing any meals. He was probably keeping fit as a fiddle. The telephone rang. Roy snatched it up.

"Hello," he said.

There was no answer. He spoke again. Then he heard the quiet click of the receiver at the other end being hung up. Roy tapped the bar until the desk clerk came onto the wire.

"Yes, Mr. Vernon?"

"Someone just called me," Roy said.

"Yes, I handled the call. Were you disconnected?"

"Yell, yes. Was it a man?"

"Yes," the clerk replied. "Perhaps he'll call back. I'm sorry, Mr. Vernon. You weren't disconnected at this end."

"Don't worry about it," Roy said. "Thanks."

"Thank you," the clerk said. "Good night, Mr. Vernon."

Roy hadn't expected it to happen quite so soon. He thought he would have a little more breathing time before the killer located him again. He had wanted to eat without a pair of eyes watching him. But maybe he could turn that to his advantage.

He splashed cold water on his face and hurried down to the lobby. The clerk was busy at the desk with a new arrival. Three or four men sat in the sleek leather chairs, smoking and reading. Not one of them paid Roy any unusual attention. After his first glance at them, Roy didn't look in their direction again. He strolled through the lobby, out onto the street.

He walked to the corner before he looked over his shoulder. The sidewalk between him and the hotel entrance was deserted. He walked back again and stepped into the lobby. Each of the men was sitting exactly where he had been before. Roy went out again, headed for

the restaurant where he had had breakfast. It was an all-night place and a big plate-glass window covered the entire front.

It was after midnight and the streets were practically empty. It would be difficult for the killer to pursue him openly. He would have to slip from doorway to doorway, from corner to corner. He would stay out of Roy's sight, never let Roy out of his.

Roy finally entered the restaurant and took a table not too close to the big window, yet not too far away from it.

He ordered without looking at the waitress and he ate without looking at his food. His eyes never left the window. It was no good. People walked by, but no one went by the restaurant twice. No one, so far as Roy could tell, was stationed outside waiting for him.

THE food was an uncomfortable lump in his stomach. It hadn't helped him any. He was suddenly angry at himself for his incompetence. Things weren't going well at all.

There must be some way of tricking the man into identifying himself. There must be some place—not a dark, dead-end alley, not a lonely country road where a man with a gun could safely use it—but some peopled place into which the killer would have to follow Roy in order not to lose him.

He was paying his check when he thought of the bowling alley on the main street. It had been open at dawn that morning. It would certainly be open now. Sprawling across the second floor of a block-long building, it had two entrances that could not be watched simultaneously. One was on the side street named Carleton, the other on the next side street. If he went into the bowling alley, his man would have to come into it, too. He felt a little bit better now about his ability to stay alive.

The Hampton Recreation Center was a streamlined masterpiece of architecture. Under soft, but sun-bright lighting, the twenty-four shining alleys looked like a jitterbug's idea of the floor

of heaven.

There was a milk bar, a sandwich bar, a soft-drink bar and a liquor bar. There was low music that was a background for the triumphant cries and the frustrated wails that came from the surprisingly large number of midnight athletes. Roy walked into the bench-lined lane that divided the alleys into sets of twelve. He got into a position from which he could see the heads of both staircases.

In the next ten minutes a man and a woman came in and moved directly to the bar. A crowd of youngsters, their feet still twitching from some prom, stormed the soft-drink bar. A party of four men took over two alleys, took off their coats and rolled up their sleeves. Roy watched only the three men who had come in unaccompanied. One was eating a sandwich, another sat on a bench and watched the bowlers, the third was having a beer.

Roy let five minutes pass. Then, rising slowly, he walked toward one of the stairways. He looked nowhere but straight ahead of him. At the top of the stairs he paused and lit a cigarette. Two-thirds of the way down he stopped, turned and ran quietly back up.

It had worked. The man who had been at the liquor bar was coming hurriedly toward the stairs. He was short enough to be a jockey, wide enough to be a good fullback. His chunky body strained the seams of his sharp, over-tailored clothes. The expression on his pallid face was one of weariness until he saw Roy coming toward him.

The man stopped so abruptly that he almost lost his balance. His eyes popped open, his head twisted to one side. He reacted as if he had been physically struck. Keeping his eyes from meeting Roy's, he whirled in his tracks and retreated to the bar. He stood before it, rigid, his head bent over an empty glass.

Roy walked to the end of the bar where it turned to meet the wall. From there he had a full view of the squat, square man. He watched the bartender go to him and wait for his order. He watched him take away the tall glass

and return with a shot glass and a bottle. When he drank, Roy saw that the man's hands were shaking.

In the alley nearest the bar, a bowler scored an ear-splitting strike and the man wheeled to face the crackling explosion. He slopped another drink from the bottle into his glass and gulped it down. His eyes flickered everywhere but in Roy's direction.

The other people at the bar sipped their drinks, chatting and laughing. The high school crowd's exuberance rose raucously above the music and the rumble of balls rolling along the alleys to smack into the wooden pins. An elderly man came toward Roy, asked if he would share an alley.

When Roy turned back to the little man he found himself being examined. Their eyes met. Roy grinned at him and the man reacted as if he had been struck by lightning. He spun away from the bar and fled out of the room.

HE WAS sprinting away from the main street, half a block away, when Roy reached the street. Roy raced after him. It was grotesque, inane; it was like one small boy chasing another. They ran two blocks and another and into a fourth.

Fortunately, the man's hysterical pace fell off and Roy was able to keep the distance between them from increasing. They pounded along, relentlessly, like quarter milers.

They were entering a desolate part of the town now. It seemed to be an obsolete and abandoned industrial district. They ran by crumbling walls, falling fences. Ahead of him the man scurried around a corner. Roy, gritting his teeth, pressing his hand against his pain-shot side, sprinted to the corner. It was a useless torture. The man had vanished.

Roy leaned back against the wall and fought for his breath. He became conscious of a rumbling, clanking noise. Less than fifty feet away a freight train was crossing the alleyway. He forced himself to walk the fifty feet to the track.

It was a long train—the man could not have crossed the tracks ahead of it. Somewhere in that fifty feet the little man had found shelter.

Roy started back to the corner, inspecting the wall to his left. He found a place that the man might have been able to scale. Roy's greater height made it possible for him to pull himself to the top of the wall and see what was beyond it.

He was unable to see anything until the caboose of the freight rolled by. From its light he could make out stacks of lumber, huge old boilers, then the light disappeared.

If the man was hiding in there, it would be impossible to find him. It would be dangerous even to try. But perhaps he wasn't there.

Roy lowered himself to the ground, crossed the alley and found a high board fence.

It was, in comparison with its surroundings, in good condition. Although it was too high to climb, a triple strand of barbed wire lined its top. Then, close to the center of the fence, Roy found a missing board. The man could have squeezed through there. Roy could, and did.

He was in a yard filled with waist-high weeds. Before him, silhouetted in the glow of the lights of a far-away freight yard, was an abandoned mansion—an old homestead that had been trapped by the onrush of industry and, probably, because of some freak will, had been left standing to die a slow natural death. Roy walked forward cautiously, then stopped when he thought he detected a glimmer of light in the house.

Again he started forward, and again he stopped. Could this be a trick? Was he doing exactly as he was supposed to do—walk into a dark, deserted house? No, that didn't seem likely. The man's fear at Roy's discovery of him was too real; it couldn't have been shammed. And the man would have let Roy see him go through the fence. He wouldn't have let himself get out of Roy's sight at the crucial moment.

CHAPTER VIII



A DULL light wavered and disappeared on the ground floor of the house. This time there could be no mistaking it. It was as though the door of an illuminated room had been opened and quickly

closed, or as if someone had moved across Roy's vision with a light.

Cautiously, he approached the house. Then a freight train covered any noise he might make and removed the need of caution. He climbed the five steps of the back porch and found the door.

It was securely padlocked, but the bottom panel had long ago been battered in. Roy crouched, maneuvered through the hole and got inside the house. He stood up, listening and peering into the darkness. He could hear nothing but the freight train rumbling along not twenty feet away. It was impossible to see anything.

At last, he risked lighting a match. By the time it went out he had crossed the huge empty kitchen and was at the hall door in the center of the farthest wall. There he stopped and counted his matches. Only three more remained in the packet. He would have to use them wisely. One hand on each wall, pushing a foot far ahead of him before he took a step, he groped his way down the hall into the smothering blackness.

His right hand moved across some woodwork and was on the panelling of a closed door. He opened it, slipped inside the room and closed it. He would wait there until the freight had passed, until he had the advantage of hearing any noise that might be made by someone in the house.

He fought against the urge to strike a match. He had broken one from the packet and three times his hand had moved to strike it. Cursing himself for being panicky when he needed to be cool, he forced himself to save those matches. But it was impossible. There was something—some feeling, some old

compulsion—that drove him to strike a light to see what was behind him in this room.

It was the little man. Completely inert, he lay on his face in a corner, as if he had been flung there. Roy dropped to his knees beside the man when the match flickered out. He grasped the man's shoulder to twist him around and through his clothes he could feel the warmth of his body.

But when he put his hand on the man's chest, he could feel no heartbeat. When he groped for the man's wrist and found it, there was no throb of pulse. Roy struck a match.

He saw two staring, distended eyes. He saw a mouth that was twisted in the tight grimace of final agony. Roy rose and moved as far away from the man as he could while his light lasted. It was something he had never before seen, something that he couldn't remain near. The man had been murdered by strangling.

The break in the kitchen door was a gray blob before him and he ducked swiftly through it. The high weeds clung to his knees and thighs as he strode through the yard. Now it was murder in the past tense. Now there would be no keeping the police out of it.

At the fence he hesitated and turned back to the house. The light was there. It held for a few seconds, then vanished. Roy broke into a run, angling back toward the house. His foot caught in a tangle of weeds and he sprawled forward. His hand hit something sharp, his head something that was heavy, solid.

HE WAS sitting up when he knew what it was all about again. His hand hurt more than his head. He pulled a jagged piece of glass out of his palm and tightly bound the wound with his handkerchief.

Getting to his feet, he looked at the house. It was completely dark. The railroad sounds in the distance accentuated the deathly stillness about him.

He saved his last match until he was in the room that was off to the right

of the hall. He lit it carefully, cupped it in his hands and lifted it above his head.

The room was empty. There was enough light for him to see that. The body of the squat, little dead man was gone.

It had been taken away.

It must still be somewhere in the house—it and the person who had strangled the life out of it. Roy turned to the door.

He was in the hall when the motor of an automobile started up. The sound came from the front of the house. His match gave out and he had trouble finding the door. He raced outside and through the broken gate in the high fence just in time to see the gray shape of the car move around the corner.

He ran a few steps, then stopped. It was no use.

Cursing himself for his inadequacy, he started back toward the center of town. Actually, it hadn't been his fault, but that didn't alter the facts. He had been within a few yards of the man who wanted George Vernon dead, who wanted him dead so much that he had murdered a hireling for endangering the completion of his plan.

If I had stayed in that room for just a few minutes, Roy thought, if I had waited a few minutes the Big Boy would have walked into my arms. It would all be over.

Now what was he supposed to do? A murder had been committed. You reported murders to the police. The police asked you where the body was and when you couldn't answer that one. . . .

What he needed was a lawyer. The lawyer he needed was Charley Drexel. Charley was tough. He had been around. By some miracle of modern transportation he might even be at the hotel now, waiting to help a client in trouble.

Ten minutes later the desk clerk of the Hampton House was shaking his head. "There have been no calls for you, Mr. Vernon."

"Look," Roy said. Then he decided he was too tired to explain. Instead he

said, "Has anyone been asking for Roy Murray?"

"Roy Murray?" The clerk was puzzled but amenable. "No, nothing for anyone by that name either, Mr. Vernon."

"Thank you," Roy said and headed for the elevator.

The first thing he would do was tend to his hand. Then he would call New York again. The call might be wasted; Charley might be already on his way. But it would be nice knowing that.

He was about to nudge the dozing elevator operator when a girl's voice, low and urgent, said behind him. "Mr. Vernon?" Roy turned slowly.

The girl was frightened. Her blue eyes were wide and anxious. Her unpainted lips were trembling. Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her. Everything about the plain, drab girl before him spoke of fear.

"Mr. Vernon?" she said again, and this time the words were a prayer.

Roy hesitated. His first reaction had been to shout that he was not George Vernon, that he was Roy Murray. He stopped himself from saying it. The girl expected him to be George Vernon, needed him to be Vernon. Here, then, might be the answer to the riddle that had plagued him nearly to death.

He nodded at the girl and smiled. "Yes. Yes, I'm Vernon."

FOR a moment she swayed with sudden relief. Then words came tumbling out of her mouth. "I'm Elsa Carr. I tried to get here yesterday but I couldn't. They—they were watching me, I couldn't get away."

Her lips snapped shut and her eyes roved the lobby, searching out every corner. There was no one in it but the clerk behind his desk.

Elsa Carr touched Roy's arm. "Can we talk now? Over there? It seems safe."

She led him to a sofa, pulled him down beside her. With quick intensity, as if it were something she had to say but wanted it over with, she said, "It's silly of me to try and thank you. Nothing

can tell you how grateful I am to you. You know what this means to me and I know the risk you're taking to do it."

"It's all right," Roy assured her.

"Mr. Vernon, I—" She hesitated. Again her eyes checked the lobby, made sure that no one watched or listened. "Mr. Vernon," she said, "in your letter you didn't explain just how you could help me. What is it that you know?"

"Miss Carr," Roy said, and stopped.

"Please tell me!"

"Wait. Let's take it easy."

She went rigid. The fear shot back into her eyes. In a whisper she said again, "What is it that you know?"

"Listen to me—"

The girl stood up. She moved backward slowly, away from Roy. "You're not him," she said hoarsely. "You're one of them. You aren't Vernon."

She turned and was in the first step of a headlong, stumbling flight when Roy caught her by the wrist. He swung her back to him, held her by the shoulders. He spoke quietly, rapidly.

"Listen to me," he said. "I'm not George Vernon. But I'm not one of them. You've got to listen to me, for my sake as well as yours."

Her head was down and twisted away from him. He couldn't see her face. He didn't know if she was even hearing him tell her what had happened to him in the past day and two nights. But he went on and as he did, he felt her go limp under his hands. He steadied her and made her sit again on the sofa.

"You must believe what I've told you," he continued. "I don't know what's going on, but I do know that George Vernon is in danger. And right now, that's me. Can't you see that you've got to believe me?"

He was hardly able to hear her say, "Yes, I've got to believe you. There's nothing else."

Roy said, "You're in trouble and I'm in trouble. You tell me what it's about. Maybe we can work it out together."

"If only I could be sure that you—you aren't one of them. You might be the police and—"

"No. I'm not either of them. I'm a writer named Roy Murray. If you weren't frightened half to death you'd believe me."

"Yes," she said. She turned to face him squarely. "I'm going to trust you. If I'm wrong about you, well, I'm too tired now to care. Whatever happens to me, I'm too tired to fight it any more."

"All right," Roy said. "What is it?"

"It's pretty bad. I—I'm wanted by the police."

"Why?"

Her eyes looked straight into his. "For murder," she said. She was silent a second. Then she said softly, "I didn't do it. I wasn't even there when it happened. But I can't prove that to you. I can't prove it to anyone." Her voice rose suddenly, hysterically. "They've made it look as though I killed him! That was the way they planned it!"

CHAPTER IX



ROY put his hand on the girl's arm. "Wait a minute. You've got to get a grip on yourself or you'll crack up. Go slowly."

"Yes. You see, when I left him he was all right. I didn't know about it until the next morning. It was in the paper that he had been killed, that the police were looking for me. I ran away. Then Carl Morgan found me and I had to run away again. But Morgan found me once more—that was after my sister brought me George Vernon's letter. It said that I should meet him here and that he would help me."

"Go slowly, Elsa. I can't keep up with you."

"If Morgan didn't kill Artie, then one of his gang did. But I can't prove it! You see, that's the trouble! If the police ever get me, I'm done for."

"Elsa, did this Morgan follow you here?"

"I—I don't think so. I think I lost him before I left Philly. But that's why I didn't get here yesterday when George

Vernon's letter told me to. I couldn't shake Morgan."

"What else did the letter say?"

"Just that I should meet Vernon here. That he could help me prove I didn't kill Artie. He said that he was in some trouble, that's why I had to meet him here, secretly." She stopped. Her lip was trembling. "What should I do?"

Roy shook his head. "I don't know. If no one followed you here you're safe for the time being. We'd better sit tight a little while. I've sent for a friend—my lawyer in New York. He'll know what to do."

Her hand was digging into his arm. "This friend of yours—he won't tell the cops?"

"No," Roy said. "He'll help you. He'll help us both."

She was looking directly at him. She didn't see that the desk clerk was halfway across the lobby, moving toward them.

The clerk raised his voice. "Are you Miss Carr?"

The girl leaped to her feet and wheeled toward him. The man smiled apologetically. He said, "I didn't mean to startle you, Miss Carr. There's a phone call for you. Will you take it in the first booth?"

"Yes," she said. "I will."

The clerk moved back to the desk. Elsa Carr's voice was tense when she spoke to Roy. "That's George Vernon calling me. It has to be. He's the only one who knows I'm here."

"He's waiting to talk to you in that booth, Elsa."

"Yes, thank God. Nothing's happened to him. He's all right. I was afraid that—"

The sound she made was more a sob than a laugh. She pressed the back of her fists to her eyes. Then, half-running, she crossed the lobby to the phone booth. Roy watched her pull the glass door shut behind her. He saw her lips begin to move.

There was a scratching sound to his left. He turned toward it. A cloud of cigarette smoke floated up above the back of a tall chair. He walked to it,

looked down over it.

"Hello, Madge," he said.

"Hello," she answered.

"What are you doing here?"

"Never mind. Roy, I believe that girl. I don't know why, but I do."

"So do I," Roy said. "And I know the reason. It's because she makes sense. She makes this whole thing make sense."

"How do you figure that?"

"Somehow that man she calls Morgan intercepted George Vernon's letter. His boys were waiting here to meet Vernon, to make sure he didn't spoil the plan to frame Elsa for that killing. They found a George Vernon here, too—me. At least now I know why I'm a target for murder."

"But that'll be ended soon. If that is Vernon on the phone. All of us together, Roy, we can clear this up."

"Charley will clear it up. He knows the ropes."

"Your lawyer?"

"Yes. Charles A. Drexel, the craftiest barrister on Broadway. Unless I don't know Charley, he's on his way here now. And I do know Charley."

"Roy! Here comes the girl."

ELSA CARR was stepping out of the phone booth. Her face was filled with relief, with eagerness. Then her eyes fell on Madge and alarm leaped through her and she jerked to a halt. She turned as if to go back into the booth. Then she changed her mind and, moving to a nearby bench, sat on it with her back to Roy and Madge.

Madge said, "She doesn't know what to do about me. She's giving you a chance to get rid of me."

"I'd like to get rid of you. I don't want you mixed up in whatever is going to happen."

"I'm going to talk to her."

She strode toward the girl. Following her, Roy saw Elsa Carr rise uncertainly, not knowing whether to stay or run. Then he heard Madge talking to her, telling her that she was a friend of Roy Murray's, that any friend of Roy's was a friend of hers. She talked on,

warmly, reassuringly. Roy watched the girl relax and respond to Marge's warmth.

Madge said, "Was that George Vernon on the phone?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?" Roy asked.

"He's here. He wants me to meet him right away. In a place called Tipton Lane. I'm going there now."

"I'll go with you, Elsa," Madge said.

"No," Roy said. "I'll go with her."

The girl said timidly, "I—I'd like her to go, too." She looked gratefully at Madge. Roy felt that it was important to her that Madge went, that she trusted her more fully than she did him. Elsa said, "I don't think Tipton Lane is very far."

"It isn't," Madge said. "I did some sketches near there the other day. It might have been a lane two hundred years ago. Now it's an alley. We can walk there more quickly than I could drive you. Let's go."

The click of their heels roused the clerk from his catnap and he smiled sleepily as they passed his desk. They went out into the night, turned to the left, walked past the building that housed the bowling alley, turned left again. The girl walked quickly. She was excited and strangely gay as if she had no doubt that her nightmare was about to be ended.

Except for an occasional car and a few hurrying pedestrians, the streets were deserted. They stepped down a curb and moved across the mouth of a narrow alley.

Madge said, "Here. This is it."

They stood still, peering down into Tipton Lane. No one stepped out of the darkness toward them.

Cautiously they edged into the alley, around the bent elbow in its middle and on toward the street at the far end.

A light high up in one of the buildings snapped on and they could see that Tipton Lane was hemmed by the backs of five and six-story tenements. They walked more rapidly now. At the end of the alley they stopped. There had been no one on the narrow street.

"Something's happened to him," Elsa Carr said.

"Maybe," Roy said. "But we're early. We'll walk back."

The light on the fifth floor was out now. The sound of their footsteps was the only thing that broke the quiet of the little street. Once Elsa cried out and then giggled as a frightened cat scurried across the alley in front of them.

They started forward again. Now they were beyond the elbow and Elsa was ahead of them. She stepped out of the alley onto the sidewalk of the street. For a moment she was out of their sight, then she was darting frantically toward them. She stumbled and it was Roy who kept her from falling. Panic had strangled her and the sounds she made were a hysterical jumble. Roy tightened his grip on her shoulders, shook her.

"Elsa, what is it?"

"In a car out there," she gasped, waiting . . . Morgan!"

SHE twisted out of Roy's grasp and ran toward the far end of the alley. Madge and Roy chased her. The alley suddenly lit up with the haze of reflected light. Then the motor of a car and two headlights moved around the elbow and caught them, blinding them with their brilliance. They stopped. The lights crept slowly toward them. Roy stretched out his hand and caught Elsa.

"The other way," he said.

"No!" Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "No, Morgan's there."

The lights stopped moving. They snapped off. A car door slammed and a man moved stealthily toward them. Elsa sagged at his side and Roy slipped his arm around her. He shook the glare out of his eyes. The figure that approached them was a man. The man stopped ten feet in front of them.

"Roy!" he called. "Roy, is that you?"

"Charley," Roy said. He laughed and said it again.

Charley approached them, his bulky, well-fed figure rolling from side to side as he walked. He took off the three-

dollar felt hat that he had worn all the years that Roy had known him. With the back of his other hand he wiped the top of his egg-bald head.

He said, "What is this, anyway?"

Elsa was holding tight to Roy. "Who is he?" she whispered.

Roy said, "It's all right now, Elsa. Charley—"

The girl screamed. "Listen! Can't you hear it? That's Morgan's car. He's coming this way. She seized Roy and dragged him past Charley toward Charley's sedan. "Hurry!" she cried. "Please!"

Charley said, "What's going on?"

Elsa pushed Roy into the driver's seat. Sobbing with fear, she choked out the words. "You drive. Let's get out of here."

She dove into the back of the car. Charley followed her. Madge slipped into the seat beside Roy. Roy snapped on the lights, the ignition. He got the car going and backed out of the alley. He righted the car, sent it moving toward the main street of the town. He glanced at Madge. She was watching Elsa. In the mirror Roy saw that the girl was on her knees, peering out through the rear window. Charley lit a match and held it to the end of a fat cigar.

"All this is fun," Charley said, "but what does it add up to? A guy gets a mysterious message from his favorite client, he breaks his neck getting here and the client won't talk."

"Good going, Charley," Roy said. "How did you do it?"

"Flew to Wilmington. Hired this car and drove over. Just saw you three disappear around a corner as I pulled up in front of the hotel. I lost you, but you had to be in that alley. There was no place else for you to be. Come on, Roy. Give. Introduce me to the ladies."

"I," said Madge, "am an old chum of Roy's from way back. And it was lovely meeting you in that alley, Charley."

"Some of my best friends I met in alleys," Charley said. He touched Elsa's shoulder. "Sit down, baby. Nobody's following us."

"Yes!" Elsa's voice was shrill. "I wasn't sure, but that car—yes, it is following!"

Roy glanced into the reflector. He could only see Elsa and Charley, who had twisted his bulk around to look out the back window.

Charley said, "Yeah, there's a car all right. Roy, make a couple turns. Give 'em the old one-two and see what happens."

CHAPTER X



NO ONE spoke until Roy had pulled off the main street, driven a block and turned again. Then Charley said, "The girlie's right, Roy. Step on it!"

Roy threw the weight of his foot on the gas pedal. The car Charley had hired in Wilmington was a good one. It kept its four wheels on the ground as Roy raced it back into the main street. He pushed it to eighty as they roared out of the town. They sped past the real estate development where the Lindleys lived, hit the open country, still going fast. Then Roy had to slow down.

Ahead of them the road split and plunged into a double-barreled tunnel. They were nearing the far mouth of the tunnel when Charley spoke.

"We've lost them."

Charley righted himself in his seat, pulled Elsa down from the window. "It's all right now, baby. You're a client of Charley Drexel's now, so your troubles are over."

Roy saw Elsa smile weakly at the lawyer and sink back exhausted in the corner of the car.

The car burst from the tunnel's mouth and flicked through its gardened plaza. A state trooper was sitting on a wall, smoking a cigarette. Roy thought of asking Charley if they could use a cop, then decided against it. Charley considered policemen adept at helping old folks and children across streets and that was all. He caught the lawyer's

eye in the mirror.

"What do we do now, Charley?"

"Keep going. We'll drive to Wilmington and establish a base there. In the meantime, how about a few salient facts?"

Roy told the story. He began with the moment of the great coincidence when he had chosen the name of George Vernon and he ended with the moment that the lights of Charley's car had pinioned them in Tipton Lane. Charley chuckled.

"Roy, Roy," he said.

"What? What's funny?"

"If you could pick horses out of a hat the way you can names of murder-bait. Look, kid, you say nobody except Madge here knows that you were Roy Murray pretending to be George Vernon?"

"That's right. And then I told Elsa a couple of hours ago. The four of us here are the only ones in the world who know. Why, Charley?"

"Quiet, please," Charley said. "Let's have a little silence. The Brain wants to function. So do not disturb."

Roy drove on and it was pleasant. He handed Madge a cigarette and put another between his lips. Madge looked to him for a match and he shook his head. She searched through her purse, then snapped open the compartment in the dashboard. She lit his cigarette, held the flame to her own, and slipped the matches back into the compartment. Roy inhaled and settled down behind the wheel. Suddenly, everything was fine with him.

Beside him was—he tried to think of a girl he would rather have beside him, and he couldn't. Behind him was Charley. That was fine, too. And Elsa Carr. Things would start looking up for her. Charley would see to that. Charley would see to everything. Yes, life was definitely turning over on its non-seamy side where it hadn't been spending much time in the past forty hours.

He glanced at Madge, started to speak, and stopped. Madge was leaning forward, staring straight before her. She was filled with a strange tension that sent a chill crinkling through him.

In the glow of the dashboard light her face was strained and pale. He started to speak again and, almost imperceptibly, she shook her head.

He kept his eyes on the road and waited. He felt Madge lean back in the seat, then slide slightly toward him. He heard her heave a great sigh and say, too merrily, "Oh, what a glorious night!"

"Quiet, sweetheart," Roy said. "You'll disturb the Brain."

CHARLEY uttered a derisive laugh and said something that Roy didn't hear. All of his attention was on Madge's left hand as it stretched forward until it was beneath the bulb of the dashboard light. It stopped there.

She opened it and Roy saw a sheet of yellow paper, the size of a grocery store order blank. It was a printed form and to it pencilled writing had been added. Roy leaned forward, hunched over the wheel. Now he could read the slip of paper.

It was only a bill issued by the Crown Garage, 114 West 48th Street, New York City. It was a bill for one month's rental, 12 gallons of gas, 1 quart of oil, a cleaning job, a new windshield wiper. It was made out to C. A. Drexel. A garage bill made out to Charley—yet it made Madge's hand tremble as she held it.

He felt her nudge his thigh. Quietly she pulled down the compartment door and slipped the yellow paper into it. He glanced at her face and knew from its expression that that was all she could tell him. The rest was up to him.

He sent the facts winding slowly through his mind. Madge had found a garage bill made out to Charley in the car's compartment. Charley's garage was the Crown on West 48th Street. He knew that. The Crown people had made out Charley's monthly bill and he had tucked it into the dashboard. That was perfectly all right.

But it wasn't all right that the bill should be in this car. Charley had flown to Wilmington. In Wilmington he had rented this car. There it was!

You didn't set up housekeeping in a rented car. You didn't take bills out of your pocket and file them in a compartment of a rented car.

Roy stared at the windshield wiper. It was shining, unmistakably new and recently installed. This wasn't a rented car. It was Charley's car. And Charley had lied to him.

Why had he lied? Why had he said he had flown to Wilmington when, actually, he had driven his own car from New York to Hampton? But he couldn't have done that. It would take at least six hours to cover that distance.

Six hours. The two words burned themselves into Roy's brain. Six hours ago he had not yet sent his message to Charley. Yet sometime before that Charley had started driving to Hampton. He had set out for Hampton when it was impossible for him to know that Roy was there, pretending to be George Vernon. But he had known.

How, Roy asked himself, could he have known?

The answer to that one sent Roy's mind into a tailspin. One of two people had given Charley that information. The short, squat man who was dead now. Or the girl in the back seat, Elsa Carr. It had to be one of them. And if it was, it meant that no George Vernon was ever to have been murdered.

It was Roy Murray who was to have been killed.

He should have known that. He should have known it from the first. He had known all along that the coincidence was too great—that he had taken the name of a man marked for murder was too incredible to be true.

It wasn't true. It was he who was to die. He was to have been found dead as George Vernon. His own identification was to have been stripped from him. The hotel registry, the suicide note, the letter signed Cynthia which was still in his pocket—that would have proved he was George Vernon. The police would never link anyone to the murder of that man because there was no Vernon.

It was a plan that had been possible

to set up only because he meant to take a new name, to hide out and write his play. Only one person knew that he was going to do that. He looked up into the mirror. The girl Elsa had moved over and her head was on Charley's shoulder. She was pretending to be asleep. Roy knew that Charley had been whispering to her; Charley knew that Roy had seen him doing it. He grinned at Roy, and winked.

Charley was trying to kill him. He had already strangled a man who had got in his way. But why did Charley want him dead?

He had the answer to that one, too, now. The money.

THE old lawyer had been frantic when Roy had instructed him to give it away. He had been frantic because there was no money. Charley had used it and, to avoid the discovery, Roy had to be killed. He was going to be killed any moment now. Charley needed only to extend his hand, touch the back of Roy's neck with a gun, pull the trigger.

He was chauffeuring himself to the lonely spot where he was to be murdered. The girl pretending that she was to meet George Vernon—that was a hoax to maneuver him into this spot. It was Charley she had talked to on the phone. It was she who told him that Roy had sent for him.

There was no Morgan. There had been no car at the end of the alley. No car had followed them. It had all been staged by the girl. All of it except the fright that had seized her when she stepped from the phone booth and saw him with Madge. They hadn't known about Madge then. They hadn't included her in their plans.

The relief that swept over Roy was like a wave of cold, clean water. He was safe, so long as Madge was with him. Charley couldn't kill him with Madge there. Somehow, Charley would try to separate them. Roy wouldn't let that happen. He wasn't done for yet. Between the two of them, he'd get out of this.

His relief exploded as quickly as it

had appeared. Charley's words had come back to him.

"... look, kid, you say nobody except Madge here knows you were Roy Murray pretending to be a George Vernon..."

Charley had asked him that. And he had assured Charley that no one in the world except the four people in this car knew anything about it. It was all right for the girl to know. She was in this with Charley. And it didn't matter that Madge knew it. It only meant the use of another bullet—one for the back of his head, one for Madge.

Roy turned and looked at her. She didn't move or speak. She might have been an image, a very lovely image. Then her hand crept across the seat and waited for Roy's. He took it, held it for a moment. He glanced into the mirror. Charley was smoking his cigar more rapidly. It might have been nerves; it might have been impatience to finish a job he had to do. He had already killed one man, strangled the life out of him, carted his body away.

CHAPTER XI



THE ghost of a plan formed in Roy's mind. It might work and it might not. There was no time to ponder a better one. Two things might make it work. Charley's ignorance that Roy knew the

truth was one; the fact that he had already killed a man the other. Those two things and a lot of help from heaven.

He thought they would never reach a fork in the road. But finally there was one in front of them. He eased the car off the highway to Wilmington and in a moment they were rolling along at right angles to it. Charley hadn't noticed. Or had he noticed and didn't care? Was one deserted place as good as another to fire two shots?

It was heaven that helped this time. The road kept swinging to the right and only one direct turn was necessary to

point the car back to the highway. Then they were on it again and Charley hadn't realized yet that they were driving away from Wilmington, back toward Hampton, back toward a tunnel where a trooper might be stationed.

Madge was leaning forward in her seat, her hands clasped tight in her lap. She knew what Roy was doing. She was rooting them home. Roy started whistling softly and she stopped peering out through the windshield. She leaned back, pretending it didn't matter how soon they got to the tunnel where the policeman might be.

He couldn't be there, he wouldn't be there. It wouldn't be his sole duty to police the tunnel, not at night when the traffic was light. But it was possible. Accidents often happened in tunnels. He had to be there.

The car rolled on. Slowly, carefully, Roy pressed his foot harder on the pedal so that Charley wouldn't sense that they were going seventy now. Suddenly Charley cupped his hands around his eyes and looked out the window.

Roy said, "Charley, do they miss me in New York? Have you been flooded with inquiries about me, Charley?"

"Yeah," Charley grunted. "Flooded."

"Did you tell them not to worry about me, Charley, that I was all right?"

Going in the opposite direction it was hard to tell how much further it was to the tunnel. It couldn't be far. The car was doing more than a mile a minute. It had been doing that for quite a few minutes. Roy said, "Charley?"

"Huh?" The lawyer was still looking out the window. "Yeah?"

"I got a good start on my play. Before all this began, I mean. Want me to tell you about it?"

"Say, are we on the right road?"

"Of course."

"You wouldn't be kidding me, would you?" Roy saw Charley's hand slip into his side pocket. He saw the girl move away, cower back into her corner. "I can take a joke, kiddo," Charley said, "but not at this time of night."

The lights of the tunnel popped into sight. Charley saw them the same time

he did. He said, "What do you think you're doing?"

The state trooper was not sitting on the wall where they had seen him. Roy took his foot off the accelerator and allowed the car to coast. It didn't matter now.

And then, suddenly he saw the trooper. He was gunning up his motorcycle. He was on the cycle and it was headed into the tunnel. Then he swerved in a semi-circle and was facing the car. He stopped and watched it come toward him.

Roy let it roll on and put his foot on the brake.

Charley spoke. His voice was normal and pleasant. "You can't prove a thing, Roy. You're going to sound very silly."

The state trooper was looking through the window, across Madge at Roy.

Roy said carefully, "There's something in the back of this car, in the luggage compartment, I'd like you to see."

Charley lunged forward. He grappled with the door handle, swung open the door. Roy was ahead of him. He hit him while he was still on the running board. Charley went limp, started to fall. The cop came around the front of the car and grabbed Charley as he scrambled to his feet. He dragged the lawyer to the back of the car, held him while Roy unlocked the compartment. In it, folded up like a jackknife, was the short, thick dead man. . . .

MADGE poured another cup of coffee for Roy. She put into it exactly the right amount of cream, precisely enough sugar. She smiled as she leaned across the table and handed it to him. He took it and he wasn't in his hotel room. He was in a small cottage by a waterfall, seventh heaven, a garden of roses.

"You transport me," he told Madge.

"Hmm?"

"You send me." He sighed. "Due to the unreliability of my ex-lawyer, I am a poor man. It may be several months before I can buy you green negligées to traipse around our house in." He sighed

again. "I wish I could pick lawyers like I can negligées."

"Roy, that man Charley killed followed you from New York. At Charley's orders?"

He nodded. "The moment I decided to get rid of my money, Charley knew he had to do something drastic. His book on my finances wouldn't stand any looking into. When the little man discovered here in Hampton that I had taken the name George Vernon, he called his boss. That gave Charley his lovely, foolproof idea.

"He drove down here pronto to have me killed as a George Vernon. He picked up darling little Elsa in Philadelphia. It was she who wrote the 'Cynthia' letter for him. Sweetheart, if you hadn't sent me out to the Marions, I would have been murdered in my sleep—in that bed there. Thanks, Madge."

"And if you hadn't outwitted the little man the next night—thank you for that, Roy."

"If you hadn't discovered it was Charley's own car we were in—no, Madge, I owe my life mostly to you."

"You were driving the car, Roy. It was you who finally tricked Charley."

"Let's not argue, Madge."

"But you saved my life and I insist on showing my appreciation." Suddenly, she laughed. Then her eyes narrowed suspiciously and she said, "You know, on second thought it wasn't a Roy Murray who wrote that one-act play I was in at school. It was a boy named George Vernon."

"Now, wait!" Roy said frantically. "Don't kid me. I am Roy Murray! I can prove it. I'm sure I'm Roy Murray."

A waiter stepped into the room. He looked at Roy and said, "May I remove the table, Mr. Vernon?"

"My name's Murray!" Roy shouted.

"That so?" the waiter said. "That's my name, too. Murray, Roy Murray. And you know, there's a fellow in New York who writes plays. His name is Roy Murray, too. What's your first name, Mr. Murray?"

"George," Roy said weakly. "Call me George."