



WITH A STRANGE DEVICE

He studied himself in the mirror while carefully knotting his tie. Lean, ascetic features, thin lips, dark eyes, black eyebrows and hair. Small white scar on left temple. Clean-shaven, thirtyish, neat dresser. How long before that description became circulated? How long before some collarless, cigarette-chewing write-up man cashed in on him with a yarn sensationally titled *The Phantom Killer of Cooper's Creek* or something like that?

It didn't look like the face of a killer. Too thoughtful and bookish. But it might well fill the part with eyes straining at a police camera and with an identification number hung beneath. Anyone could look a suitable candidate for the death-cell when photographed in those circumstances, especially when bleary-eyed and frowsy after a long, long night of intensive questioning.

'Dinners ready!'

'Coming!' he called.

He didn't really want any dinner but would have to go through the motions of eating a hearty one. The alarm permeating his mind was matched by a sickness in his stomach. But abstinence would invite more awkward questions. He'd have to force the unwanted food down.

'The condemned man ate a large, four course meal.' Ridiculous! When facing his end, no man could do that.

Chapter 1

The governmental research establishment, the very heart of the country's scientific effort, was huge and formidable by any standard, even that of the technological twentieth century. By comparison Fort Knox and Alcatraz, the Bastille and the Kremlin, were as frontier forts built with wood logs. Yet it was vulnerable. Hostile eyes had examined what little could be seen of it, hostile minds had carefully considered what little was known about it, after which the entire place became less safe than a moth-eaten tent.

The outer wall was forty feet high above the earth, thirty feet deep below the earth, eight feet thick, of granite blocks sealed by and faced with satin-smooth aluminous cement. There was not a toe-hold on it, even for a spider. Beneath the base of the wall, thirty-six feet down, ran a sensitive microphone system, wired in duplicate, intended to thwart human moles who might try to burrow their way in. Those who had designed the wall were firmly convinced that fanatics were capable of anything and that nothing is too far-fetched to justify counter-measures.

In the great length of this quadrilateral wall were only two breaks, a narrow one at the front for the entry

and exit of personnel, a wider one at back for trucks bringing supplies or removing products. Both gaps were protected by three forty-ton hardened steel doors, as massive as dock gates, mechanically operated and incapable of standing open more than one at a time. Each door was attended by its own squad of guards, big, tough, sour-faced men who, in the opinions of all those who had dealings with them, had been specially chosen for their mean, suspicious natures.

Exit from this place was less difficult than entry. The outgoer invariably armed with a pass-out permit, merely suffered the delay of waiting for each door behind him to close before the one in front of him could open. Movement in the opposite direction, inward, was the real chore. If one were an employee well-known to the guards one could get through subject to tedious waits at three successive gates and a probable check on whether one's pass - which was changed at unpredictable intervals - was of the current pattern.

But the stranger had it tough no matter how important his bearing or how authoritative the documents he presented. He suffered a long and penetrating inquisition at the hands of the first squad of guards. If the questioners were not thoroughly satisfied, or in no mood to be satisfied with anything in heaven or on earth, the visitor was liable to be searched, which search included close inspection of his physical apertures. Anything found that was deemed suspicious, superfluous, unreasonable, inexplicable, or not strictly necessary for the purpose of the visit, was confiscated in spite of all protest and returned to the owner on his way out.

And that was only the first stage. The second guard squad specialized in concocting objections to entry not thought up by the first squad. Nor were they above belittling the search proficiency of the first guards and insisting upon a second search. This could and sometimes did include removal of the dental plates and examination of the naked mouth, a tactic inspired by the known development of a camera half the size of a cigarette.

Guard squad number three was composed of chronic sceptics. Its members had an infuriating habit of detaining any incoming stranger while they checked with squads one and two as to whether this, that or the other question had been asked, and, if so, what reply had been given. They had a tendency to doubt the truth of some replies and throw scorn upon the plausibility of others. Full details of searches were also demanded by them and any omission in search-technique was made good then and there, even if the victim had to strip to the skin for the third time. Guard squad number three also possessed but seldom used an X-ray machine, a lie-detector, a stereoscopic camera, a finger-printing outfit and several other sinister devices. The great protective wall surrounding the research plant was in keeping with what lay within. Offices, departments, machine-shops and laboratories were rigidly compartmentalized with steel doors and stubborn guards blocking the way from one area to another. Each self-contained section was defined by the colour of its corridors and doors, the higher up the spectrum the greater the secrecy and priority in security assigned to a given area.

Workers in yellow-door areas were not allowed to pass through blue doors. Toilers behind blue doors

could 'go slumming' as they called it by entering a yellow or lower priority area but were strictly forbidden to stick their noses the other side of purple doors. Not even the security guards could go beyond a black door without a formal invitation from the other side. Only the black door men and the President and God Almighty could amble around other sections as they pleased and explore the entire plant.

Throughout the whole of this conglomeration ran its intricate nervous system in the form of wires buried in the walls, ceilings, and, in some cases, floors. Wires linking up with general alarm bells and sirens, or with door-locking mechanisms, or delicate microphones or television scanners. All the watching and listening was done, of course, by black door-section snoopers. Inmates had long accepted the necessity of being continually heard and seen, even when in the toilet-for where better than the little room in which to memorize, copy or photograph classified data.

Such trouble, ingenuity and expense was useless from the viewpoint of outside and unfriendly eyes. The place was, in fact, a veritable Singapore, wide open to attack from an unseen and unexpected quarter. There was no good reason why any source of blows should be unimagined except, perhaps, that the apprehensive can be so excessively thorough as to overlook the obvious.

And in spite of hints and forewarnings the obvious was overlooked. The people at the top of the research centre's plant were highly qualified experts, each in his own field and therefore ignorant of other fields. The chief bacteriologist could talk for hours about a new and virulent germ without knowing whether Saturn has two moons or ten. The head of ballistics department could draw graphs of complicated trajectories without being able to say whether an okapi belongs to the horse, deer, or giraffe families. The entire place was crammed with experts of every kind save one - the one who could see and understand a hint when it became visible.

For example, nobody found any significance in the fact that while the plant's employees bore security measures, searchings, and snoopings with resigned fortitude, most of them disliked the colour area system. Colour had become a prestige symbol. The yellow-area man considered himself down-graded with respect to his blue-area counterpart even though getting the same salary. The man who worked behind red doors viewed himself as several cuts above a white door man and so on.

Women, always the socially conscious sex, boosted this attitude to the utmost. Female workers and the wives of male workers adopted in their outside relations a farmyard pecking-order based upon the colour of the area in which they or their husbands worked. The wives of black-area workers were tops and proud of it; those of white-area men were bottom and riled by it. The sweet smile and cooing voice and feline display of claws was the normal form of greeting among them.

Such a state of affairs was accepted by all and sundry as 'just one of those things'. But it was not just

one of those things. It was direct evidence that the plant was occupied and operated by human beings who were not robots made of case-hardened steel. The absent expert - a top-flight psychologist - could have recognized this fact with half an eye even if he did not know a venturi-tube from a rocketnosecap .

That was where the real weakness lay. Not in concrete, granite, or steel, not in mechanisms or electronic devices, not in routines or precautions or paperwork, but in flesh and blood.

Haperny's resignation caused more irritation than alarm. Forty-two years old, dark-haired and running to fat, he was a red-area expert specializing in high-vacuum phenomena. All who knew him regarded him as clever, hard-working, conscientious and as emotional as a plaster statue. So far as was known, nothing interested Haperny beyond his work, nothing stirred him outside of his work. The fact that he was a bachelor was considered proof that he had nothing for which to live other than his work.

Bates, the head of his department, and Laidler, the chief security officer, summoned him for an interview. They were sitting side by side behind a big desk when he lumbered in and blinked at them through thick-lensed glasses. Bates dumped a sheet of paper on the desk and poked it forward.

'Mr Haperny, I've just had this passed to me. Your resignation. What's the idea?'

'I want to leave,' said Haperny, fidgeting.

'Why? Have you found a better post someplace else? If so, with whom? We are entitled to know.'

Haperny shuffled his feet and looked unhappy. 'No, I haven't got another job. Haven't looked for one either. Not just yet. Later on, Perhaps.'

'Then why have you decided to go?' Bates demanded.

'I've had enough,' said Haperny, restless and uneasy.

'Enough?' Bates was incredulous. 'Enough of what?'

'Of working here.'

'Let's get this straight,' said Bates. 'You're a valuable man and you've been with us fourteen years. Up to now, you appear to have been content. Your work has been consistently first-class and nobody has ever criticized it or you. If you could maintain that record you'd be secure for the rest of your natural life. Do you really want to throw away a safe and rewarding job?'

'Yes,' said Haperny.

'And with nothing better in prospect?'

'That's right'

Leaning back in his chair, Bates stated at him speculatively.

'Know what I think? I think you had better see the medic.'

I don't want to,' Haperny said. 'What's more, I don't have to- and I'm not going to.'

He might certify that you're suffering from the nervous strain of overwork. He might recommend that you be given a good, long rest,' urged Bates. 'You could then take an extended vacation on full pay. Go fishing somewhere quiet and peaceful and come back in due course feeling like a milliondollars. '

'I'm not interested in fishing.'

'Then what the devil ate you interested in? What do you intend to do after you've left here?'

'I want to amble around for a time, wherever the fancy takes me. I want to be free to go where I please.'

Frowning to himself, Laidler chipped in with, 'Do you plan to leave this country?'

'Not immediately,' said Haperny.

'Your personal record shows that you have never been issued with a passport,' Laidler went on. 'I had better warn you that you may have to face some mighty awkward questions if ever you do apply for one. You possess information that could be useful to an enemy. The government cannot afford to ignore that fact.'

'Are you implying that I might be persuaded to sell such information?' demanded Haperny, reddening slightly.

'Not at all - not in present circumstances,' said Laidler, evenly. 'Right now your character is above reproach. Nobody doubts your loyalty. But -'

'But what?'

'Circumstances can change. A fellow wandering aimlessly around without a job, with no source of income, must eventually come to the end of his savings. He then experiences his first taste of poverty. His ideas start altering. See what I mean?'

'I'll get a job sometime, somewhere, when I'm good and ready.'

'Is that so?' interjected Bates, raising a sardonic eyebrow.

'Whatd'you think a boss is going to say when you walk in and ask him could he use a high-vacuum physicist?'

'My qualifications don't prevent me from washing dishes,' said Haperny. 'If you don't mind, I'd like to be left to solve my own problems in my own manner. This is a free country, isn't it?'

'We want to keep it that way,' put in Laidler with a touch of menace.

Bates let go a deep sigh and opined, 'If a fellow insists on suddenly going crazy, I can't stop him. So I'll accept this resignation and pass it along to headquarters. If they decide that you must be shot at dawn it'll be up to them to tend to it' He waved a hand in dismissal. 'All right, leave it with me.'

Haperny departed and Laidler said, 'Did you notice his face when you talked about him being shot at dawn ? It seemed to me to go sort of strained-looking. Maybe he's scared of something.'

'Imagination,' scoffed Bates. 'I saw him myself and he looked normal enough. I think he's become belatedly jumpy, in Nature's own way.'

'Meaning?'

'He's been sexually retarded but at last has outgrown it. Even at forty-two it's not too late to do something about it. Bet you he leaves here at full gallop, like an eager bull. He'll keep on running until he finds a suitable mate. Then he'll get coupled and cool down and want his job back'

'You may be right,' conceded Laidler. 'But I wouldn't care to put money on it. I feel instinctively that Haperny is badly worried. It would be nice to know what's causing it'

'Not the worrying type,' Bates assured. 'Never has been and never will be. What he wants is a roll in the hay. No law against it, is there?'

'Sometimes I think there ought to be,' said Laidler, mysteriously. 'Anyway, when a high-grade expert

suddenly decides to take off into the blue we can't safely assume that today's date marks the opening of his breeding season. There may be a deeper, more dangerous reason. We need to know about that.'

'He'll have to be watched until we're satisfied that he is doing no harm and intends none. A couple of counter-espionage agents will have to tag along with him. That costs money.'

'Will it come out of your wallet?' asked Bates.

'No.'

'Then what do you care?'

The news about Haperny drifted around the plant and was discussed in no more than perfunctory manner: In the canteen, Richard Bransome, a green-area metallurgist, mentioned it to his co-worker Arnold Berg. In the future both men were to be the unwilling subjects of greater mysteries though, of course, neither suspected it at this time. 'Army, you heard that Haperny is getting out?'

'Yes. Told me so himself a few minutes ago.'

'H'm! Has delay in getting results worn him down? Or has someone offered him money?'

'No; said Berg. 'He says he's become sick of regimentation and wants to run loose awhile. It's the gypsy in him'

'Strange,' mused Bransome. 'He never struck me as a fidget. Seemed to me as stolid and as solid as a lump of rock.'

'Wanderlust does look out of character for him,' Berg admitted. 'But you know the old saying: still waters run deep.'

'You may be right. I get tired of routine myself sometimes. But not tired enough to throw up a good job.'

'You've a wife and two kids to keep,' Berg pointed out.

'Haperny has nobody to think of but himself. He's free to do as he pleases. If he wants to switch from scientific research to garbage collecting, I say good luck to him. Somebody's got to move our garbage, else we'd be stuck with it. Have you ever thought of that?'

'My mind dwells on higher things,' said Bransome, virtuously.

'I'd dwell on lower ones if the junk were piling up in your backyard,' Berg retorted.

Ignoring that, Bransome said, 'Haperny is stodgy but no dope. He's got a plodding but brilliant mind. If he's taking off it's for a reason better than the one he's seen fit to make public.'

'Such as?'

'I don't know. I can only guess. Maybe he's been given another official job elsewhere and is under strict orders to keep his mouth shut.'

'Could be. In this uncertain world anything is possible. Someday I may vanish myself-and make good as a strip-teaser.'

'With that paunch?'

'It will add to the interest,' said Berg, patting it fondly.

'Have it your own way.' Bransome pondered in silence awhile, then said, 'Now that I come to think of it, this place has been getting its knocks of late.'

'Anything regarded as a burden upon the taxpayer is sure to be kicked from time to time,' offered Berg. 'There's always somebody ready to howl about the expenditure.'

'I wasn't considering the latest cost-cutting rigmarole. I was thinking about Haperny.'

'His departure won't wreck the works,' Berg asserted. 'It'll be no more than a darned inconvenience. Takes time and trouble to replace an expert. The supply of specialists isn't unlimited.'

'Precisely! And it seems to me that these days the time and trouble are taken more often.'

'Howd'you mean?' asked Berg.

'I've been here eight years. For the first six our staff losses were no more or less than one would expect. Fellows reached the age of sixty-five and exercised their right to retire on pension. Others agreed to work on but fell ill or dropped dead a bit later. A few younger ones pegged out from natural causes and got themselves killed in accidents. Some people were transferred to more urgent work elsewhere. And so on. As I said, the losses were reasonable.'

'Well?'

'Take a look at the last couple of years. In addition to the normal sequence of deaths, retirements, or transfers we've had disappearances for less usual reasons. There was MacLain and Simpson, for instance. Took a vacation up the Amazon, evaporated into thin air and no trace of them has since been found.'

'That was eighteen months ago,' Berg contributed. 'It is a good bet that they're dead. Could be anything: drowning, fever, snakebite, or eaten alive by piranhas.'

'Then there was Jacobert . Married a wealthy dame who had inherited a big cattle spread in Argentina . He goes there to help manage the place. As an exceptionally able chemical engineer he wouldn't know which end of a cow does the mooing.'

'He can learn. He'd be doing it for love and money. It would be well worth the effort. I'd do the same myself, given the chance.'

'And Henderson ,' continued Bransome, ignoring the interruption. 'Another case like Haperny's . Took off on a whim. I heard a rumour that sometime later he was found operating a hardware store out west'

'And I heard another rumour that immediately he was found he took off again,' said Berg.

'Which reminds me, talking of rumours. There was that one about Muller. Found shot. The verdict was accidental death. Rumour said it was suicide. Yet Muller had no known reason to kill himself and definitely he wasn't the type to be careless with a gun.'

'Are you suggesting that he was murdered?' asked Berg, raising his eyebrows.

'I'm suggesting only that his death was peculiar to say the least. For the matter of that, so was Arvanian's a couple of months ago. Drove his car off a dockside and into forty feet of water. They said he must have suffered a blackout. He was thirty-two, an athletic type and in good health. The blackout theory doesn't look very plausible to me.'

'What are your medical qualifications?'

'None,' Bransome admitted.

'Well, the fellow who came up with the blackout notion was a fully qualified doctor. Presumably he knew what he was talking about'

'I'm not saying he didn't. What I am saying is that he made an intelligent guess and not a diagnosis. A guess is a guess no matter who makes it.'

'Could you offer a better one?'

'Yes - if Arvanian had been a heavy drinker. In that case I'd consider it probable that he met his end as result of driving while drunk. But he was not a bottle-lover as far as I know. Neither was he a diabetic.' Bransome paused thoughtfully and finished,

'Maybe he fell asleep at the wheel.'

'That could happen,' agreed Berg. 'I did it myself once, many years ago. It wasn't through tiredness, either. It was brought on by the sheer monotony of driving on a long, lonely road in the dark, hearing the tyres humming, watching the headlamp beams swaying. I yawned a few times and then - crash! Found myself in a ditch with a bump on my head. The experience shook me up for weeks, I can tell you.'

'Arvanian hadn't done a long, exhausting drive. He'd covered exactly twenty-four miles.'

'So what? He could have been tired and dozy after a hard day's work. Possibly he hadn't been sleeping well of late. A few spoiled nights can make a man muddle-minded and ready to bed down anywhere. even behind a wheel.'

'You're right about that, Amy. As the father of two kids I've had a taste of it. Lack of sleep can pull a man down. It shows in the way he does his job.' Bransome tapped the table by way of emphasis. 'It didn't show in Arvanian's work.'

'But -'

'Furthermore, he was supposed to be on his way home. The dockside was out of line from his direct route by three miles or more. He made a detour to get there. Why?'

'I don't know.'

'Neither do I. It looks rather like suicide. Quite possibly it wasn't. Nobody knows what it was. I feel entitled to say there was something decidedly strange about it. That's as far as I go:

'You've got a prying mind,' said Berg. 'Why don't you set up in business as a private investigator?'

'More hazards and less security,' responded Bransome, smiling. He glanced at his watch. 'Time we got back to the treadmill'

Two months later Berg disappeared. During the ten days proceeding his vanishing he had been quiet, thoughtful, and uncommunicative. Bransome, who worked closest to him, noticed it and for the first few days put it down to a spell of moodiness. But as the spell persisted and grew into something more like wary silence, he became curious.

'Sickening for something?'

'Eh?'

'I said are you sickening for something? You've become as broody as an old hen.'

'I'm not aware of it,' said Berg, defensively.

'You're aware of it now because I've just told you. Sure you feel all right?'

'There's nothing the matter with me,' Berg denied. 'A fellow doesn't have to yap his head off all the time.'

'Not saying he does.'

'Okay, then. I'll talk when I feel like it and keep shut when I feel like it.' After that the silence increased. On his last day Berg uttered not a word other than those strictly necessary. The next day he failed to appear. In the mid afternoon Bransome was summoned to Laidler's office. Laidler greeted him with a frown, pointed to a chair.

'Sit down. You work along with Arnold Berg, don't you?'

'Yes, that's right'

'Are you particularly friendly with him?'

'Friendly enough but I wouldn't say especially so.'

'What'd you mean by that?'

Bransome said, 'We get on well together at our jobs. I understand him and he understands me. Each of us knows he can depend upon the other. That's all it amounts to.'

'Purely an industrial relationship?'

'Yes.' 'You didn't extend it into private life?'

'No. Outside of work we had little in common.'

'H'm!' Laidler was disappointed. 'He hasn't reported today. He hadn't applied for official leave. Have you any idea who he's not here?'

'Sorry, I haven't. Yesterday he said nothing to indicate that he might not turn up. Maybe he's ill.' 'He isn't,' Laidler contradicted. 'We've had no medical certificate from him.'

'There hasn't been much time for that. If it's been sent off today you wouldn't get it until tomorrow.'

'He could have phoned,' insisted Laidler. 'He knows how to use a telephone. He's a big boy now. Or if he's bedbound somewhere he could have got someone to phone for him.'

'Perhaps he's been rushed to hospital in no condition to give orders,' Bransome suggested. 'That does happen to some people. Anyway, the telephone operates both ways. If you were to call him - '

'A most ingenious idea. It does you credit.' Laidler sniffed disdainfully. 'We called him a couple of hours ago. No answer. We called a neighbour who went upstairs and hammered on the door of his apartment. No reply. The neighbour got the janitor to open up with his master-key. They had a look inside. Nobody there. The apartment is undisturbed and nothing seems wrong. The janitor doesn't know what time Berg went out or, for the matter of that, whether he got home last night.' He rubbed his chin, mused a bit. 'Berg's a divorcee. Do you know if he has a girl friend currently?'

Bransome thought back. 'Occasionally he's mentioned meeting a girl he liked. About four or five in all. But his interest didn't appear to be more than casual. As far as I know, he didn't pursue them or go steady with any of them. He was somewhat of a cold fish in his attitude towards women - most of them sensed it and reciprocated'

'In that case it doesn't seem likely that he's overslept in a love-nest.' Then Laidler added, 'Unless he has resumed relations with his former wife.'

'I doubt it.'

'Has he mentioned her of late?'

'No. I don't think he's given her a thought for several years. According to him they were hopelessly incompatible but didn't realize it until after marriage. She wanted passion and he wanted peace. She called it mental cruelty and heaved him overboard. A couple of years afterwards she married again.'

'His personal record shows that he has no children. He has nominated his mother as next of kin. She's eighty years old.'

'Perhaps she has cracked up and he's rushed to her bedside,' Bransome suggested.

'As I said before, he's had all day to phone and tell us. He has not phoned. Moreover, there's nothing wrong with his mother. We checked on that a short time ago.'

'Then I can't help you any further.'

'Maybe you can,' said Laidler. 'One last question. Is there anyone else in this plant who might be well-informed about Berg's private life? Anyone who shares his tastes and hobbies? Anyone who might have gone around with him evenings and weekends?'

'Nobody that I know about. Berg wasn't unsociable but he wasn't gregarious either. Seemed satisfied with his own company outside of working hours. I've always regarded him as a very self-contained kind of individual.'

'Well, if he walks in tomorrow, wearing a big, fat grin, he'll need all his self-containment. He'll be on the carpet for taking a walk without telling anyone. It's against the rules and it gives us trouble. Rules aren't made to be broken. And we don't like trouble.' He eyed Bransome with irritated authority and ended, 'If he fails to reappear and if you hear anything about him from any source whatever, it will be your duty to inform me at once.'

'I'll do that,' Bransome promised.

Leaving the office, he returned to the green area, his mind mulling the subject of Berg. Should he have told Laidler about Berg's recent surliness? Of what use if he had? He couldn't offer an explanation for it; he couldn't imagine a reason except, perhaps, that all unwittingly he had done something or said

something to upset Berg. But most definitely Berg was not the type to nurse a grievance in silence. Even less was he the kind to spend a day sulking in some hiding-place, like a peevish child.

Pondering these matters he remembered Berg's odd remark of two months ago, 'Someday I may vanish myself-and make good as a strip-teaser.' Had that been an idle comment or did it have a hidden significance? In the latter case, what had Berg meant by 'strip-teaser'? There was no way of telling.

'To blazes with it,' said Bransome to himself. 'I've other things to worry about. Anyway, he's sure to turn up tomorrow with a plausible excuse.'

But Berg did not appear next day or any day thereafter. He had gone for keeps.

Chapter 2

In the next couple of months three more top-graders took their departure in circumstances that could and should have set all the alarm-bells ringing - but didn't. One, like Berg, lit out for the never-never land, apparently on a whim. The other pair left more formally after offering weak excuses that served only to arouse the ire of Bates and Laidler. The latter felt impotent to do anything about it. In a free country a man may leave one job and seek another without being arrested and imprisoned for incomplete candidness and without being compelled to undergo a prefrontal lobotomy.

Then came the turn of Richard Bransome. Appropriately enough, the world fell about his ears on Friday the Thirteenth. Up to then it had been a pleasant, comfortable world despite its short-comings. There had been, on occasion, routine and boredom, rivalries and fears, the thousand and one petty pinpricks such as most men have to endure. But life had been lived; a life full of those little taken-for-granted items that are never fully appreciated until suddenly they vanish for ever.

In the morning, the regular departure of the 8.10 train. The same faces in the same seats, the same rustle of unfolding newspapers and low mutter of conversation. Or in the evening, the anticipatory homecoming along a tree-lined avenue where in always some neighbour was polishing a car or cutting a lawn. The pup gambolling around him on the front path. Dorothy's face, flushed with kitchen-heat, smiling a welcome while the two kids hung from his wrists and demanded that he rotate and make carnival noises.

All these petty but precious treasures that made each day: at one stroke they lost solidity, actuality, realness. They blurred and went right out of focus, fading like reluctant ghosts undecided whether to stay or go. They retreated from him, leaving him in an awful mental solitude. He made a frantic grasp at them with all the desire of his shaken mind and momentarily they came back, only to fade away again.

A few words started it. He was homeward bound on a cool evening that held the first hint of coming winter. Thin streamers of mist crawled through the growing dark. As always, he had to change trains and wait twelve minutes for the connexion. Following his long established habit, he went to the diner for a coffee. He sat at the counter; on the right-hand stool, gave the order he'd given times without number.

'Coffee, black.'

Near by two men sat nursing cups of coffee and talking in desultory manner. They looked like long-distance night truckers soon to go on duty. One of them had a peculiar, drawling accent that Bransome could not identify.

'It's fifty-fifty,' said the drawler, 'even if it had been done yesterday. The cops never solve more than half the murders. They admit it themselves.'

'Oh, I don't know,' argued the other. 'Figures can be misleading. For instance, how many times have they pinched a character who has done more than one job, maybe a dozen jobs?'

'Howd'you mean?'

'Look, let's see things as they really are and not as they ought to be. Nobody is executed for committing murder, and that's a fact. If a fellow is led to his death it's for quite a different reason. It's because they know he's a murderer and can prove it, have proved it. So they pull the lever on him.'

'Well?'

'For all they can tell, he's guilty of several other killings they don't know about or can't prove. Those remain on the files as unsolved crimes. What difference would it make if they could pin them on him? None whatever. They can't execute him several more times. When he's paid the price for one murder

he's paid for all his murders. He's paid for the ultimate crime which is that of being found out! The speaker sipped coffee meditatively. 'The facts aren't available and never will be. But if they were, they might show that a killer's chance of landing in the morgue is as good as eighty in a hundred.'

'I'll give you that,' conceded the drawler. 'Anyway, they reckon this one was done at least twenty years ago. That gives the culprit ~a whale of a start.'

'How'd you come to get mixed up in it?'

'I told you. The floods had undermined this big tree. It was teetering over the road, at a dangerous angle. Made me duck my head in the cab as I edged past. A few miles farther on I found a prowler-car. I stopped and warned the crew that fifty tons of timber threatened to block the road way back. They raced off for a look.'

'And then?'

'A couple of days later a state trooper came clunking into the 'depot and asked for me. He tells me the tree's been pulled down, cut up, and hauled away. Says they found human bones under the roots, believed to be female and buried about twenty years. They're waiting for some expert to look them over, the bones I mean.' He gulped coffee, scowled at the wall, finished, 'He said the skull had been bashed in. Then he stared at me as if I'm the mug they're looking for. And he wanted to know how many years I've been a driving along that road and whether I can remember seeing anything suspicious way back when he was riding his kiddie-car.'

'But you refused to squeal?' asked the other, grinning.

'Couldn't tell him a thing. He took my address in case I'm wanted again. Maybe they'll be watching me next time I go through Burleston. That's what I get for looking after the public interest.'

Burleston!

Burleston.

The listener at the other end of the counter gazed at his coffee cup. It drooped in fingers from which strength flowed away like invisible water. Burleston! The cup threatened to spill. He prevented it from slopping over only by a great effort of will-power, lowered it to its saucer; then slid off his stool and went out. The truckers ignored him as he left. He walked slowly, weak at the knees, with cold thrills lancing up his spine, with his brain awlirl

Burleston!

I am Richard Bransome, a highly qualified metallurgist in government employ. I have the confidence of my superiors, the friendship of my colleagues and neighbours, the love of my wife and two kids and a pup. Before I was assigned to top-secret work my background was thoroughly investigated by those trained to make a one hundred per cent job of it. My record is clean, my past is spotless There are no skeletons in my cupboard.

No skeletons?

Oh, God, why do the dead have to rise from their graves and point a finger into the present time? Why can't they lie there forever and let the living continue to live in peace?

He stood blank-eyed and dazed while his connecting train rumbled in without him being fully aware of its arrival. Conditioned legs carried him into his usual coach much as they might have taken a blind man. He fumbled around uncertainly, found his seat, sat in it and hardly knew what he was doing.

Why did I kill Arline?

The coach was fairly full, as usual. He had the same faces opposite and all around. They had greeted his entry with the customary nods and made ready for the customary idle chat.

The man facing him, Farmiloe, folded an evening paper, stuffed it into a pocket, gave his preliminary cough and commented 'Been a good day today, though I say it myself. High time we had a few peaks to compensate for-' His voice broke off, came back on a slightly higher note, 'You feeling ill, Bransome?'

'Me?' Bransome gave a visible jerk. 'No, I'm all right'

'You don't look it,' Farmiloe informed. 'You're white enough to have had a wash.' He leaned sidewise, chuckled fatly as he nudged Connelly, the man next to him. 'Hear what I just said? I said Bransome's white enough to have had a wash.'

'He doesn't look so good at that,' said Connelly, refusing to be overwhelmed by the other's wit. He stared at Bransome, moved his knees away. 'Don't you be sick in my lap.'

'I'm okay. There's nothing wrong with me.' The words came out as if he were using somebody else's voice.

Why did I kill Arline?

Farmiloe let the subject drop and switched to yammering about the rises and falls of business. All the time he gazed steadily at Bransome with big white eyes, slightly protruding. He appeared to be half-expecting something, an unpleasant something that he did not want to happen. For that matter, so did Connelly, though in a less obvious way. They had the air of men hoping to escape a minor crisis, such as being called upon to give first aid to somebody rolling on the floor.

The train roared and rumbled onward while conversation petered out and the three sat uncomfortably in an atmosphere of suspense; none of them had another word to say. Eventually a string of lights slid past the windows, slowed, came to a halt. Voices sounded in the misty darkness outside. Somebody started trundling a noisy hand-truck up near the front of the train. Connelly and Farmiloe gazed expectantly at Bransome who sat fixed-eyed, seemingly unconscious of their attention.

After a few seconds Farmiloe leaned forward and tapped Bransome's knee. 'Unless you've moved your home, this is your station.'

'Is it?' Bransome looked incredulous. He rubbed condensation from a window and peered through. 'So it is!' Grabbing his leather brief-case, he forced a false smile into his face, hastened towards the exit. 'Must have been daydreaming.'

As he went out of the door he heard Connelly say, 'Night-mare would be more accurate.'

Then he found himself standing on the platform watching the train pull out. Its brilliantly lit coaches rolled past him one by one. He could see the successive rows of passengers chatting, reading papers, or lolling back half asleep. None of them had anything to worry about, not really. Their minds were occupied with matters comparatively trivial. Wonder what's for dinner tonight? Feel like a nice, quiet evening watching the television - will Mabel want to go out or will she be content to stay in? Will Old Soandso sign those papers tomorrow without quibbling? They were lazy and complacent just as he had been on his homeward journeys - until today.

But now the hunt was up and he, Bransome, was the quarry. Alone of all that passing train-load he knew the fear of the pursued. It was not the adventurous thrill that some claimed it to be. It was heart-knocking and mind-disturbing, a psychological upheaval the like of which he had never known. At the end of the trail, quite possibly, stood the prize awarded to long-distance runners: the electric chair, the scientific monstrosity that the criminal fraternity called the hot squat. He could picture it in his mind's eye and the vision made his brain go dizzy.

There was no escape from his predicament, or none that he could think up right now. The shock was too recent for him to be capable of logical thought. Walking away from the station he turned the corner of an avenue without any real consciousness of where he was going. An auto-pilot created in his mind by long conditioning was steering him homeward. He saw the illuminated windows of neighbours' houses, a spectacle he'd always regarded as evidence of life, but now he viewed them as no more than mere lights - because his thoughts were of death.

Bones under the roots of a tree that could and should have shadowed them for another century. Bones that should have remained there unsuspected and untouched until events had drifted too far into the past for any man to trace to the present. There seemed to be some sort of devilish perversity within the so-called laws of chance, a gross distortion of the probability factor to the detriment of the guilty. So out of this world's multimillion trees one especial tree must topple, thereby starting the manhunt.

Young Jimmy Lindstrom passed him towing a red-painted minitruck at the end of a cord and sang out, 'Hi, Mr Bransome!'

'Hi!' he responded mechanically, forgetting to add, 'Jimmy.' He moved onward with robotic gait.

A couple of months ago he had filled in a quiet hour on a journey by reading one of those lurid crime magazines. Somebody had left it on an adjacent seat and he'd picked it up and looked at it out of curiosity. One true story therein had told how a dog had unearthed a skeletal hand wearing a plain gold ring; no more than that. From there onward, step by relentless step, lines had been followed, questions asked, further clues developed until eventually the web of entrapment had been laid. Sheriffs and their deputies, county attorneys and city detectives scattered right across the continent had picked up jigsaw pieces here and there over a couple of years. Suddenly the complete picture had become visible in all its brutal ghastliness - and a man had gone to the electric chair for a crime fourteen years old.

Now there was this. Somewhere within the broad land a scientific bloodhound would be deciding the cause of death, the approximate date, the sex, height, age, and weight of the victim, plus numerous other details such as only a specialist can extract. The weaving of the web had begun, its completion only a matter of time.

His pulse leaped at the thought of it. How would the end come? At work, at home, or perhaps on the way from one to the other? Maybe at home, where he'd hate it most. In a mind stimulated by crises he could readily imagine the scene. Dorothy would answer the door-bell, admit a couple of burly, grim-faced men, and stand wide-eyed while one of them spoke.

'Richard Bransome? We are police officers. We have here a warrant for your arrest and it is our duty to inform you that anything you may say -

A scream from Dorothy. The children howling their hearts out and trying to drag him indoors. The pup whining in sympathy and seeking some place to hide. And the police would take him away, one on each side of him so that he couldn't run for it. Away from Dorothy, the children, the pup, the home, from everything that he had held dear. For ever and ever and ever.

He was perspiring in the coldness of the night when he discovered that he had walked fifty yards past his own house. Swivelling on one heel, he retraced his steps, went up to the front door, fumbled like a drunk as he sought for his key.

The moment he entered the kids came at him screaming and trying to climb up his front. Each yell seemed tormentingly shrill, tearing at his nerves in a way never experienced before. The pup squirmed and wriggled between his feet, making him stumble. He had to put forth a tremendous effort to control himself, blanking his ears to the noises and fixing a false smile upon his face. He scratched two tousled heads, patted two cheeks, stepped carefully over the pup and hung his hat and coat in the hall.

That peculiar perceptiveness of children made them sense that all was not well. They became silent, backing away and eyeing him gravely, knowing that he was troubled. He put on a jovial act but it did not deceive them. In turn, their attitude did nothing to help soothe him inwardly. The very way they looked at him made it seem as if somehow they knew that he was of the damned.

Dorothy's voice came from the kitchen. 'That you, darling? What sort of a day have you had?'

'Worrying,' he admitted. Going through to the kitchen, he kissed her and, of course, gave himself away. He held her a little too tightly and a little too long, as if determined never to be deprived of her.

She backed off a bit, studying him, her arched eyebrows crinkling into a frown. 'Rich, is it anything serious?'

'Is what serious?'

'Whatever is on your mind.'

'Nothing is bothering me particularly,' he lied. 'Only one or two things at work. I have to go crazy over those problems - it's what I'm paid for.'

'Well,' she said doubtfully, 'don't let them get you down. And don't bring them home with you, either. Home is the place for getting away from all that.'

'I know. But worries can't be dismissed that easily. Maybe some people can leave them behind the moment they walked out of the laboratory, but I can't. Even at home I need an hour or so to settle down.'

'You're not being paid overtime.'

‘I’m being paid plenty.’

‘And so you ought,’ she said positively. ‘The best brains deserve the best pay.’

He patted her cheek. ‘They get it, my lovely - but there are plenty of brains better than mine.’

‘Nonsense.’ She put a bowl under the mixer and turned a switch. ‘You’re developing an inferiority complex. I’m surprised at you!’ ‘Not so,’ he contradicted. ‘A good brain is good enough to recognize a better one. In the plant are some that must be known to be believed. Clever men, Dorothy, very clever men. I wish I were as competent.’

‘Well, if you’re not, you soon will be.’

‘I hope so.’

He stood brooding. Will be, she had said. The future tense. It might have been valid yesterday. But not today. His future was being taken over by other hands, slowly, piece by piece, damning item after damning item. Until someday far or near.

‘You’re unusually quiet this evening. Hungry?’

‘Not very.’

‘Dinner won’t be more than a few minutes.’

‘All right, honey. Just time to have a wash.’

Wending his way to the bathroom, he stripped to the waist and washed as if trying to clear away his

mental blackness. He was a little muddle-minded, his brain doing a kind of jittery side-slip each time he bent low over the water.

Dorothy came in hurriedly. 'I forgot to tell you there's a warm, dry towel in the...why, Rich, you've bruised your arm.'

'Yes, I know.' Taking the towel from her, he mopped his face and chest, bent the arm to survey the blue-black patch around the elbow. It felt tender and sore. 'Fell down the steps by Branigan's this morning. Banged my elbow and bumped the back of my head.'

She felt his skull, slim fingers probing his hair. 'Yes, there's quite a lump.'

'You're telling me. It hurts to touch it.'

'Oh, Rich, you might have broken your neck. Those steps are long and steep. How on earth did it happen?'

'Not quite sure.' He towelled a bit more, reached for his shirt. 'I was going down the steps in the same way that I've gone down them a few hundred times. Suddenly I took a dive. Don't remember tripping over anything or slipping on anything. Don't remember feeling ill or fainting or giving way at the legs. I just dived face first without warning. Two fellows were mounting the steps and about half-way up. They saw me topple, jumped forward and grabbed me as I hit. They saved me from serious damage, I reckon.'

'And then?'

'I must have knocked myself out for a short time because I next found myself sitting on the steps in a semi-daze with one of the fellows slapping my face and saying, 'Are you all right, mister?' I got to my feet rather shakily, thanked him and went on my way. Needless to say, I felt darned silly.'

'Did you see the doctor?'

‘No. There wasn’t enough reason for doing so. A couple of bumps, that’s all. I don’t rush to the medic and scream for a lollipop every time I bruise myself.’

Her gaze went over him with unconcealed anxiety. ‘But, Rich, if you fainted, as you may have done, it could mean there’s something wrong and -‘

‘There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m fit enough to fall down the Grand Canyon and bounce. Don’t get worked up over a few bumps and lumps. The kids will be smothered with them before they’re through.’ Finding his collar and tie, he started fixing them. ‘I must have been absent-minded or careless and missed my step or something like that. It’ll teach me to watch where I’m going. Let’s forget it, shall we?’

‘All the same, I -, Her voice tailed off, a startled expression came into her oval face. ‘My goodness, something’s burning!’ She raced back to the kitchen.

He studied himself in the mirror while carefully knotting his tie. Lean, ascetic features, thin lips, dark eyes, black eyebrows and hair. Small white scar on left temple. Clean-shaven, thirtyish, neat dresser. How long before that description became circulated? How long before some collarless, cigarette-chewing write-up man cashed in on him with a yarn sensationally titled The Phantom Killer of Cooper’s Creek or something like that?

It didn’t look like the face of a killer. Too thoughtful and bookish. But it might well fill the part with eyes straining at a police camera and with an identification number hung beneath. Anyone could look a suitable candidate for the death-cell when photographed in those circumstances, especially when bleary-eyed and frowny after a long, long night of intensive questioning.

‘Dinner’s ready!’

‘Coming!’ he called.

He didn’t really want any dinner but would have to go through the motions of eating a hearty one. The alarm permeating his mind was matched by a sickness in his stomach. But abstinence would invite more awkward questions. He’d have to force the unwanted food down.

‘The condemned man ate a large, four-course meal.’

Ridiculous!

When facing his end, no man could do that.

He passed the security guards at nine in the morning, receiving a nod of recognition from each squad, suffering the usual tedious wait at three successive doors. In theory, the guards were supposed to subject his official pass to minute examination each time he went in and came out, even though they had known him for years. This rule had been relaxed after the outspoken and irascible Cain had erupted when called upon to show his document for the seventeenth time to his own brother-in-law. Now the guards nodded at those well known, pounced tigerishly upon anyone unrecognized.

Inside, he put coat and hat in a metal locker, donned a dark green cover-coat bearing a numbered disc and a radiation-tab, walked along a series of corridors, past a couple more guards, through a green-painted door. Beyond, he went through a long, ornate laboratory and several large, imposing workshops, finally reaching a steel shed at back. This place was the size of an airship hangar. Cain and Potter, both in green cover-coats, were already there, pencils stabbing at drawings scattered along a bench as they discussed some aspect of the thing in the shed’s middle.

The shiny, metallic object on the concrete resembled a cross between a huge automobile-engine and a long-nosed anti-aircraft gun. Its looks were not deceiving. Any competent ballisticsian could have diagnosed its purpose after brief examination. A small row of missiles standing by its base were a dead giveaway: shells without cases. The subject of the Cain--Potter discussion was an experimental model of a fully automatic high-angle gun made especially spiteful by a new liquid explosive. The latter could be pumped, carburetted, injected, and fired electrically. On the drawing-board this gadget was capable of pumping six hundred proximity-fused missiles per minute to an altitude of seventy thousand feet. But on the test-range it had proved a different story altogether; within eight seconds shells had been wobbling wildly upward from a barrel worn and expanded by frictional heat.

So they had tried various modifications that had gained them a mere four seconds of effective fire. The basic idea was first-class but, in actual practice, more full of bugs than a flea-trainer’s dog. If weeks or months of trial and error, argument and head-beating could create perfection they’d have a gadget capable of tearing the skies apart.

Right now they had reached the stage of eating their nails while seeking a solution to the problem of how to reduce the rate of fire without reducing the rate of fire. This was not as impossible as it seemed; at the last resort they could substitute a multi-barrelled gun designed to fire in series. But they were not yet ready for the last resort.

Cain ceased yabbering at Potter, turned to Bransome and said, 'Here's another frustrated genius. For your information, we have come to a definite conclusion.'

'And what is that?' asked Bransome.

'Either the barrel-lining or the shells must be made of frictionless alloy,' responded Cain, grinning. 'As an allegedly expert metallurgist it's your job to invent it. So go ahead and get busy.'

'Be nice if I could.'

'They're riding Hilderman,' put in Potter thoughtfully. 'If his department can stabilize this bang-stuff the way they want' He gestured towards the gun we can sling this piece of junk into the river. The missiles will be self-propelled and all we'll need to build will be a whacking big belt-fed, radar-controlled bazooka.'

'Not being in the explosives line I don't know what's wrong with it for such a purpose,' said Cain. 'But you can bet it's been given a trial and found wanting in some important respect.' He walked four times around the gun, complained loudly, 'This thing is the victim of its own efficiency. We've got to find some way of cutting out the grief while retaining all the pleasure. Why don't I become a bookie and take life easier?'

'It'll have to be multi-barrels,' observed Potter.

'Only as an admission of defeat. I refuse to admit defeat and so do you. No surrender. *Il snepasseront pas*. I like this ugly futility. I helped build it. It's my life. It's my love. Criticism be damned.' He sought sentimental support from Bransome. 'Would you destroy the object of your affection merely because she was giving trouble?' Then he watched Bransome turn white and walk away without answering. After a few pregnant moments he turned to Potter and asked in surprised tones, 'What did I say wrong? Hell's bells, I didn't know whether he wanted to kill me or jump through the window. I've never known him like that before. What did I say wrong?'

Potter stared at the door through which Bransome had gone and hazarded, 'You must have jumped on one of his pet corns.'

'What corn? All I said was -'

'I know what you said. I heard you with both ears. Evidently it meant something to him, something special and touchy. Maybe he's having trouble at home. Maybe he and his wife have had a battle and he's invited her to drop dead.'

'He'd never do that. I know him pretty well. He's not the kind to emote all over the house.'

'His wife may be. Some women can work themselves up into a state of hysteria over nothing at all. What if his wife is making things unbearable for him?'

'My guess is that he'd keep his mouth shut and refuse to add fuel to the flames. In the last resort he'd quietly pack his bags and walk out for keeps.'

'Yes, that's how I weigh him up,' agreed Potter. 'But we could be wrong. No man really knows what another might do in a crisis. Every disaster brings the most unexpected reactions. The big, tough, loud-mouthed types dive into fox-holes while some quiet and weedy little guy does something heroic.' To blazes with him, anyway,' said Cain impatiently. 'Let him solve his own problems while we try to get a half-lock on ours.'

Moving to the drawings on the bench, they considered them afresh.

Chapter 3

Bransome left at five, exchanged nods with the guards and started home. It had been a bad day, the

lousiest day he could recall. Everything had gone wrong, nothing right. He seemed to have spent a large part of his time looking over his shoulder, beating away his fears and making unsatisfactory attempts to concentrate on his work.

Ability to concentrate is the prime virtue in any research establishment. How can a man do it with a death-cell depicted in his mind? Up to now he had suffered approximately twenty-four hours of intense nervous strain merely because a couple of unknown truck-drivers had gossiped about an unknown crime at some unspecified place near Burleston. The tree they had discussed was not necessarily his tree, the bones not necessarily those of his victim. It might be that, belatedly, someone else's misdeed had been brought to light - and the hunt might now be in full cry after another quarry.

A pity, he thought, that he hadn't had the gumption to join the truckers' conversation and steer it around until he got the details he needed to know. Would that have been wise? Yes - if their information had proved of a nature calming to his fears. No - if it confirmed his worst apprehensions. And in the latter case, his interest might arouse suspicion. The grouchy one who had been involved might display a dangerous shrewdness.

'Say, what's this to you, mister?'

How could he answer? What could he say? Only something silly and unconvincing - and even that could invite trouble.

'Oh, I once lived around those parts.'

'Did you now? Near Burleston, eh? Do you remember a woman disappearing in that locality? Or can you name anyone who might recall it? Maybe you know something about this, huh?'

If those two were in the diner again this evening would it be best to ignore them or would it pay to join them and entice them to talk in a revealing way? For the life of him he couldn't decide. Had he been a hard-drinking, convivial type the solution would have been easy; join the boys, buy the beer, steer the conversation between the burps. But he wasn't of that kind and he doubted his ability to act so completely out of character.

These considerations fled from his mind when he turned a corner and found a cop standing there. His pulse gave a jump. He walked past trying desperately to look casual and unconcerned, even pursing his

lips in a silent, carefree whistle.

The cop's eyes bored at him, glittering in the shadow beneath the visor of his cap. Bransome paced steadily on, feeling or imagining that he could feel the other's stare burning into the back of his neck. He wondered whether he had drawn attention to himself by overdoing the indifference, much as a naughty child betrays itself by exaggerated innocence.

Parading onward with nerves drawn taut, he knew that a sudden authoritative bellow of 'Hey you!' would get him on the run. He'd race like mad across streets, through traffic, along back alleys, with feet pounding after him and whistles blowing and people shouting. He'd run and run and run until he dropped exhausted. And then they'd take him.

No shout sounded to start him off. Reaching the next corner he could not resist taking a wary glance behind. The cop was still there and still gazing towards him. Rounding the corner, Bransome stopped, counted ten, had another look back. The cop was in the same place, his attention now turned the opposite way.

Sweating with relief, he continued to the station. There he bought an evening paper, sought hurriedly through it for any item of news vital to him, failed to find one. But that meant nothing. The police give reporters a handout only when it suits them and not before. Often it does not suit them until they're able to name the culprit and invite the press to aid the hunt.

His train rolled in and carried him to the junction. Dismounting, he went to the diner. The truckers were not there. He didn't know whether to feel relieved or disappointed. The only other customer was a huge, blank-faced man sitting astride a high stool and gazing boredly at the mirror back of the counter.

Ordering black coffee, Bransome sipped and after a while met the big man's eyes in the mirror. It seemed to him that the other was not idly glancing at him, but examining him with more than usual interest. Bransome looked away, let a minute go by, then looked back. The big man was still watching him in the mirror and making no attempt to conceal the fact. He had a kind of massive arrogance as if in the habit of staring at people and openly challenging them to do something about it.

A railroad worker came in, bought two wrapped sandwiches and took them out. The big man remained firmly on his stool and kept his inquisitive gaze levelled at the mirror. Sipping coffee with studied unconcern, Bransome tried hard to avoid looking at the mirror but his attention kept coming back to it as though drawn there by a form of hypnosis. Every time he met the other eye to eye.

I'll have to avoid this diner, he decided. Been coming here too regularly and too long. Set up an unbroken routine and the pursuers know where to look for you. All they need do is go sniffing along your self-created rut and pick you up at one end or the other. Destroy the routine and they no longer know where in hell you are.

'They'? Who are 'they'?

The various officers of the law, of course. This bull-sized starer could be just such a one. Yes, that was a definite possibility. He could be a cop in plain clothes, lacking enough evidence to justify an arrest but hoping that guilt could be made to ferment like yeast so that he, Bransome, would get the jitters and betray himself in some fatal manner.

Well, he wasn't going to betray himself, not while he still remained in full possession of his senses. The police had found a collection of human bones and they were welcome to handle the resulting problem without any help from him. So far as he was concerned, he'd give them a gallop for their money because life is sweet even with a major burden on the mind. And death is full of terror no matter how deserved.

Leaving his drink unfinished he edged off his stool and walked to the door. The big man twisted around and slowly came to his feet, his full attention on the other. His manner was that of one giving the quarry a slight lead merely for the fun of it; a professional pursuer unable to relish the chase when capture became too easy.

If the idea was to make Bransome bolt like a startled rabbit it didn't work. Though the rawest of amateurs at this game of evading the law, Bransome was no dope. He was a man of high IQ, trying to deal with a situation all too familiar to members of the underworld but quite strange to himself. He was willing to learn and slowly but surely he was learning. One petty scare over that uniformed cop earlier on had taught him not to react too swiftly or too openly. Everyone chases an obvious fugitive.

The correct concealing tactic, he decided, is to behave normally when one is feeling far from normal and to maintain an unswerving pretence that one is an insignificant part of humanity when one has gone beyond the pale of it. That is hard, terribly hard, when one has had no training as an actor, no conditioning in deceit, and carries a brain that tends to keep sounding shrill warnings like an intermittent alarm-clock. But it had to be done.

So as he went out he forced himself to give the big man stare for stare. He reached the station, found his

train and got into the rearmost coach. This gave him a vantage point: from the end window he could watch the station entrance while pretending to read his paper.

He sat tensely, looking over the top edge of the paper until presently he saw the big man lumber through the gateway and board the train a couple of coaches nearer the front. That was the coach that he, Bransome, usually occupied, the one in which Connelly and Farmiloe would now be seated.

Why had the big man picked on that coach? Was it sheer coincidence or was he betting on the quarry's known habits? In the latter event he was likely to do something about it when he discovered that Bransome was not among those present. Just what would he do? Obviously he'd be in something of a quandary since there would not be enough time to explore the whole train before it departed. He'd have to make his choice between staying on the train and searching it or getting off it to snoop around the station. The train hooted, gave a slight jerk, trundled forward with gathering speed, clanked over points and speeded onward. There was no evidence that the big man had dismounted. Evidently he had remained aboard. If he stayed put and did not get off at Bransome's station all would be well. The brief series of events would serve to prove that a guilty mind can be suspicious of a stray cat.

But if he took a walk along the train's corridors or maintained a watch and got off with Bransome...

Perhaps even now he was engaging Connelly and Farmiloe in conversation, cunningly steering the talk the way he wanted it to go, prying out items of information that meant nothing to the tellers but plenty to the listener and doing it with the disarming dexterousness of the professional nosey-poke. Maybe he'd learn that this was the first evening in months that Bransome had failed to travel with the pair of them, that yesterday evening his manner had been strange, that he'd been preoccupied and ill at ease and so on.

This kind of thing created yet another dilemma for the hunted. Stay in a rut and one is tracked. Jump out of it and one immediately attracts attention. Behave with absolute normality and one can be followed along his chosen path of habitude. Break away from the path and one is harder to find but more surely wanted.

'Innocent, are you? Then why did you take pains to give us the runaround?'

Or, 'We had to chase you. Only the guilty-minded give us a chase. Talk your way out of that!'

And they'd take it from there.

‘Why did you kill Arline?’

‘Come on now, tell us about this Arline. . . Arline - ‘ I hit him like a brick.

Arline who?

The train rolled into his station and stopped. He got off automatically, without being fully aware of what he was doing. He was so occupied with the puzzle of his victim’s surname that he quite forgot to look for the big man.

‘Surely I should know the identity of the woman I buried? I may have become fuzzy-minded but not to that extent. The name must be located at the back of my brain but for some reason I can’t bring it forward. Twenty years is a long time. I know I tried hard to expunge that episode from my memory, to treat it as something that never really happened, a bad but meaningless dream. Yet it’s strange that I cannot recall her family name.’

Arline -?

The big man hove enormously into view as the train gave a raucous hoot and moved on. The name problem promptly fled from Bransome’s mind as he passed through the exit and walked steadily along the approach road. There was a coldness in his back hairs as he heard the slow, deliberate tread of the other’s feet a mere twenty paces behind.

He turned a corner. So did the other. He crossed the street. So did the other. He entered his own road and the big man followed suit.

Problems were piling upon problems. Now he had a new one. Question: did the big man know his address or was he following for the purpose of discovering it? In the former case, Bransome might just as well walk boldly into his own home. In the latter case, to do so would be to provide needed information.

Reaching a decision, he walked right past his own house and frantically hoped that the kids would not rush out yelling and thus reveal what he preferred to hide. Not for a moment did it occur to him to question why a shadower should make so careless a job of his shadowing. If he had given the matter any consideration he'd have concluded that the purpose was to make him panic, that the shadower was functioning as a stimulator of self-betrayal.

No familiar figure endangered his walk-onward tactic until young Jimmy Lindstrom came round the top corner. Bransome immediately avoided him by turning down a side-street. The heavy footsteps faithfully followed.

At the other end of this street a cop was lounging under a lamp, The sight of him made Bransome hesitate for a moment. Then it struck him that here was a situation where boldness might pay.

Speeding up his pace, he reached the cop and said, 'A big fellow has been following me for most of half an hour. I don't like it. He may be after my wallet.'

'Which fellow?' asked the other, peering down the street.

Bransome looked back. The subject of his complaint was nowhere to be seen.

'He was behind me as far as that last corner. I heard him turn it.' The cop sucked at his teeth and suggested, 'Let's go back there.' He accompanied Bransome to the corner. There was no sign of the shadower.

'You sure you didn't imagine him?'

'I'm positive,' said Bransome.

'Then he must have dived down an alley or gone into a house,' the cop decided. 'If he did go into a house he followed you because he uses the same way home.'

‘Could be. But I know most of the folk around here. He was a complete stranger.’

‘That means nothing,’ scoffed the cop. ‘People come and go all the time. If I got the jitters every time I saw a new face I’d have been white-haired ten years ago.’ He studied Bransome curiously. ‘Are you carrying a big wad or something?’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘Where’d you live?’

‘Just over there,’ said Bransome, pointing.

‘All right, mister. You go home and take it easy. I’ll be watching - and I’ll be around for quite a piece yet.’

‘Thanks,’ said Bransome. ‘Sorry to have troubled you.’

He headed for home, inwardly wondering whether he had done the right thing. For all he knew he might still be within observation of the big man who, because of the cop, had become more discreet. True, the suspected shadower might be no more than an innocent newcomer to the locality. But if he were not...

This business of being on the run, mentally at any rate, was like playing superfast chess with his life as the stake. A false move here and another there and the game inevitably must lead to checkmate. It seemed incredible to him that other wanted men could endure such a situation for months, even for years before they gained psychological relief by giving themselves up.

For the first time he began to speculate about the question of just how long he would last and how he would precipitate the welcome end.

Dorothy said with wifely concern, 'Why, Rich, your face is flushed and hot. And on a cool evening like this.'

He kissed her. 'I've been hurrying. I don't know why. Just felt I wanted to put a move on.'

'Hurrying?' She frowned in bafflement and glanced at the clock. 'But you're six or seven minutes later than usual. Was the train running behind time?'

He bit back an affirmative before it could pop out. So easy to tell lies and so easy to be found out. Problems were still piling up. Now he was being tempted to deceive his own wife. Even in such a minor matter as this, he couldn't do it and he wouldn't do it or not yet.

'No, dear, I wasted a bit of time yarning to a cop.'

'Well, that needn't have made you race like mad. Dinner can always wait for a few minutes, you know that.' She put a slender hand to his cheek. 'Rich, are you telling me the truth?'

'The truth about what?'

'About yourself. Are you sure you feel all right?'

'Of course I do. I'm top notch.'

'Not a little bit headachy or feverish?'

'Why on earth do you ask me that?' he demanded.

'You're flushed, as I've told you. And you're not your usual self. I can sense it every time. I've lived with you long enough to know when you're down in the dumps.'

‘Oh, stop picking on me!’ he snapped. He felt contrite immediately and added, ‘Sorry, Honey. I’ve had a tough day. I’ll go have a wash and freshen up a bit.’

He went to the bathroom, his mind coddling the knowledge that all this had happened before. A nervy homecoming, awkward questions from Dorothy, evasions on his part, flight to the bathroom. It couldn’t go on evening after evening, week after week assuming that he remained free for any length of time. And there were doubts about that

Stripping to the waist, he examined his elbow. It still bore a blue-black patch, felt a little stiff but was no longer sore. The bump on his head had gone down considerably; when he took that tumble he couldn’t have hit so hard after all.

In short time he joined the family for dinner. They sat around the table and ate in unaccustomed silence. Even the pup was subdued. There was a dark shadow over the house that all could sense but none could see. After a while the strain became too much. They broke the silence with brief remarks and equally short responses. But the conversation was forced and artificial and they knew it.

In bed that night Dorothy lay restlessly for most of an hour, turning first on one side and then the other, before she whispered, ‘Rich, are you awake?’

‘Yes,’ he admitted, knowing he could not fool her by pretending to be asleep.

‘How about taking a week from work?’

‘My vacation isn’t due just yet.’

‘Couldn’t you ask them for a week in advance?’

‘What for?’

‘You need the break. It would do you good.’

‘Now look here - ‘ He stopped, choking off his irritation as an idea struck him. Then he finished, ‘I’ll see how I feel in the morning. Let’s try to get to sleep now, shall we? It’s late enough already.’

Her hand reached out and patted his.

Over breakfast she brought the subject up again. ‘Grab yourself a spell of time off, Rich. Others do it often enough, when they feel seedy. Why shouldn’t you? You’re not the only originalCast IronMan.’

‘I’m not seedy, either.’

‘I don’t want you to be. A well-earned rest could make all the difference.’

‘Difference between what?’ he asked.

‘Having and not having something to worry about,’ she gave back. ‘I know your job means a lot to you but it isn’t everything. Health comes first.’

‘Nobody’s ever been killed by work.’

‘That’s what Jeff Anderson told his wife, remember?’

He winced and said, ‘Jeff’s stroke wasn’t necessarily brought on by work. It was just one of those things.’

‘Maybe it was,’ she admitted. ‘And maybe it wasn’t.’

‘Listen who’s talking,’ he said jocularly. ‘You accuse me of worrying too much but just now you’re doing plenty yourself.’

‘Rich, we’re married. We’re supposed to consider each other. If we don’t, who will?’

‘All right.’ He left the table, found his hat and case, kissed her behind the front door. ‘I’ll think it over on the train.’

With that, he departed.

He stuck it for four more days, fending off the curious and the querulous at work, fighting a delaying action with Dorothy each night. On the first evening the big man followed him home again. The other three evenings he switched routes and lost the unwelcome tracker. Since each route was longer and consumed more time he got home late. That meant more innocent questions from Dorothy, more evasions that added to her unease. He could see that Dorothy’s worry was growing and that she was doing her best to conceal the fact.

At work the going was rough. In spite of all his efforts to appear perfectly normal his subtle change of character was evident to colleagues on familiar terms with him. His sudden lapses leading to minor blunders, his odd moments of being slow on the uptake, caused confreres to look at him askance. A few addressed him with unusual solicitude, in the manner of men concerned for the sick or soon to be sick.

The fourth day was by far the worst. A tall, sharp-eyed, loose limbed character named Reardon appeared in the plant and hung around the green area most of the time, especially those parts near to where Bransome was working. Bransome’s abnormal sensitivity told him that this newcomer was keeping watch upon him though at no time could he catch him doing so openly. But since nobody could roam the plant without the backing of top authority, that meant the snooping must have official approval.

Surely to God the hunters couldn’t have picked up the trail so swiftly, after twenty long, long years? Could it be that already they had managed to identify the culprit and were keeping him under constant surveillance pending production of enough evidence to provide legal proof? The matter preyed so much on his mind that he couldn’t resist sounding Potter on the subject during the midday break.

‘Who’s this Reardon fellow who seems able to live without working?’

‘Some kind of investigator, I think.’

‘That so? Who or what is he supposed to be investigating?’

‘Darned if I know,’ said Potter, little caring. ‘I’ve seen him around once before. About eighteen months ago.’

‘He wasn’t around our area. I’ve never set eyes on him in my life.’

‘He was fooling around in the red area,’ asserted Potter. ‘So you might not have noticed him. He arrived soon after Henderson took off. Everyone thought he was Henderson’s replacement but he wasn’t. He just mooched around for a few weeks, doing nothing and saying nothing, then went back to wherever he came from. Maybe his job is to tour all the defence plants and make sure nobody is wasting time shooting craps. Maybe somebody in Washington thinks we’d all become incurable crap-shooters unless a beady eye is put upon us from time to time.’

‘Some investigator,’ opined Bransome doubtfully. ‘Meanders all over the place chain-smoking and saying nothing. Never asks any questions.’

‘Do you want questions?’

‘No.’

‘Then what are you griping about?’

‘It gives me the fidgets to have some snooper breathing down my neck.’

‘Doesn’t bother me,’ said Potter. ‘I’ve got a clear conscience.’

Bransome stared hard at him, firmed his lips and that was the end of the conversation. He knew he could not stand another day of this, with remarks like Potter’s jolting his brain, with Reardon’s sharp gaze always near to hand, with the big man to be avoided on the way home and Dorothy to be faced each evening and night. A desperate resolve mounted within him: the time had come to make a break.

When work ceased he went straight to the personnel office, found Markham and said, ‘I hate to come at you without warning but I’d like to take a week off, without pay, starting tomorrow.’

‘Why without pay?’

‘I don’t want to cut into my vacation time.’

Markham registered sympathy. ‘Trouble at home? Kids ill or something?’

‘No, nothing like that.’ He sought around for a plausible pretext. Seemed as if he were doomed to spend the rest of his years mouthing deceptions, finding excuses, seeking pretexts. ‘It’s difficulty with relatives. I’d like to go visiting some distance away and try to clear matters up.’

‘This is rather irregular,’ said Markham, pursing his lips.

‘I know. I wouldn’t ask if it weren’t imperative.’

‘I’m sure you wouldn’t.’ He pondered a moment, picked up the phone, switched through to Cain and chatted briefly. Then he said to Bransome. ‘Cain doesn’t object and that means Laidler can’t object either. It’s all right with me. You’ll be back a week tomorrow?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay. I’ll have it noted on your card.’

‘Thanks a lot. I appreciate it.’

He went out just as Reardon came in. A sideways glance as he passed the window showed Reardon talking to Markham. For some reason he quickened his pace.

A casual acquaintance who happened to be going his way gave him a lift most of the journey home in an asthmatic car. That enabled him to evade the big man again and arrive on time. Perhaps luck was about to change. He had come to the state of thinking things a lot better when they ceased to grow worse.

The family responded with alacrity to his slight perking up. It showed how deeply they must have been affected by his gloom. The kids shrilled, the pup gyrated and wetted the carpet. Dorothy smiled, glanced at the clock, bustled around the kitchen.

‘I’m going away, Honey.’

She paused, saucepan in hand. ‘You mean you’re taking a holiday as I suggested?’

‘Of course not. I wouldn’t snatch a vacation all by myself, without you and the kids. That wouldn’t be a holiday at all. This is the next best thing.’

‘What is it then?’

‘I’m going on business, just for a week. It’ll be quite a change and a bit of a rest.’ ‘I’m glad to hear it. That’s just what you need.’ She put down the pan and capped it with a lid. ‘Where are they sending you, dear?’

Where?

He hadn't thought of it up to this moment, not even for the purpose of having a ready reply. All that had been in his mind was to get away from here and from the plant, away some place devoid of trackers and questioners, a temporary hideout where he could sit in peace, review his predicament and try to concoct a satisfactory solution.

Where?

She was awaiting his reply and becoming conscious of the delay.

'Burleston,' he said with dull desperation. He did not know why he said it. The hated name popped out of his mouth of its own accord.

'Where's that?'

'It's a small place in the mid-west.'

'Oh, is it? Why?'

He continued hurriedly to stall further questions. 'I'll be there only three or four days. I don't plan to fly there. I'll be going by train, lolling back in my seat and enjoying the scenery. Just a lazy bum.' He forced a grin and hoped it looked convincing. 'The trip will be boring, all by myself. Wish you could come along.'

'What, and leave the children to themselves? Or take them away from school for a week? Don't be silly!' She carried on with kitchen work, her spirits visibly improved. 'You make the most of your journey to Burleston, Rich. Eat well, sleep well and don't worry about anything. You'll come back fighting fit.'

'Yes, Doctor,' he said, showing false meekness.

Come back to what? There was only the dangerous rut to which he could return. Obviously it would be a waste of time to jump out of it unless he could stay out.

So within this coming week he must, if possible, find a new anonymous life some place where eyes would not watch his ever move, feet would not follow the steps of his own. It would not ~ enough merely to achieve that much; he must also devise a method of spiriting Dorothy and the children out of one home and into another, suddenly and without trace. To do that he would have to give Dorothy the facts so far denied to her but that prospect could be faced after other problems had been solved if it were possibly to find a complete solution.

One alternative was to abandon his family and thus deprive searchers of a point of contact.

He could not do that, risky though it might be to cling to then He would never do it unless forced by circumstances utterly beyond his control.

Sentence of death would be such a circumstance.

Chapter 4

In the morning he left home by taxi, taking one case and travelling light. Dorothy stood in the driveway by the family car, smiling good-bye and ready to take the children to school. The kids jigged upon the lawn and waved him away. It occurred to him with a touch of panic that if he were picked up during the next few days this might be the last time he'd ever see them thus. Peering through the cab's rear window he drank in the view of them until a corner cut them off from sight.

The cab made a brief stop at the local bank while he withdrew a modest sum. A larger amount would make things easier for him but harder for Dorothy if events proved against their early reunion. He had to strike a compromise between his own immediate needs and her future ones. They had saved assiduously without piling up enough to splurge.

From there he went to the station. The cab rolled away and left him warily seeking familiar faces. There

weren't any around just then, for which he was profoundly thankful. He was going to town an hour later than usual and that saved him from the inquisitiveness of fellow-commuters.

The train took him away. He arrived in town without untoward incident, became as lost in scurrying millions as a grain in a truckload of sand. There was no plan in his mind other than that of ridding himself of all followers while he sought a way of coping with his woes. He had the vague idea that the past cannot easily catch up with one who moves around, therefore the essential thing was to keep moving, erratically, without forecastable system.

More or less aimlessly he tramped along crowded sidewalks, his case hanging at his side, until suddenly he found himself at the mainline station. Then and only then did he realize that some independent and unhampered portion of his mind had steered him there, having decided his route from the start. It seemed strange, he thought, that a confused and apprehensive brain should retain a small section capable of calm thought and ready command. It did not occur to him - since he was little given to self-examination - that a basically emotional problem can swirl over but never drown a basically analytical mind.

Anyway, he obeyed the inward order or instinct or whatever it was. Entering the station, he went to the ticket-office and gazed owl-eyed at the clerk as it dawned upon him that he must now declare his destination. One could not ask for a ticket to somewhere safe, beyond reach of the law. One must name a place of one's choice, any place, even the first one that comes to mind. Indeed, his mouth opened to form the word but he bit it back in the nick of time: the same word he had voiced to Dorothy when called upon to answer without thinking.

The other portion of his mind, the part remaining craftily awake, held the word back, if they come looking for you, it argued, they'll trace you to town and rake the train and bus stations for someone who remembers the item they wish to learn. They'll talk to this clerk and he may talk back. Even though he deals with hundreds of people per day he may have an excellent memory and find some obscure reason to recall your visit - and say too much. Don't take a chance on him. Don't take a chance on anyone. The characters in the jails are the stupid ones who accepted unnecessary risks.

Bransome bought a ticket to a big city three-quarters of the way to where he intended to go. Pocketing the ticket, he picked up his case, turned around and almost bumped into a tall, lean man with crew-cut hair and gimlet eyes.

'Well now, Mr Bransome,' said Reardon pleasantly, but showing no great surprise. 'Giving yourself a vacation?'

‘With official permission,’ said Bransome, making a gigantic effort to control himself. He added, ‘People do take time off once in a while.’

‘Sure they do,’ approved Reardon. He looked with pointed interest at the other’s case, his air being that of one able to see right inside anything at which he gazed. ‘Have yourself a good time.’

‘That is my intention.’ Then resentment sparked and he demanded, ‘What are you doing here anyway?’

‘The same as yourself.’ Reardon gave a half-smile. ‘I’m going somewhere. We wouldn’t happen to be going the same way, would we?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ Bransome riposted, ‘not knowing your destination.’

‘Oh, well, what does it matter?’ said Reardon, refusing to bite. He glanced at the station clock, edged towards the ticket office window. ‘Have to hurry. Be seeing you sometime.’

‘Maybe,’ said Bransome, showing no pleasure at the prospect. He made for his train, relieved and yet not relieved at getting rid of Reardon. His mind was jumpier than a cat at a fireworks display. Meeting the fellow here seemed too much for coincidence. He had a swift, wary look around as he passed through the barrier. There was no sign of Reardon at that moment.

Ten minutes passed before the train pulled out and he spent it edgily expecting unwanted company. If Reardon were trailing him, and had documentary authority to prove his right to ask questions, it would be easy for him to demand a ticket as issued to the previous buyer and climb aboard this train. The last thing Bransome wanted was the snoop’s face in the opposite seat, with several hours of conversation to be handled cagily, endless pointed remarks and penetrating questions to be fended off. He kept anxious watch through the window but eventually the train moved out with nothing to show that Reardon had caught it.

Reaching the terminus after an uneventful trip, Bransome walked haphazardly around the city, kept surreptitious watch behind him but failed to spot a follower of any kind. He treated himself to an indifferent meal, mooched about a little longer and returned to the station. So far as he could tell nobody was trailing behind him and nobody was hanging around the station entrance in expectation of his

reappearance.

At the ticket office he said. 'I want to get to Burleston.' 'No rail service to that place,' replied the clerk. 'Nearest station is Hanbury, twenty-four miles off. A bus will take you the rest of the way.'

'All right. Fix me up for Hanbury. What time is the next train?'

'You're in luck. Two minutes from now. Track Nine and you'd better hustle.'

Grabbing his ticket, Bransome galloped through the subway and up the steps to Track Nine. He made it nicely; the train started to move before he was settled in his seat. That fact was a source of much satisfaction; he felt that the speed of his departure must have shaken off pursuit if, indeed, he really was being pursued.

Here was the curse of being burdened with a past dragged willy-nilly into the present and making it equally grim: the constant unshakable, never-ending sensation of being watched, suspected, followed. The obsession of being surrounded by eyes that stared and saw the truth and accused.

Why did I kill Arline?

There was a slight sickness in his stomach as he pondered the question. For some elusive reason the details came back more clearly now that he was less preoccupied with immediate dangers.

He could remember her surname now, Arline Lafarge. Yes that had been her name. She'd once explained to him that her first name was another version of Eileen and that the last was attributable to French ancestry. She'd had a wonderful figure to which she gave every possible emphasis and that was all that could be said for her. In other respects she'd been black-haired, black-eyed, completely calculating and completely callous. An old witch in youthful guise if ever there was one.

She had gained an almost hypnotic hold over him when he was not quite twenty and must have been a ten times bigger fool than he'd ever been before or since. She'd announced her intention of exploiting her control to the utmost just as soon as he became fit for exploitation, by which she meant she was biding her time until he left college, found a job and started making good money. Mean.while he was to be her

willing love-slave, waiting and yearning for the ultimate reward of her body. Every once in a while she insisted that he crawl to her at her command. She wanted periodic reassurances that her hold remained good and tight. And he had dutifully provided them, wanting her and hating her at one and the same time.

So then, two decades back, had come the explosion. She had summoned him to Burleston just for the day, wanting to dangle the bait just beyond reach of the poor fish, wanting to gloat over him, wipe her feet on him, satisfy herself for the twelfth or twentieth time that he was wholly hers, body and soul. That was her mistake - to call him just then. Something snapped, his liver had taken over from his heart and his hatred had built up to critical mass. He could have thrown her over but his fury had been too great to be satisfied with so simple a solution. So he had gone to Burleston and bashed her skull in. Then he had buried her under a tree.

He must have been crazy.

The details of that act now shone vividly in his mind as if impressed thereon a few days ago rather than twenty years back. He could see her pale oval face as she collapsed beneath a vicious blow, her crumpled form lying still, unmoving, a thin trickle of blood creeping from the edge of her black hair and matching the blood-red of her lips. He could still sense the insane violence with which he'd struck her. He could recall with complete vividness the frantic energy with which he had scabbled a burrow in which to hide the body, meanwhile watching the lonely road for anyone who might catch him in the act. He could see himself carefully replacing the last torn-up sods between the tree's roots and trampling them firm to conceal all signs of disturbance.

And then had followed the long period of mental training designed to protect him from the past; a stringent form of self-discipline by means of which he had almost convinced himself that the deed had never been done, Arline Lafarge had never existed, he had never been to Burleston in his life.

To some extent he must have succeeded in expunging evil memories as the years rolled by. Today, his crime could be pictured in sharp focus and full colour but on preceding and subsequent events he was decidedly hazy. It had taken quite a time to remember that Arline's surname had been Lafarge. Try as he might, he could not bring the township of Burleston to mind with any accuracy, in fact his efforts to recall its scenes left him unsure whether he was resurrecting the correct ones or confusing them with some other small place visited in the long ago. In the past he had travelled around quite a lot and had seen plenty of one-horse country towns; at this date it wasn't easy to sort out one from another. And another thing: right now he couldn't imagine why Arline had gone to Burleston in the first place.

Above all, he could not for the life of him recall the precise nature of Arline's hold over him. Obviously he should be able to remember it because therein lay the basic motivation of his crime yet he could not. Even if one made full allowance for the desire and emotions of youth, mere detestation was not enough -

or not enough for a man of his thoughtful type. So far as his possibly inhibited memory went, he had not had more than his shared youthful follies, had never been known as a wildcat. There must be a better-than-average reason for ridding himself of Arline. Somewhere at some time he must have done something that could effectively ruin his career if found out, something that Arline had known about and held over him.

But he had not the slightest recollection of it. What had it been. A theft? An armed robbery? An embezzlement or a forgery? In his imagination he went through the details of his life from babyhood to the twenties and failed to dig out a single deed of enough consequence to place him at the mercy of a scheming female. So far as his memory could be trusted his only delinquencies had been childish ones such as blacking the eye of a mother's pet, breaking a window with a ball. No more than that.

Wearily he rubbed his forehead, knowing that intense nervous strain can play hob with rational thought, wondering whether any of the bright brains with whom he worked ever became afflicted with a similar mental hiatus. Once or twice he also wondered somewhat fearfully whether his own mind was quite normal and whether some latent abnormality - first evident twenty years ago - was now reasserting itself in readiness to develop into a certifiable condition. He may have been a little mad then - he might not be as sane as he believed now. Darkness had fallen by the time he reached Hanbury. He took a room at a small hotel, slept erratically with many tossings and turnings, breakfasted heavy-eyed and without appetite. The first bus to Burleston left at nine-thirty. He caught it, leaving his case at the hotel.

The bus got him there at ten-fifteen. Dismounting, he stared up and down the main street and entirely failed to recognize it. This did not mystify him; places can and do change a lot in twenty years. Sometimes they alter out of all semblance to original form as old buildings get knocked down, new ones take their place, vacant lots become occupied, garbage dumps are cleared away and their space developed. In twenty years a hamlet can become a village, a village can grow to a town and a town into a city.

To the best of his judgement, Burleston was now a small country town of about four thousand population. It was bigger than he'd expected. He knew of no reason why he'd imagined it smaller except, perhaps, that a memory of his last visit was lodged somewhere in his subconscious.

For some time he stood on the Street uncertain what to do next. He hadn't the vaguest notion why flight from inward fears had brought him here; only that he had obeyed an instinct seemingly without rhyme or reason. Perhaps it was the much-vaunted desire of the criminal to return to the scene of his crime. It could be that, in fact it was likely to be that because he felt very much impelled to visit the actual scene without knowing if it was north, south, east or west of where he was standing.

His memory supplied only the vision of a length of country road no different from a thousand country roads. In his mind's eye he could see that stretch vividly enough: a straight, two-lane highway, smoothly

macadamed , with young trees lining the verges at fifty-foot intervals. Fields around full of young corn standing knee-high. One tree in particular, the one under which he had dug a tunnel, down below the spreading roots. He'd shoved her into it head first. Her shoes had peeped out before he'd hidden them with the last of the earth and reset the sods of coarse grass.

Somewhere outside of Burleston it had been, must have been. A mile beyond the outskirts, five miles, ten? He didn't know. And in which direction? He didn't know that either. In this street were no familiar pointers, nothing to give him a clue.

Eventually he dealt with that problem in manner best calculated to avoid the questions of the curious. He hired a taxi, told the driver that he was a business executive seeking a site for a small factory outside of town. The driver, more concerned with cash than with motives, took him on a comprehensive tour of all roads within ten miles of Burleston. It was a dead loss. At no point did they pass a scene that the passenger could recognize.

When they got back to their starting-point, Bransome said to the driver, 'I've been tipped to look at a cornfield alongside a two-lane road. The road has trees planted on both sides at regular intervals. Know where that might be?'

'No, chief. You've been along every route out of this town. Thereain't any more. I don't know of any tree-lined road nearer than ten miles the other side of Hanbury. Take you there if you want.'

'No thanks,' said Bransome hurriedly. 'The advice I was given definitely said Burleston.'

'Then somebody got it wrong,' asserted the driver. 'Wise guys usually get it wrong.' With that piece of philosophy he drove away.

Well, perhaps the road had been widened and its trees cut down, Perhaps he had jounced within a few yards of the fateful spot without knowing it. But no, that wasn't likely. The gabby trucker who had scared him in the first place had talked about a tree leaning over the road and near to falling. That one, at least, had not been cut. It was a good guess that all the other trees were still there - unless cut very recently. But he had seen no evidence of any roadside tree-felling during his ride in the taxi.

Restlessly he walked several miles up and down the main street, looking at shops, stores, taverns and service stations, hoping to stimulate his memory and get himself a clue of some kind, any kind. It was to

no avail. The whole place remained as completely strange as any unknown town. If it were an unknown town, if indeed he had never been here before, he must have got the name wrong. It couldn't be Burleston after all. It must be some similar sounding place such as Boylestown or Burlesford or even Bakerstown .

'It is Burleston,' insisted his brain.

Confusion.

His mind said one thing while his eyes said another. His mind declared, *'This is where you came to kill Arline.'* His eyes contradicted, *'You don't know this place from Singapore or Seringapatam.'*

Then to make matters worse his mind seemed to split into mutually antagonistic halves. One part gloated, *'Watch out! The police are collecting the evidence. Watch out!'* The other part retorted, *'The police be damned! You've got to prove it to yourself. That's all that matters!'*

Schizophrenia: that was his self-diagnosis. Such a mental condition would account for everything. He was living and had lived for years in two separate worlds. Let not thy righthand know what thy left hand doeth. Let not Bransome the scientist be called to account for Bransome the murderer.

In the last resort it might prove his salvation. They don't execute certified maniacs. They put them away for keeps, in an asylum.

Salvation?

He'd be better off dead!

A paunchy man in the doorway of a cheap clothing store spoke to him as he mooched past for the sixth or seventh time.

‘Looking for someone, stranger?’

Bransome did not hesitate this time. Glib stories came more easily with practice and he’d been getting some of that of late. He had the foresight to make it substantially the same yarn as that fed to the taxi-driver. Folk gossip in a small town, are quick to detect inconsistencies and remark upon them.

‘I’ve been seeking a suggested factory site. Can’t find it anyplace. My informant must have bungled it somehow.’

‘In Burleston?’ asked Paunchy, screwing up his eyes in readiness for deep thought.

‘No - just outside.’

‘What sort of a site? If you can give a description I might be able to help you.’

Bransome gave it in as much detail as he could and added, he told that one of the trees was brought down by a flood.’ That was a daring item to put in. He waited edgily, half expecting the other to burst out, ‘Hey, that’s where they found a girl’s bones!’

But the other merely grinned and said, ‘You must be of more than half a century ago.’

‘Whatd’you mean?’

‘I’ve been here fifty years. We’ve had no flood anywhere around these parts in my time.’

‘You’re sure of that?’

‘I couldn’t be more positive.’

‘Perhaps I’ve got the wrong Burleston.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Paunchy. ‘I’ve never heard of another one. Not in this section of the world, anyway.’

Bransome shrugged, trying to look careless and indifferent ‘Nothing for it but to go back and recheck. This trip has been waste of time and money.’

‘Tough luck,’ sympathized the other. ‘Why don’t you try Kaster’s real estate office in Hanbury? That fellow knows every farm and field for a hundred miles around.’

‘It’s an idea. Thanks!’

He returned to the bus terminal, baffled. In a town so small as this an event as large as murder - even an old one recently revived - should be the talk of the place. Proximity to the scene should have made the taxi-driver mention it as the cab went past. The paunch man should have responded to the tale of the falling tree with the lurid details of what the uprooting had revealed. Yet neither had reacted.

It then occurred to him that the local newspaper should be able to provide information without him having to entice it in manner likely to attract attention. He could have kicked himself for a having thought of it before and he filed the oversight under the heading of criminal amateurism. In spite of days of ducking and dodging he was not yet an adept at being on the run.

The current issue of the town sheet might contain nothing of significance to turn, especially if the case were hanging fire or the police giving no handouts to the press. But some issue in the last few weeks would hold the story, the theories pertaining to it and perhaps some hint of what was being done about it.

He spoke to a be-whiskered oldster sitting on a nearby bench ‘Where’s the office of the local paper?’

‘We don’t have one, mister. We use the *Hanbury Gazette* .comes out Fridays.’

The bus arrived, he got aboard and sat looking through window. Across the street Paunchy was still lounging in the doorway of his shop, his bored attention on the bus. It was more than certain, Bransome decided, that that observant character would remember him and, if asked, be able to give a fairly accurate description of him together with the times of his arrival and departure. He looked the gabby, miss-nothing type who could give damning evidence when required.

Oh, Lord, why were other people's memories so good and his own so bad?

If ever the hunt caught up with him this visit to Burleston would look significant to say the least. He may have made a serious mistake in coming here. Perhaps he should not have given way to the dictates of an abnormal mind or some insistent part of it. This journey could weigh heavily against him when the questioning began.

'All right, so you're not guilty. Let's accept that. Let's agree that you don't know what we're talking about. Let's agree that you've never heard of Arline Lafarge. Then why did you take it on the lam? Why did you beat it away from home just about as fast as you could go?'

'I didn't beat it. I wasn't running away from anything. I merely treated myself to a week free from work. I was seedy and needed a rest.'

'Did your doctor tell you that?'

'No. I didn't consult my doctor.'

'Why not? If you were all that near to collapse he'd have issued a certificate of exemption, wouldn't he?'
'I wasn't near to collapse and haven't claimed that I was. Don't put words into my mouth.'

'We need no instructions from you. Just give straight answers to straight questions. You've nothing to hide, have you?'

‘No.’

‘Okay then. You say you were exhausted and wanted to take it easy for awhile?’

‘Yes.’

‘You diagnosed your own trouble and prescribed your own treatment?’

‘Yes, I did. There’s no law against it.’

‘We know all about the law. Now answer this: isn’t it a wonderful coincidence that you should need a rest way out in the wilds at the very time that we picked up your tracks? Why couldn’t you have rested at home, with your wife and kids?’

‘We weren’t doing each other any good.’

‘Howd’you mean?’

‘My mental condition worried them and that in turn worried me. It was a vicious circle that aggravated the situation. The worse I felt, the worse they made me feel. It seemed to me that the only solution lay in taking a few days away from home, somewhere quiet and peaceful.’

‘Such as Burleston?’

‘If I was going away I had to go somewhere, didn’t I? I could have gone anywhere, anywhere at all.’

‘You said it, mister! You could have gone anywhere in the widewide world. But you had to go to Burleston. Howd’you account for that?’

‘I can’t account for it.’

Perhaps at that point he’d start shouting and they’d give each other significant glances, knowing from experience that he who shouts is in a corner. He’d shout his answers in effort to emphasize his innocence and thereby convince them that he was soon to crack.

‘I don’t know why I went where I did. I was heading for a nervous breakdown and in no condition for logical thought. I went off at random, believing that the trip would do me good. It was by sheer chance that I got to Burleston.’ ‘That and no more?’

‘Yes.’

‘It was just by accident that you landed there?’

‘That’s right.’ ‘You’re quite sure about that?’

‘I am.’

A wolfish grin followed by, ‘When you left home you told your wife you were going to Burleston.’

‘Did I?’

Fighting for time, frantic with thought.

‘She says you did.’

‘She’s mistaken.’

‘Your kids heard you tell her.’

Silence.

‘They’re mistaken too, eh?’

Silence.

‘All three make identically the same mistake, eh?’

‘Perhaps I did tell her - though I’ve no recollection of doing so. I must have had Burleston somewhere in my mind and sort of went there without thinking.’

‘So you went to a God-forgotten dump like that, eh? Most folk around here have never heard of the place. But you knew about it. You’ve just said yourself that it must have been somewhere in your mind. How did it come to be in your mind? What put it there?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Your records show you weren’t born in Burleston. You didn’t get married there. Your wife doesn’t come from there. On the face of it you’ve no personal connexion with the place. So why did you go there?’

‘I’ve told you a dozen times, I don’t really know.’

‘Why did you consider it necessary to tell a bunch of lies about this trip?’

'I didn't. I told my wife where I was going and that's your own evidence.'

'Never mind our evidence - you concentrate on yours. You told Markham that you were having difficulty with relatives but your wife doesn't know a thing about it. You told your wife that you were being sent to Burleston on official business but your superiors flatly deny it. You told a taxi-driver and a shopkeeper that you were looking for a factory site when in fact you were doing nothing of the kind.'

'I didn't want Markham to know I was feeling lousy.'

'Why not?'

'I didn't want him to think I couldn't stand the pace. It doesn't help to give an impression of weakness.'

'Doesn't it? Well, your explanations are weak enough to fall apart. It's quite normal for employees to fall sick and say so and be given time off. Ten per cent of the plant's personnel have been absent for that reason, at one time or another, this year. Why do you regard your case as exceptional?'

Silence.

'How about the fairy tale you told your wife? A man doesn't deceive an attractive woman without good motive.'

'She was already deeply concerned for me. I didn't want to add to her worry.'

'All right. So you went to Burleston and sought a factory site, or said you were seeking one. We've two witnesses to that. Thinking of setting up business for yourself? What kind of manufacturing did you have in mind? Why locate your plant in Burleston, where there's no railhead?'

'The witnesses are mistaken.'

‘Both of them?’

‘Yes.’

‘H’m! They’re suffering from delusions in the same way as your wife and kids, eh? Strange how everybody misunderstands you, isn’t it?’

No reply.

‘Medical evidence shows that this girl was murdered. Of all traceable suspects you alone had the opportunity and, we believe, the motive. The crime lies dormant for twenty years while you establish yourself as a loving husband, a good father and a solid citizen. You became a perfect picture of suburban respectability.’

Silence. ‘Then by a most remarkable coincidence you get tired of it all just after the murder comes to light. By a still greater coincidence you decide to take a sudden vacation. In where of all places? In Burtleston!’

Silence.

‘Don’t let’s fool around any longer - we’ve wasted enough time already. Let’s get down to basic facts. The news gave you the jitters because you had good reason for jittering. You had to check up. You had to find out whether the police had got a lead on anyone and, if so, who. Otherwise you couldn’t sleep nighttimes.’

Silence.

‘Mister, you’re sewed up tight enough to satisfy any jury. A confession is your only hope. At least it may save your neck.’ A pause, a stare, a contemptuous wave of the hand. ‘Take him away. Let him think it over until his lawyer gets here.’

Bransome had no difficulty in imagining the whole dreadful dialogue in which he would be assigned the role of the cornered rat. Would it really be like that when the end came? His pulse put in a few extra thumps as he thought of it.

Chapter 5

The queasy feeling had passed off by the time he reached Hanbury. He had argued himself out of it on the basis that idle anticipation and ultimate realization can be completely different things. The future lay in the lap of the gods rather than in the depths of his over-active imagination. The worst might never happen. If it did, he would meet it when he came to it.

He found the office of the *Hanbury Gazette* a few hundred yards from his hotel, went in, said to the lean, sallow-faced youth behind the counter, 'Do you have any back numbers available?'

'Depends how far back.'

'As from the last issue.'

'Yes, we've quite a lot. How manyd'you want?'

Bransome thought a moment, said, 'I'd like a dozen.'

'You mean you want twelve copies of the last issue?'

'No, I want one each of the last twelve editions.'

The other dug them out, rolled them into a bundle, put string around them and handed them over. Bransome paid, returned to his hotel and took them to his room. He locked his door, opened the bundle on the table by the window and started his examination. For most of two hours he searched through the newspapers page by page, column by column, missing nothing.

These sheets covered a period stretching from last week to three months ago. They recorded a fire, a couple of hold-ups and several car thefts in town, a suicide out of town and a spectacular shooting forty miles away. Nothing out of the ordinary appeared to have happened in or near Burleston.

He could think up two possible explanations for this. Firstly, the trucker who had given forth about the body under the tree may have been misled by talk about a very similar crime located elsewhere. He snatched a gleam of hope from the thought that his burden of guilt might be cast off and borne by another.

Alternatively, the trucker's story might be accurate enough but referred to an event older than he, Bransome, had assumed. The fellow's manner had not suggested it; on the contrary, he had conveyed the impression of telling about something that had happened fairly recently, within the last few days or perhaps during the previous week. The trucker had certainly given the listening Bransome the idea that the news had not had time to grow stale.

Yet again his brain suffered a momentary dizziness. Up to now he'd taken it for granted that the powers-that-be had only a short time in which to trace him; but if, in fact, they'd had more than three months they might be very near by now. Close upon his heels. Perhaps right at this moment they were in his home, firing questions at a pale-faced and distraught Dorothy.

'Where did he say he was going? To Burleston? Where the heck is that? See if you can get through to the police there, Joe. Tell 'em he's wanted. If it's not a false lead, they may be able to pick him up.'

He sat in his room wrestling with his predicament. From first to last he'd had to cope with a constant succession of panics brought on by his own ears. Now he was managing to develop a resistance to them. Right now he could think of the wires humming as Dorothy's questioners raised the Burleston or Hanbury police. A day or two ago the mere notion of it would have got him on the run again. But not now. He would sit tight until morning and take a chance with the cops.

It was essential that he remain overnight because the Gazette office would have closed by this hour. No more back copies could be got come tomorrow. The part of his mind that battled with his emotions and insisted on dealing with the situation - the part that had steered him here - maintained that he must not leave Hanbury without finding what he was seeking or satisfying himself beyond all doubt that it was not

there to be found. At whatever risk the matter must be settled one way or the other.

Tossing the useless newspapers into the waste-basket, he rubbed his chin and decided on a shave before dinner. He unlocked his case, opened it, stood staring at it with deep suspicion. The contents were neatly packed, his belongings intact, nothing missing. Ever since his childhood he'd been ludicrously faddy about his packing and, like most people of that type, he could tell at a glance when something had been disturbed. Things lay in his case almost but not quite as he had put them. He felt fairly sure that the case had been emptied and repacked.

He could not be absolutely positive about it but, all the same, he considered it a good guess that someone had opened the case and given the contents a swift and expert examination. Somebody looking for what? In the circumstances he could find only one answer, namely, incriminating evidence. A petty thief, he reasoned, would not have bothered to try to conceal his search by tidily repacking the contents and locking the case. More likely he'd have flung the stuff all over the room to express his anger at finding nothing of value. Only an official searcher would make an effort to hide his probing.

He tested the locks for signs of picking or forcing but they showed not a scratch and turned easily. Could he be mistaken about this? Had he unknowingly bounced the case around a bit and thus shaken it up since last it was opened? Or were the Hanbury police swinging into action already?

For the next few minutes he sought carefully through the room for a crushed cigarette butt or a splash of tobacco ash or anything else that could be construed as the mark of an intruder. He found nothing. Neither the bed nor the wardrobe showed a sign of having been disturbed. Proof was non-existent and all he had to go upon was a fussy belief that a spare tie had been folded left to right instead of right to left and that a bunch of collars had been packed with points to the rear instead of to the front.

Next, he stood near the window, half-concealed at one side, and watched the Street below for some sign that the hotel was under observation. That got him nowhere either. Passers-by were numerous but so far as he could discern no same figure mooched past twice in twenty minutes and nobody appeared to have even a surreptitious interest in the hotel. Of course, anyone officially keeping watch on the place would not necessarily hang around outside. He might be in the hotel itself, possibly lounging in the lobby and wearing an innocent air of waiting for someone, or behind the counter posing as a relief clerk. Bransome went downstairs to have a look. The only persons visible in the foyer were two elderly ladies gossiping together; he could not picture either of them in hot pursuit of a murderer. At the counter the one clerk on duty was a skinny runt who could have fitted into a leg of a cop's pants. Bransome went up to him.

'Has anyone called for me while I've been out?'

‘No, Mr Bransome.’

‘Anyone been shown up to my room?’

‘No, sir, not that I know of.’

‘H’m!’

‘Something wrong?’ asked the clerk, eyeing him.

‘Nothing much. Just had a queer feeling that someone has been prowling around my room.’

‘Is anything missing?’ said the clerk, stiffening himself in readiness for trouble.

‘No, nothing at all.’

The clerk showed vast relief and suggested. ‘It may have been the room-maid.’

‘Possibly.’

Bransome glanced down, ill at ease and vaguely dissatisfied. The hotel register lay wide open and practically under his nose. It was turned to face the clerk but he could see the last entry quite clearly. The fact that the writing was upside-down caused only a little delay in appreciating what he could see. He stared at it absently while his thoughts moiled around until eventually his eyes chipped in and told his brain what was there.

‘Thanks,’ he said to the clerk.

He tramped upstairs, sat on the edge of his bed, tangled and untangled his fingers while he tried to estimate how many Reardons there might be in the world. Maybe six or seven thousands, maybe ten or more. No knowing, no way of telling. And besides, that lanky, beady-eyed snooper at the plant wasn’t necessarily a Joseph. He could be a Dudley or a Mortimer or anything but a Joseph.

All the same, it was an unpleasant coincidence. Like meeting Reardon at the railroad station was a coincidence. Or having his case tampered with here, right here, just after a Reardon had arrived.

For a short time he seriously considered paying his bill and getting out, not out of town but to some other near-by place where he could stay the night. That wouldn’t be so easy. Hanbury had only two hotels and it was rather late in the evening to roam the streets in search of a rooming-house.

There was an alternative with which he toyed in the manner of a trapped rat provoked into attacking the terrier. He could go to Room 13, boldly knock on the door and confront this Reardon. If the fellow proved to be a complete stranger everything would be all right.

‘Sorry, my mistake - wrong room.’

But if the occupant of Room 13 turned out to be the one-and-only Reardon there’d be a couple of pointed questions ready for him the moment he opened the door.

‘What the hell are you doing here? What’s the idea of following me around?’

Yes, it might pay off. Reardon dare not accuse him of anything without proof. If such proof already existed he, Bransome, would now be under arrest. The fact that nobody as yet had seen fit to haul him in gave him an advantage, if only a temporary one.

Filled with sudden resolve he left his room, hurried along the corridor to Room 13 and tapped on its door. He was all set to create a scene if the familiar face appeared. He tapped again, more loudly and impatiently. There was no response. Putting an ear to the keyhole he heard not a sound. He tapped longer and still more loudly. Silence. The room was empty. He tried the door-handle and was out of luck; the door remained fastened.

Feet sounded around the bend of the corridor. Bransome dashed back to his own room, left his door a quarter-inch ajar and watched through the crack. A heavily built man with a very large stomach tramped past Room 13 and continued onward. Bransome shut and locked his door, sat on the bed and gazed meditatively at his case.

In the end he wedged a chair under the door-handle for good measure, and got into bed, first having another long look through the window without finding evidence of watchers. He might as well have walked the streets all night for what good the period of repose did him. He missed Dorothy and the kids, pictured them in his mind, wondered what they were doing now and when he would see them again. For hours he lay experiencing alternate states of alertness and semi-consciousness, merging himself into a series of fantastic dreams from which the slightest sound brought him fully awake. By dawn he was slightly baggy-eyed and in no mood to sing.

At eight-thirty in the morning he was at the Gazette office, the moment it opened. Returning to his hotel he dumped a large roll of back numbers in his room, went down to breakfast. A dozen people were there, chatting and eating. They included nobody he could recognize. For all that he could tell, the whole lot might have been named Reardon, the clerk, the heavy man and the two old ladies to boot.

Breakfastover, he hastened upstairs, sought through the newspapers one by one. He reached back into the past for almost a year. None mentioned his crime. Not one of them. For reasons best known to themselves the police might have suppressed the news — but it seemed incredible that they should have imposed so complete a black-out for so long. Or was the event more than a year old and reported in an equally older paper? Or had the trucker talked about somebody else's similar deed?

He still felt that he had to know one way or the other without tempting fate by his methods of gaining the knowledge. Yet he could think of only one sure and conclusive means of securing the basic facts. It would be a dangerous move, if he had the courage to make it. It would be tantamount to shoving his head into the lion's mouth. He could go and ask the police about the matter, boldly and frankly, just like that!

Might he get away with it if he gave them a false name and made his curiosity plausible with a suitable story? How about describing himself as a professional writer of unsolved mysteries and asking them to help with the data on Arline Lafarge? Jeepers, that might be going too far. He could imagine the cops'

reaction.

‘Hey, how do you know about this? The papers haven’t mentioned it. And how have you got hold of the victim’s name? We haven’t yet identified her ourselves. Seems to us, mister, that you know a whole lot more than is good for your health. Only one man could know so much - the man who did it!’

Then they’d hold him as a major suspect, eventually discover his true identity and the fat would be really in the fire. Too risky and too darned stupid as well. How about calling them from a phone booth? There was an idea. They couldn’t grab a man through a mile of copper wire, much as they’d like to. Neither could they trace his call and pick him up if he had the sense to refuse to hold on and wait their convenience.

He was learning, one at a time, the tricks and subterfuges of the man on the run. It was a hell of a life.

The booth by the bus station would be the best place. A good tactic would be to consult the time-table there and make his call just before two or three buses were due to depart. If the police came racing to the booth, eager to grab any guilty-looking characters in sight, they might be tempted to jump to the wrong conclusions and go haring out of town in pursuit of the buses while he was ruminating his next move back in the hotel. The police would catch the buses and find themselves stalled for lack of a description of the unknown caller. They’d be unable to pin anything on anyone.

All right, he’d give it a try and with luck persuade someone to let slip something significant over the telephone. If, for instance, he asked the police-chief whether he needed a line on that case concerning bones found under a tree, and the chief showed interest or responded with counter-questions or tried to hold the caller on the line, it would demonstrate the grim reality of the discovery plus the fact that the authorities really were working on it.

That much decided, he saw no reason for further delay and departed, making sure that both his case and his door were securely locked. He turned and walked swiftly along the carpeted corridor, came abreast of Room 13 just as its door opened and Reardon started out.

Without a flicker of surprise, Reardon said, ‘Well, fancy meet -,’

He didn’t get any further. Bransome slugged him right in the teeth, a vicious blow born of a mixture of fear and fury. Reardon went headlong through the still open door and back into the room.

Filled with fierce desperation, Bransome leaped after him and let him have it again, this time smack on the chin. It was a weighty, well-aimed punch that could have knocked out many a man bigger and heavier than the other. But for all his lengthy leanness Reardon was a tough customer. Though taken completely unaware, he refused to go down. He reeled, waved his arms around and tried hard to rally.

Pressing his advantage to the full, Bransome gave him no chance. Anger lent him strength such as he had never known. He brushed aside a groggy swing from the other and planted a haymaker into his gullet. Reardon let out a harsh, choking cough and appeared about to fall. He raised a hand in the air and looked as if striving to shout but unable to give voice.

Bransome landed three more before Reardon toppled, not with a clumsy thud but with a quiet folding motion like a suddenly emptied suit of clothes. He was tough all right; he could take plenty of punishment even without warning. Bransome bent over him, breathing heavily. Glancing behind, he saw that the door was wide open. He went to it and looked along the corridor. Not a soul in sight. Nobody had heard the brief fracas, nobody had raised the alarm. Carefully he closed the door and returned to his opponent.

Standing over Reardon, he rubbed his knuckles as he gazed thoughtfully down. His insides were still simmering with excitement and his nerves were taut. This fellow, he decided, was far too smart and persistent a tracker for his comfort. It would be sheer folly not to exploit the present situation and remove the hound-dog from his trail for long enough to make him lose it. Right now he was in a good position to get rid of Reardon for keeps. A man can be executed for murder only once; he cannot be burned twice for two. Yet he couldn't bring himself seriously to consider the idea of killing Reardon there and then. He couldn't have indulged so cold-blooded a slaying even for a million dollars. If this had been the right time for useful introspection - which it was not - he'd have perceived the manifest incongruity of a killer baulking at a killing and, perhaps, found significance in it.

Despite that the means was ready to hand, he could not have slaughtered Reardon to gain his own salvation. Reardon lay sprawled partly on his back and partly on one side, his eyes closed, lips bleeding, his jacket open and revealing a small shoulder holster containing a tiny blue-steel automatic. Bransome eyed the gun speculatively but did not touch it.

Going to the other's luggage-case, Bransome opened it, found therein a dozen handkerchiefs, a couple of ties and all the usual necessities of travel. He used the ties and handkerchiefs to fasten Reardon's wrists and ankles and fix a wad over his crimson mouth. By the time he'd finished Reardon was emitting snuffling noises and showing signs of coming round.

Bransome swiftly searched him, found his wallet and looked through it. Paper money, two or three letters of no especial interest, a couple of receipted bills, a folded insurance certificate for a car. One inner flap held postage stamps. The opposite one contained a long, narrow, cellophane-encased card. Bransome looked at the card and found his back hairs rising. It bore an embossed eagle, a serial number and some lettering.

Federal Government of the United States of America.

Department of Military Intelligence.

Joseph Reardon.

In the name of all that's holy what had Military Intelligence to do with a plain, sordid murder? It baffled him. The only possible explanation he could think up was that perhaps they took over jurisdiction from the police when the homicide involved someone employed on top secret work. But that didn't seem likely. So far as he knew the police administered the law with bland indifference to all other considerations and would march the world's greatest scientist up the thirteen steps if he had slain his own mother.

Anyway, this bloodhound was stalled for the time being. For how much time depended upon how fast he, Bransome, moved to some place far out of reach. Replacing the wallet in the other's pocket, he shoved Reardon under the bed, sneaked a glance out of the door and found nobody in sight. He left Room 13, hearing the door-latch click behind him.

Dashing to his own room he grabbed his case, had a hasty glance around to make sure nothing was left, hustled down to the lobby and paid his bill. The clerk was slow-moving, lackadaisical, as if determined to try Bransome's patience to the limit. While he was detained at the counter Bransome's eyes could not stop looking warily around, seeking a prospective tracker in the lobby and half-expecting a hullabaloo upstairs. Snatching his receipted bill, he hurried to the bus station and found no bus due to leave for fifty minutes. He then tried the railroad station. No train for an hour and a half.

That meant unwanted delay. The instinct of the hunted warned him not to remain a minute longer in Hanbury than could be helped. Temporarily he had abandoned the idea of phoning the police. One could call them from anywhere, even a thousand miles away. When making such a call distance would lend considerable enchantment to the view.

The main thing was to get out before Reardon broke loose and the powers behind him sealed the town. He decided to walk along the route of the first bus due to depart. It would pick him up four or five miles out and that should be sufficient to evade the search if in the next fifty minutes Reardon managed to raise

the hue and cry. The first things the authorities would do would be to cover the bus and railroad stations, chase all the taxis and question the car-hire depots.

So he trudged out of town, maintaining a good, fast pace and thinking only that he would phone Dorothy before this day was through and find out how she and the children were doing. Also he'd ask her whether anyone had pestered her as to his whereabouts. Once more he was unconsciously displaying his lack of criminal expertise; it had not crossed his mind to steal a car, make a quick getaway, dump the machine in some big town and confuse the issue by stealing another. He had stolen only once in his life, at age six, the loot being a large apple that had given him the father of all bellyaches.

On the other hand, this touch of the raw novice could have given him a slight advantage had the case taken the shape he expected of it. From the police viewpoint hardened criminals are predictable within limits. They react thus and so, according to their shadowland logic. The beginner is unpredictable. The old lag instinctively thinks of swift escape in terms of a hot car. The first-timer might do anything, anything at all, even make himself conspicuous by walking on his own two feet. So Bransome walked.

He was lucky at the outset. When twenty minutes on his way a badly dented and wheezy sedan overtook him, stopped and offered a ride. He accepted, sat himself next to a red-faced, rednecked, garrulous man and told him truthfully that he'd been ambling along while waiting for the bus to catch up.

'Whereya making for?' asked Redface.

'Any big town.' Bransome tapped his case to draw attention to it. 'I go from door to door.'

'Whatcha selling?' 'Insurance.'

Would there never be an end to situations and questions calling for spur-of-the-moment lies?

'What a racket,' declared Redface with complete lack of tact. 'My wife nearly got talked into buying a heavy one on me. Like hell you will, I told her. Whyja want me worth more to you dead than alive? Lousy racket, I say. Gives a woman a vested interest in a corpse. That ain't right. There's trouble enough in this world without inviting someone to hit the jackpot by getting a feller into his box.'

'Mine's fire and robbery insurance,' offered Bransome soothingly.

'Well, that's a lot different, mister. There's some sense in it. Now my uncle over in Decatur, he had a haybarn go up like a volcano. And him being too stingy even to give at the knees, he lost plenty. I've always said -

He rambled on and on while the sedan creaked and thumped and burped and knocked off the miles. He listed and described in full detail every major fire for forty years back, ended by opining that fire-cover was a good bet but the robbery part of it wasn't any bargain because this section of the country had few prowlers.

'Easier pickings elsewhere, I guess,' he said. 'Even a crook won't go a long way just to make it harder for himself.'

'Must be nice to have little need of bolts and bars,' Bransome commented. 'How about murders? Get many of those?'

'Had a few in our time. All of 'em brought on by booze or women. Only one never got solved.'

'Which one was that, eh?' asked Bransome, hoping at long last to hear something worth hearing.

'It was eight or maybe ten years ago,' answered Redface easily. 'Old Jeff Watkins got beaten up something awful and died without speaking. The police went looking for a transient who'd been doing odd jobs round and about. They never found him.'

'What about that girl they discovered buried under a tree?'

Redface removed his attention from the road long enough to stare at him in surprise. 'Which girl?'

'Maybe it's only a rumour,' said Bransome. 'A few days ago I overheard someone talking about the bones of a girl being found under a tree outside of Burleston.'

‘When was this?’

‘I don’t know when it was supposed to have happened. It was at least a week ago and possibly a few months ago. The fellow didn’t seem to be yarning about something very old.’

‘He was talking out of the back of his neck,’ said Redface positively.

‘Could be.’

‘If it had anything to it, that story would run like a grass fire for a hundred miles around,’ asserted Redface. ‘In these parts they’ve got to have something to talk about and they talk plenty. I’d be sure to have heard about it.’

‘But you haven’t?’ ‘No, mister. You must have misunderstood what that feller was saying.’ The car rolled into a country town smaller than Hanbury but bigger than Burleston. Redface glanced at his passenger. ‘How about here?’

‘Suits me if you’re going no farther.’

‘I can take you another forty miles. After that you’ll have twelve more to go to reach the city.’

‘I’d like that better. I’ll take a chance on getting another ride.’

‘Want to go a good long way, don’t you? Think you can’t drum up much business in this town?’

‘To tell the truth, I’m a bit tired of small places. I think I’d do better in a big one.’

'Can't say I blame you,' Redface said. 'Doesn't your outfit provide you with a car?'

'Yes - I left it at home with the wife.'

'She got an insurance on you?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Women!' said Redface, scowling ahead. 'Bunch of grab-alls. Take everything a man's got.'

He fell silent, gnawing steadily at his bottom lip as the car trundled through the town and out the other side. The increasing mileage suited Bransome who felt the more of it the better. The driver continued to hold his peace, apparently irritated by the iniquities of the female sex.

They came to a point about thirty miles from the last town and ten from Redface's destination. Here they joined a wide, straight artery on which two cars were stalled. The sedan rattled nearer and nearer. A uniformed figure broke away from the group by the two cars and stood in the middle of the road. It was a state trooper holding up a forbidding hand.

One of the halted cars started up and purred away just as Redface said, 'What now?' and braked to a stop. A second trooper appeared beside the first. The pair of them cautiously approached the sedan, one on either side. Their manner showed them to be more interested in the passengers than the car.

Looking inside, the taller of the two said to Redface, 'Why, hello Wilmer! How's tricks?' 'So-so,' responded Redface, not overjoyed. 'What do you want to bitch about this time?'

'Take it easy, Wilmer,' advised the other. 'We're looking for someone.' He gestured towards Bransome. 'Know this fellow?'

'Should I?'

‘He’s riding with you, isn’t he?’

‘Sure is. You want to make something of it?’

‘Look, Wilmer, let’s be sensible about this, shall we? I’m not married to you and I don’t have to take any lip. So let’s have one or two straight answers from you. Where’d you find this fellow?’

‘Picked him up outside Hanbury,’ Redface admitted.

‘You did, did you?’ The trooper studied Bransome with care. So did his partner. ‘You correspond more or less with the description of our man. What’s your name?’

‘Carter.’

‘And what do you do for a crust?’

‘I’m an insurance drummer.’

‘That’s right,’ confirmed Redface, glad to give some malicious support. ‘We’ve been talking about it. I told him about the time that gabbygreaseball tried to get Maisie to make a wad of my body and -’

‘Carter, eh?’ said the trooper, taking no notice of Redface. ‘What’s your first name?’

‘Lucius,’ informed Bransome, digging it up from God only knew where and handing it out fast.

This promptness made the questioners a mite uncertain. They glanced at each other and studied

Bransome again, obviously making mental comparisons with a description given over the radio.

‘What were you doing in Hanbury?’ asked one.

‘Selling insurance.’ Bransome put on a wry smite. ‘Or trying to.’

He was getting pretty good at this falsehood business. All one needed was excellent control of the nerves and plenty of practice. Nevertheless, he inwardly regretted his newfound aptitude. By nature he detested liars. ‘Got any proof of your identity?’ said the shorter trooper.

‘I don’t think so. Not with me. I leave most of my personal documents at home.’

‘Nothing in your case or your wallet?’ ‘No letters, cards or anything like that?’

‘Sorry, I haven’t.’

‘Strange for a character to roam around without a single thing to show who he is, isn’t it?’ The shorter trooper thinned his lips, threw his partner a warning look. ‘I think you’d better get out of this dilapidated hearse, Mr Lucius Carter.’ Jerking open the door, he gestured authoritatively. ‘We’d like a closer look at you and at what you’ve got.’

Bransome dismounted with something in his mind saying, *‘This is it! This is it!’* Back of him Redfacc sat behind the wheel and looked embittered. The shorter trooper reached into the car, pulled out the case and dumped it on the road while the other stood warily a few yards away, hand on gun-butt. No use running for it. The trooper standing at the ready could put a slug in his back before he’d covered five yards.

‘Your wallet and keys, please.’

Bransome handed them over.

The other raked carefully through the evidence, grunted with satisfaction, said to his partner, 'Lucius Carter in a pig's eye! This is the fellow, Richard Bransome.' He gave a wave of dismissal to Redface. 'On your way.'

Redface reached out an arm, pulled the open door shut with a violent slam and yelled through the window, 'Dilapidated hearse my foot! I bought this car myself, with my own money. And as a taxpayer I bought yours as -'

The taller trooper put his face close to Redface's and said very quietly and very slowly, 'On. . . your. . . way. . . Wilmer. You're a. . . big. . . boy. . . now!'

Wilmer revved violently, favoured Bransome and both troopers with a defiant glare and went his way, leaving behind a cloud of oily gas.

'Get in, mister,' said the shorter trooper, signing to the patrol car.

'Why should I? What am I supposed to have done? If you've anything against me, say so!'

'You'll hear all about it at headquarters,' snapped the trooper. 'We can hold you for twenty-four hours on suspicion of anything. So quit the back-chat and get in.'

Dropping further argument, Bransome entered the patrol car. Shorty piled into the back seat alongside of him. The other trooper took the driver's seat, flipped a switch and spoke into a hand microphone.

'Car Nine, Healy and Gregg. We've just picked up Bransome and are bringing him in.'

At headquarters their attitude towards him was peculiar to say the least. They treated him off-handedly but without any of the toughness usually shown to a major suspect. It seemed as though they were far from sure of his real status, did not know whether he had blown up the U.S. Treasury or was a missing candidate for the Congressional Medal. After making further check on his identity, they gave him a meal, put him in a cell and asked no questions.

All he got in reply to his own queries was the curt order, 'Shut up and wait.'

Reardon arrived three hours later. A couple of blobs of medicated plastic sealed the splits in his lips, otherwise he showed no visible damage. They gave him a small office where he sat and waited patiently until they brought Bransome in.

Left alone, the two faced each other without emotion, then Reardon said, 'I suppose you know you've laid yourself wide open to a charge of common assault?'

'Get on with it then,' answered Bransome, shrugging.

'Why did you do it? Why did you go for me like that?'

'To teach you to mind your own damn business.'

'I see. You objected to me hanging around?'

'Of course. Who wouldn't?'

'Most folk wouldn't,' said Reardon. 'Why should they? They've nothing to conceal. What have you got to hide?'

'Find out.'

I'm trying to do that right now. Care to tell me?'

Bransome gazed blankly at the wall. So far the subject of murder had not been broached. That was strange, seeing that they had come after him and taken him in. Perhaps Reardon was saving it to the last, smacking his broken lips over the accusation yet to come. A sadist enjoying a cat and mouse act.

'I may be able to help you,' continued Reardon, still calm and collected. 'I want to help you.'

'How nice,' said Bransome.

'But it's impossible to help without knowing what you've got in your hair.'

'Lice,' Bransome informed.

Reardon said sharply, 'This isn't a vaudeville act. It's a serious business. If you're in a jam of some kind and want assistance, you'll have to talk.'

'I can look after myself.'

'Running away from your job, home and family is a mighty poor way of doing it.'

'I'm the judge of that.'

Reardon growled, 'So am I. Fix it firmly in your mind that I'm going to get to the bottom of this anyway I can.'

'The bottom of what?' asked Bransome sardonically. 'I've taken a short vacation, properly applied for

and officially permitted. That was legal enough when I left the plant and they haven't changed the law since.'

Reardon gave a deep sigh. 'I can see you don't intend to give forth - just yet. That leaves me no option but to take you back. We'll discuss the matter further on the way home.'

'You can't take me back,' informed Bransome. 'Common assault isn't an extraditable offence.'

'That charge hasn't been entered and won't be entered,' Reardon gave back. 'It'll be a sad day when I run to the law because of a slap in the face. You'll come back with me of your own free will or -'

'Or what?'

'I'll plaster you with a federal charge of suspected disloyalty and dissemination of official secrets. After that you'll go exactly where you're told, at the double, and like it.'

Bransome felthimself going crimson as he leaned forward and rasped, 'I am not a traitor.'

'Nobody has suggested that you are.' 'Yes they have. You've just done so yourself.'

'I've done nothing of the sort,' Reardon contradicted. 'Up to the present at any rate, I've found no reason to doubt your loyalty. But when it's necessary I'm ready and willing to fight fire with fire. So I've told you of the dirty trick I won't hesitate to employ to get you back at all costs and uncover what you're hiding.'

'That means you're prepared to smear me with a false accusation?'

'I am. I shall have no scruples whatsoever.'

‘And you want to help me?’

‘I certainly do.’

‘Well, that gives me two theories,’ said Bransome. ‘Either you’re crazy or you’re convinced that I am.’

‘For all I know you may be off your head,’ responded Reardon. ‘If so, I want to know how you got that way all of a sudden.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you aren’t the first and in all probability you won’t be the last.’

Bransome narrowed his eyes at him and said, ‘What the devil are you talking about?’

‘I’m talking about loonies. I’m talking about sane and intelligent men who suddenly become irrational. We’ve been getting too many of them. It’s time it was stopped.’

‘I don’t understand and furthermore I don’t want to. All I can say is that if you’re convinced that a man is crazy to take a vacation and get a much-needed rest, well, you must be a bit touched in the head yourself.’

‘You weren’t taking a vacation.’

‘Wasn’t I?’

‘If you were you’d have had the wife and kids along.’

‘You seem to know my motives better than I do myself,’ remarked Bransome dryly. ‘What do you reckon I have been doing?’

‘Running away from something. Or, alternatively, running after something. More likely the former.’

‘Running away from what?’

‘*You tell me,*’ suggested Reardon, eyeing him pointedly. ‘It’s your own theory and not mine. You dig up data in support of it. Put up or shut up.’

Frowning to himself, Reardon consulted his watch. ‘I can’t stay here all day arguing the fat to no useful purpose. There’s a train due to leave in twenty minutes. We’ll just make it if we go now.’ He paused, added, ‘Are you coming of your own accord or do you prefer to be dragged?’

‘I’d rather bedragged, I might then be able to soak you for heavy damages.’

‘You’ve some hopes. Any competent lawyer will tell you that suing the government gets you nowhere. Besides, I know what I’m doing. I can sustain a plea of justification.’

‘All right, let’s get that train.’

Bransome stood up feeling in yet another mental whirl. Not a word had been said about Arline Lafarge. The threat hanging over him was a direct threat to his life or, at least, his liberty. But for some mysterious and completely incomprehensible reason they were substituting a different and vaguely defined menace.

When deliberately and with premeditation a man kills a woman, it is murder, morally and legally murder. That’s a plain, inescapable fact that the law has to cope with almost every month. Yet here was an instance where civil law seemed impotent and the military power was intervening to pronounce him not guilty by reason of insanity.

Why?

It beat him utterly.

As the train snaked through the countryside Reardon started on him again. 'Now see here, Bransome, I'm going to be frank with you. For heaven's sake be on the level with me. I'm going to tell you why I've a special interest in you. In return, I want you to tell what you're hiding, what has got you on the run.'

'I'm not on the run.'

'Not now perhaps. Not since I've caught up with you. But originally you were.'

'I was not. It's merely your delusion.' 'Let's quit banging our skulls together. We'll get nothing out of it except a pain in the nut. I want to remind you of something you seem to have forgotten, namely, the fact that there's a war on. It's not a shooting war but it's a war all the same. Why else would you and many others be working full time on the development of newer and better weapons?'

'Well?'

'In case the cold war becomes hot. In the interim a non-shooting war is fought by non-shooting methods. Each side tries to steal the other's best brains, or buy them, or sabotage them or destroy them outright. We have lost men and plans and ideas. So have they. We've bought over some of their brains. They've acquired some of ours. See what I mean?'

'Of course. It's old stuff.'

'But still workable within limits,' said Reardon. His lean face and sharp eyes looked snoopier than ever. 'The weapons in a non-shooting war are those of theft, bribery, blackmail, seduction, murder, anything and everything that is effective for its purpose. They can and do cause casualties on both sides. The logical method of fighting a non-shooting war is to employ every available means of increasing the enemy's losses while, at the same time, preventing or reducing one's own. The latter is fully as important

as the former - and the latter is my special job. It's the responsibility of my department to beat off attacks on our brainpower.'

'You're telling me nothing that's new and wonderful,' Bransome complained. 'And so far as I'm concerned, it's a hell of a note when a fellow can't take time off without being suspected of planning to sell what he's got in his head.'

'You're over-simplifying the situation,' asserted Reardon. 'Basically, there are two ways of weakening the enemy. You can acquire his brains for your own use. Or, if that proves impossible, you can deprive him of the use of them. It's a dog-in-the-manger policy: if I can't employ that genius, neither can you, see?' So let's say that inherently you're too loyal to sell what you've got in your head. What then?'

'Well, what then?' 'The enemy removes your head so that if he can't have it neither can anyone else.'

'Bunkum! I'm not worth the bother of decapitating.'

'That's like saying a soldier isn't worth the bother of sending to the battlefield. As one, single, solitary individual maybe he isn't. But as a hundred, a thousand or ten thousand individuals he becomes a formidable force that can make all the difference between defeat and victory.' Reardon stopped for a moment to let his words sink in, then said, 'Personally, I could not care less about one Bransome. I'm worried about a hundred or a thousand Bransomes.'

'Well, you've got one consolation,' Bransome pointed out. 'My head is still tight on my shoulders.'

'I've been speaking metaphorically, as you're well aware. A brain that suddenly refuses to continue working for its country is a valuable intelligence lost to that country. It's a casualty in the undeclared war. In this highly technological age the deadliest strike one can make against a foe is to deprive him of his brains, whether or not one acquires them oneself. Either way it's a wallop.'

'That's obvious,' agreed Bransome. 'Any fool can see it and - if you don't mind me boasting - I did all my sums many years ago. But I still don't see how all this applies to me right now.'

'I'm getting to that,' Reardon responded. 'Some good men have been lost within the last couple of

years, not only from your plant but also from others. They are over and above the quota of natural losses attributable to retirement, illness or death. If we don't devise some way of stopping it the company will become a regiment and the regiment will become an army.' He made a sweeping gesture. 'After that - blooey !'

'Are you sure the losses aren't natural?' asked Bransome, remembering the suspicions he had voiced to Berg.

'We're pretty sure. We're next-door to positive. What is bad is that it took us far too much time to realize that something extraordinary was happening. All the casualties were valuable and trustworthy men. All started falling down on their jobs, acting out of character and generally going to pieces. Some deteriorated quicker than others. Some scooted without so much as a sweet good-bye. Others resigned or sought leave of absence or took a vacation from which they didn't return. Several of them faded across the border. We know what they're doing today and it's nothing contrary to this country's interests. But we can't bring them back without extraditable reason. So long as they behave themselves in the country of their choice they can stay put for keeps and there's nothing we can do about it. Recently we traced and caught up with three still in this country.'

'And what happened?'

'All three stood pat on their fundamental right to live where they like and do any kind of work they please. Their jobs weren't as good as the ones they'd thrown up but they insisted that they preferred them and were under no obligation to explain the preference. In the opinion of the agents who made reports on them, the three were scared about something or other and it was obvious that they resented being questioned.'

'I don't blame them,' Bransome offered. 'I detest being tracked all over the map. I didn't smack you in the teeth for nothing. I felt it was high time you learned to live and let live.'

Taking no notice, Reardon continued, 'Soon afterwards they disappeared again, were retraced to other places and other jobs. We decided to keep an eye on them without bothering them any further. We were compelled to face the ugly fact that brains had ceased to work for this country and we had no way of compelling them to do so. There lies the weakness of our virtues; some other kind of regime could exercise compulsion.'

'So you've got me tagged as the next rebel on the list?' asked Bransome, immensely relieved at finding that the real reason for his antics remained unknown and unsuspected.

‘You and another,’ Reardon informed. ‘The day we decided to smell along your footprints we took off after a fellow elsewhere. He’d been showing the same symptoms.’

‘Caught up with him yet?’

‘No - but we shall eventually.’ Reardon went on with, ‘Unknown to you, we had sent a flier around all weapon-research establishments asking for prompt information on any employees who left their jobs suddenly or showed signs of cracking or started behaving strangely. That’s how we got a line on you.’

‘Who put you on to me?’

‘Not telling,’ said Reardon flatly. ‘It was someone who considered you were no longer your sweet little self.’

‘Cain, for a bet,’ hazarded Bransome. ‘He’s always fancied himself as an amateur psychologist.’

‘I’m not playing guessing games with you so don’t think you can identify the culprit by process of elimination.’

‘All right. I’ll accept that some yap yapped.’

‘So I came along. I looked over the evidence, followed you around, decided that you had the fidgets and might be about to throw things over. It takes something, really something to persuade a man to rid himself of good pay, good prospects and security. We want to know what does it. If we can find out that much, we can stop it.’

‘In my case you’re going to have a hard time trying to stop something that has never been started,’ Bransome advised.

‘I don’t believe you. Know what I think? I think you are reacting to some serious threat to yourself or to your wife and children.’

Bransome said nothing.

‘There’s no threat that can’t be met,’ argued Reardon, encouraged by the other’s silence. ‘We can meet it and beat it provided that we know exactly what it is. Otherwise we’re left to fumble in the dark.’ His penetrating eyes examined Bransome with care. ‘If somebody is being menaced tell us who and how. We’ll tend to it, you can bet your life on that!’

Hah, that was a laugh! The government would give protection to a malefactor it would be obliged to punish if the truth became known. Reardon was talking about an enemy on the other side of the planet when all the time the real foe was The Law armed with the electric chair and the gas chamber.

The intervention of Military Intelligence was now explained. They and the police were working at cross-purposes without knowing it. The former suspected him of suffering mysterious coercion to dodge his duties. The latter had failed - so far - to pick up a lead that would take them to a killer. It was disconcerting to know that the M.I. had him wrongly classified as a prospective deserter but mightily comforting to learn that the cops remained stalled.

‘Am I right?’ persisted Reardon. ‘Is somebody’s life being threatened?’

‘No.’

‘You’re a liar.’

‘Have it your own way,’ said Bransome wearily.

Half twisting in his seat, Reardon looked through the window and watched the passing scenery while the train thundered on. He remained quiet for several minutes, immersed in his thoughts. Suddenly he turned and spoke.

‘Where does this dump Burleston fit into the picture?’ Despite himself Bransome jerked and changed colour. The unexpected question came like a kick in the stomach.

‘Whatd’you mean?’

‘You’re still trying to dodge the issue but your face has given you away. Burleston means something to you, something dark and desperate, yet something you had to go and seek.’

‘If you know so darned much about it you should also know what it is.’

‘I don’t know. What’s more, I don’t think you found it.’ Reardon tightened his fists and gazed absently at his knuckles. ‘I can make a guess why yourgallivantings were in vain.’

‘Go right ahead if guessing amuses you,’ Bransome invited. ‘You expected to make contact with someone unknown to you, on their initiative. But I messed it up for you. It was seen that you were being followed and they didn’t like my face. Therefore they didn’t get into touch with you as arranged. Or perhaps they didn’t give you whatever they’d promised to give.’

‘They?’

‘The opposition. Don’t pretend to be innocent - you know quite well who I mean.’

‘You’ve a very large bee in your bonnet. You can’t hear anything but its buzzing.’

‘Now look, Bransome, I’m better informed than you think. You traipsed around Burleston like a lost soul in Hades, looking for something you couldn’t find or waiting for something that never came. Lovely way to spend a vacation, isn’t it?’

Bransome offered no comment.

‘You bought umpteen back issues of the Hanbury Gazette, presumably because you have an insatiable appetite for old news. I take it you sat in your bedroom and conscientiously read the lot. Nothing like out-of-date gab for relieving nervous strain, is there?’

Bransome pulled a face and did not reply.

‘You spoke to a number of people in Burleston and Hanbury. We checked on all of them last night, looking for evidence of foreign connexions. It got us nowhere. They were as clean as new-born pups. You or somebody else took alarm from the fact that you were under observation and became too smart to give us a clue to what you were looking for.’

‘I wanted a red-haired chiropodist. There aren’t many in the world.’

‘I know, I know,’ said Reardon huffily.

‘Now I’ll tell you something,’ Bransome went on. ‘And it’s this: the hardest thing to find is that which doesn’t exist.’

‘Whatever you were seeking does — or did — exist. A man of your mental calibre doesn’t grope around for nothing.’

‘As I said before, bunkum!’

‘You’re as bad as the three I’ve mentioned. Won’t talk. Won’t give answers that make sense. Fall back on the defensive by saying there’s no law against them doing whatever they’re supposed to be doing.’

‘What they’re doing may be innocent enough,’ said Bransome. ‘Which is more than can be said for what you’ve been doing,’ Reardon slapped back. ‘Henderson, at least, did turn to operating a hardware store. And he did offer his reasons, such as they were. ‘I like it, I prefer working for myself, I get a lot of satisfaction out of it, I’m not subjected to continual regimentation, I enjoy being independent.’

‘Pretty good reasons, if you ask me.’

‘I’m not asking you,’ Reardon said. ‘The reasons were not the whole truth and we know it. We found Henderson in Calumet . He was questioned. A month later he sold his business and cleared out. A couple of weeks ago we found him bossing another small hard-ware business at Lakeside . So we’re keeping an eye on him from a discreet distance. He has an ulterior motive for avoiding official attention. So have you!’

Bransome simulated complete boredom and stared silently through the window.

‘You were in a jam and had to go to Burleston for a way out. I don’t know what shape or form that escape was supposed to take but you didn’t find it. You know where that puts you. It puts you right back where you started. You’re still in a jam. You took it on the lam and ran around Burleston like a trapped rat and it hasn’t done you one bit of good.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ snapped Bransome.

‘The devil on your back did not obligingly dismount in Burleston as you’d hoped he would. He hung on tight and he’s still riding you. He’ll go on riding until you come to your senses and let someone else pull him off, someone able to get at him better than you can. All you need do is open your mouth and name him.’

‘Pardon me.’ Bransome stood up, gave an apologetic smile. ‘I want to see a dog about a man.’

He walked out of the compartment before the surprised Reardon could decide what to do about it. A pretext for stopping him or insisting on accompanying him wasn’t easy to think up in a split second. He had not yet been charged with any crime and he wasn’t under arrest. At the moment he was free, white and ordinary, with the status of a normal passenger on a normal train.

Out of one eye as he turned to hasten along the corridor he saw Reardon come anxiously to his feet, slowed by indecision. Speeding up, he went to the toilet, fastened its door behind him, opened the window and had a quick look out. Then he climbed through the window. For a couple of seconds he

stood with his feet on the window-ledge, his finger-tips hooked into the guttering of the coach roof, his body buffeted by the train's slipstream. Then he flung himself away.

Chapter 7

He hit a heavily grassed bank sloping steeply downwards. Although he managed to land on his feet, his forward momentum and the sharp angle of the bank sent him tumbling diagonally down the slope in a series of violent rolls during which he did his best to keep himself curled into a ball. The bank seemed to be a mile high and he thought he was never going to reach the bottom of it. Eventually he landed with a thump in a dry ditch, breathless and dirty, his nostrils choked with dust.

For a short time he lay there drawing in air, sneezing repeatedly and listening to the dying reverberations along the overhead track. The train showed no sign of stopping; it pounded steadily onward bearing a thwarted Reardon who was losing distance with every second it took him to swing into action. Reardon might well be carried ten or twenty miles before he could make sure of Bransome's departure and do something about it.

Or had the sharp-eyed agent anticipated Bransome's leap and dived from the train himself? Bransome came erect in the ditch, straightening himself slowly and apprehensively lest he be smitten by the agony of a broken bone. He felt himself all over, finding no damage other than to his clothes. The escape couldn't have been better performed had he been doing it for the movies.

That last thought came back a second time as if to lend itself emphasis: it couldn't have been better performed had he been doing it for the movies. His mind gave another jolt, one hard enough to make him pause as he was about to scramble from the ditch. The movies? The movies?

Strange that a random notion about motion pictures should hit him like that. Once upon a time he'd considered the movies in an absent kind of way much as one thinks of dogs or door-knockers, hats or hamburgers or any other commonplace appurtenances of civilization. But now it was different without any obvious reason for the difference. Now he thought of movies with a peculiar sense of strain that wasn't exactly fear or terror; it was something else, something he couldn't quite place or identify. The nearest he could get to putting a label on his mental attitude was that the idea of motion pictures held in itself a sense of basic incongruity or of something that violated a fundamental law in a way that hurt him personally.

Perhaps Reardon had been right in suggesting that he was off his head or rapidly going that way.

Perhaps as his mental condition became worse he would experience weird thoughts and cock-eyed reactions every hour instead of a few times a week. Then, in the end, he would live in a hell of illusions beyond the bars of which a tearful Dorothy would be seen only in rational moments.

Clambering from the ditch, he mounted the bank and looked along the railroad track. The train had gone from sight and no scratched and dust-covered Reardon was visible to provide unwelcome company. Satisfied with that, he took an inward look at himself and decided that no matter what was wrong with him it wasn't insanity. When he made the effort to control his emotions he could study himself objectively and decide that he was not crazy; he was merely a man with an abnormal load of worry that had to be got rid of by any means he could devise.

Walking back along the railroad track he came to a bridge over a dirt road. He left the track, went down the bank and on to the road. Which way to take for the best was a matter of guesswork and he had no time to sit and wait for information from a rare passer-by; it was a sure bet that before long Reardon's gaze would be going over a large-scale map while he figured out the points at which the fugitive might be intercepted.

So he turned to the left, half-walked, half-ran for two miles along the narrow, rutted way. Here he joined a metalled secondary road, turned left again and ten minutes later was picked up by a farm truck loaded with vegetables. Showing no interest whatever in his passenger's identity or purposes, the laconic driver took him twenty miles to town and dropped him with a curt nod.

This place, the nearest to his escape-point, was or soon would be a source of danger in which he'd be foolish to linger. He caught the next bus out, thanking the gods because having abandoned his case on the train - he still retained his wallet and his money.

He covered sixty miles in that bus before reaching a fairly large town. Conscious of his scruffy appearance he stopped there long enough to have a wash, shave and brush-up. It did much to help his confidence. He followed it with a meal that restored his energy. From the restaurant he went to the bus terminus, passing two cops on the way. Both policemen were idling on corners, neither took undue note of him or registered mild curiosity. Evidently the alarm had not reached this far yet, though it might come at any time.

An express bus was soon to leave for the city seventy miles to the east. He took it and arrived without incident and became an elusive unit in the crowds. Now he was a jump nearer home. Home! He found himself longing to talk to the voice that sounded of home. For all he knew his domestic phone might be tapped, the incoming calls monitored and suspicious ones traced. A call to Dorothy might give official listeners a rough idea of his present whereabouts. It was a risk he wanted to take for the sake of the lift it would give to his morale. Besides, this city would be difficult to search, far more so than small places like

Burleston and Hanbury. If he used his wits he could live here for a month with every cop in the place looking for him.

A bank of phone booths stood in the hall of the central post office. Choosing the middle one, he put his call through and Dorothy answered.

He did his best to make his voice sound cheerful and heartening, as he greeted, 'Hi, ducks! This is your absent lover.'

'Rich,' she exclaimed. 'I was expecting to hear from you last night.'

'I intended to call but couldn't make it. A gabby character monopolized my time. Thought I'd leave phoning until today. Better late than never, eh?' 'Yes, of course. How are things with you now? Are you feeling better?'

'Top-notch,' he lied. 'What goes there?'

'Everything is all right but there's been a couple of odd incidents.'

'What happened?'

'The day after you left somebody phoned, allegedly from the plant, and wanted to know where you'd gone.'

'What did you tell him?'

'The query seemed strange to me, seeing you'd gone away on official instructions. And you know how you've always warned me to be careful in talking of your work. So I told this caller to ask in the appropriate department.'

‘How did he like that?’

‘I don’t think he liked it,’ said Dorothy, her voice expressing a touch of anxiety. ‘He cut off as if annoyed. Oh, Rich, I hope! haven’t riled someone important.’

‘You did quite right,’ he soothed.

‘That’s not all,’ she went on. ‘A couple of hours later two men called here. They said they were from the plant Security Section and showed me a document to prove it. One was a tall, lean, beady-eyed type, the other a close-cropped and slightly overmuscled character. They told me I’d no need for alarm because they were doing a bit of routine cross-checking. Then they asked whether you’d told me where you were going and, if so, what you’d said about it. So I told them you’d gone to Burleston but hadn’t said why you were going there. I said I’d no idea of the reason for your trip and didn’t want to know. They said that was quite satisfactory, then chatted awhile and left. They were pleasant enough in a dead-pan kind of way.’

‘Anything more?’

‘Yes. The following morning a big, heavily built man called here. He asked for you and somehow I felt that he knew quite well that you weren’t here. I told him you’d gone away for a short while. He wanted to know where and for how long. He wouldn’t give me his name or state his business and I didn’t like his evasiveness. So I suggested he ask his questions at the plant. I got the impression that he didn’t care to do that. I can’t imagine why. Anyway, I got rid of him.’

‘Probably it was the fellow who phoned the day before,’ guessed Bransome, mulling it over.

‘I don’t think it was the same man - his voice sounded different.’

‘What did he look like?’

Being observant, she was able to describe the visitor in some detail. The resulting picture looked very much like the individual who had stared at him in the diner’s mirror and followed him home a couple of

times. Offhand, he could not think of anyone else coming closer to Dorothy's description.

'And he wouldn't say why he wanted to see me?'

'No, Rich.' She paused, went on, 'Perhaps I'm being silly about this, but at the time I felt convinced that he didn't wish to see you at all. He wanted to make sure that you weren't here, that you'd gone away. I got the definite impression that he expected me to refuse further information and wasn't surprised or disappointed when I did.'

'Could be.'

'He was mostpolite, I'll give him his due for that. He was smooth and courteous, the way some foreigners are.'

'Huh?' Bransome pricked up his ears. 'You think heWas a foreigner?'

'I'm sure of it. He had the mannerisms. He spoke with complete fluency but had a slightly guttural accent.'

'Did you phone the two from the plant and tell them about this?'

'No, Rich, I didn't. Should I have done? There didn't seem to be anything worth telling.'

'Forget it - it's not important.'

He gossiped a bit more, learned how the children were behaving, swapped a little badinage, warned her that his return home might be delayed a few days. Ending, he left the booth in a hurry, feeling that his call had taken dangerously long. He walked the streets while stewing this latest information and wondering what it really meant.

If the last mysterious visitor was in fact the person he suspected him to be, and if Dorothy's instinct ran true in identifying him as a foreigner, his original diagnosis must be wrong. The fellow was not a cop in plain clothes or an official agent of some kind; he was a watcher, no doubt of that, but not one appointed by authority.

So firstly someone had phoned, supposedly from the plant, and got no satisfaction. Then Reardon and a stooge had called; therefore, for reasons unknown, the former had not followed him from the station but had gone to Hanbury a day or two later. Possibly Reardon had considered it advisable to report back, discuss the matter with somebody and double-check with Dorothy before taking off in pursuit.

Then there was this final caller, a foreigner. The only logical conclusion was that two separate and distinct groups were mutually interested in his movements.

Neither of them were police.

Yet the police were the only ones with a right to be interested and a motive for nailing him down. The more he thought it over the crazier it seemed. There must be method in all this madness. A solution lay somewhere if only it could be found.

Bransome spent the night in a small rooming-house in the suburbs. It was a frowsy dump a few grades better than a rat-hole but its owner, a sour-faced, angular female, looked fully capable of keeping her trap shut and minding her own business. This virtue, Bransome suspected, brought her a steady clientele of people who had reasons for wanting above-average privacy. He had found the place by asking the advice of the corner newsboy, a wizened character who evidently regarded a straw mattress as a status symbol.

By ten o'clock Bransome was back in the centre of the city. He sought and found the public library, applied for the national directory and settled down to consult it in the reading-room. It turned out that there were numerous Lake Thisses and Lake Thattas, several Laketowns, Lakevilles, Lakehursts, Lakeviews, no less than four Lakesides. Only the latter interested him and he dug out more details about them. One had a population of four hundred, another a mere thirty-two. Although he knew nothing about the hardware trade he considered it an intelligent guess that neither of these two was large enough to support a business of that type. The other Lakesides looked more promising, each having approximately two thousand citizens. Which of the pair should he try?

After some thought he decided that there was no way of identifying the right one here and now, even by

phone calls. He'd have to take a chance, go and look at one of them and, if necessary, transfer attention to the other. From the expenditure point of view it was sensible to choose the nearer of the two for first inspection. It would be a waste of hard-earned cash and valuable time to travel farther than he need do.

He made his way to the main station, keeping careful watch around him on the approach, at the ticket-office and on the departure platform. All stations, bus or train, were focal points of cross-country movement and therefore, he theorized, the favourite haunts of watchers and seekers. They were like waterholes in arid country: they functioned as common meeting- places for the hunters and the hunted. So he remained on the alert until his train arrived. By the time he climbed aboard he had discovered nobody showing an undue interest in him.

The journey took a large part of the day and he had to change trains twice. In the early evening he walked into the main street of a small, easygoing town set in heavily wooded country. A long, narrow lake glistened on the southern side. Bransome entered a snacketeria, had coffee and sandwiches, spoke to the attendant.

'Know of a hardware store near here?'

'Addy's,' responded the other. 'One block up and around the corner.'

'Has it changed ownership recently?'

'I wouldn't know, George.'

'Thanks!' said Bransome, thinking that in a place this size everybody usually knows everything about everyone else.

Leaving, he looked along the street and found he could not tell which direction was 'up' and which 'down'. There was no slope at all. Oh, well, it didn't matter. He turned to the right, walked one block, rounded the corner and found that he had chosen correctly, He was facing a small store that carried on its fascia-board the words: Addy's Hardware. Pushing open its door, he went inside.

There were two customers in the shop, one buying a coil of fence-wire, the other inspecting an oil-stove. The former was being served by a lanky youth with abirdnest hairdo. The latter was being attended by a thickset-bespectacled man who glanced up as Bransome entered, gave a brief flash of surprised recognition and continued talking about the oil-stove. Bransome sat himself on a keg of nails, waited until the buyers had been served and taken their departure.

Then he said, 'Hi,Henny !'

Far from delighted,Henderson growled, 'What do you want?'

'That's what I call a hearty welcome,' said Bransome. 'Aren't you pleased to see an old colleague?'

'I thought I knew you only by sight and name. If we're close pals it's news to me.'

'Sight and name is good enough to start an everlasting friendship, isn't it?'

'You didn't come all the way here to kiss me,'Henderson gave back nastily. 'So get down to brass tacks. Whatd'youwant ?'

'A talk with you - in private.'

'Who sent you here?'

'Nobody.Not a soul. I've come entirely on my own initiative.'

'I can believe that,' saidHenderson , openly irked. 'I presume you found my address in your crystal ball?'

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘Then how did you get hold of it? Who gave it to you?’ ‘I can explain in full and to your satisfaction if we can have a discussion somewhere nice and quiet.’ He held up a stalling hand as Henderson was about to make a retort, and added, ‘This is no place for chewing the fat. How about seeing you later, after you’ve closed the store?’

Henderson frowned and said rather unwillingly, ‘All right. Make it eight o’clock . Ring at the side door.’

‘I’ll do that.’

Bransome left as another customer ambled in. Outside, he recalled Reardon’s remark to the effect that a discreet watch was being kept upon Henderson . Such observation would take note of all visitors and, perhaps, succeed in identifying one wanted elsewhere. He looked up, down and across the street in hope of spotting the watcher but that individual was excessively discreet or possibly off duty. Nobody was keeping an eye on the place as far as he could detect.

How to spend the intervening time was something of a problem; to stroll to and fro along the main street for a couple of hours would be to draw attention to himself and that was the last thing he wanted. He solved that difficulty by taking the road to the lake and mooching along its verge like a sightseer enjoying the view. Eventually becoming bored, he returned to town with half an hour still to spare. Another light meal took care of that, using the same snack-bar as before.

‘Coffee, white, Albert. And a ham sandwich.’

The attendant brought them, unceremoniously dumped them in front of him. Then he leaned across the counter.

‘Sixty cents. And the name isn’t Albert.’

‘How right you are.’ Bransome gave him the money, said, ‘And the name isn’t George.’

‘That’s your hard luck,’ the attendant informed. He tossed the cash into the till and turned to rearranging the back shelves.

At exactly eight o’clock Bransome rang the bell at the side door. Henderson answered promptly, showed him into the parlour, indicated an over-stuffed chair. Blank-faced and wary, Henderson took a seat himself, lit a cigarette and spoke first.

‘Let me tell you, Bransome, that I’ve heard the tune before. It’s been played over two or three times for my especial benefit.’ He squirted a thin stream of smoke into mid-air and watched it dissipate. ‘Your work at the defence plant brought you so much per annum, a nice, round, fat sum. Is this crummy store bringing you as much? What’s so fascinating about the hardware trade as compared with scientific research? What’s your real reason for swapping one for the other?’ He paused again, then said, ‘Right?’

‘Wrong,’ Bransome answered. ‘I don’t care a cuss if you see fit to run a chain of brothels.’ ‘That’s a pleasant change,’ commented Henderson cynically. ‘So they’ve decided to try get at me from a different angle eh?’

‘I haven’t come here to get at you.’

‘Then what’s the idea?’

‘I’m in plenty of trouble myself. I suspect that you can help me quite a lot.’

‘Any reason why I -’

‘And,’ interrupted Bransome, ‘I suspect that I can help you equally as much.’

‘Don’t need help,’ Henderson asserted. ‘All I want is peace and a quiet life.’

‘So do I - but I’m not getting it.’ Bransome pointed a finger by way of emphasis. ‘Neither are you.’

‘That’s for me to decide.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of disputing your rights in that respect. What I’m trying to say is that I haven’t got the peace of mind I’d like to have and ought to have. I don’t believe you have got it either. But I also think we maybe able to get it if we work together. Want to hear my story?’

‘You might as well give it now you’re here. But don’t start subjecting me to this come-home-all-is-forgiven stuff. I’ve developed a strong resistance to arguments against me doing a s I darned well like.’

‘You’re still suspicious of me,’ said Bransome, ‘and I can’t blame you for it. By the time I’ve finished you may have changed your mind. Now listen to what I’ll tell you.’

He began with, ‘Henny, we are both scientists, you of one kind and I of another. We both know that an essential attribute of a scientist, or of any technologically competent individual, is a good memory. Without it we could not have been adequately educated in the first place. Without it we could not draw data from knowledge and experience as an aid toward solving current problems. To us and those like us a good reliable memory is an absolute must. Do you agree?’

‘It’s too obvious to be worth mentioning,’ remarked Henderson , unimpressed. ‘I hope you are leading up to something better than a mere lecture.’

‘I certainly am. Be patient with me. To continue: my memory always has been excellent, as it had to be to enable me to become a specialist in my field. I have learned to make full use of it and to rely upon it. No doubt the same applies to you.’

‘No doubt,’ said Henderson , beginning to look thoroughly bored.

‘Now I’ll tell you something else - I’m a killer. I slew a girl about twenty years ago and callously dismissed the deed from my mind. I swept it under a mental carpet because I did not want to be bothered with it. Recently I heard that at long last the crime has been discovered. This means the police are looking into the matter. If they don’t want me yet they will do before long. I’m on the run,Henny ,

because I don't want to be caught, I don't want to face execution at worst or a life sentence at best.'

Staring at him disbelievingly, Henderson said, 'You mean to tell me you're a real, genuine murderer?'

'So my good, reliable memory insists.' Bransome waited to let his words sink in, then topped them devastatingly with, 'My memory is a god damned liar.'

The half-smoked cigarette dropped from Henderson's fingers. He leaned sideways to snatch it from the carpet. He was about to put its glowing tip between his lips when he noticed it, reversed it and sucked deeply. The smoke went down the wrong way. He had a mild fit of coughing. Finally he found his breath.

'Now let's get this straight, Bransome. Are you or are you not guilty of murder?'

'My memory says I am. It says so in clear details amounting to total recall. Even now I can see that girl's angry face as we yelled at each other. I can see the shocked stupefaction when I bashed her on the skull. I can see the change of complexion when she was lying flat and going cold. I can see the dead disinterest in her face as I smothered it with dirt. The whole scene is still with me. It is photographic and as fresh as if it happened only a week or two ago. I'm incubating a theory about that: I suspect the entire episode is so vivid because it did happen a week or two ago.' 'What the blazes are you getting at? You've just told me that you did it twenty years back.'

'So my memory says. I'm telling you again that my memory is a clever and persuasive liar.'

'How do you know that?'

'The facts contradict it. The lack of facts likewise. Jointly they say that I have never committed such a crime.'

'What facts?' demanded Henderson, trying but failing to conceal his interest.

'I got the willies and ran away. I was scared and I bolted, perhaps in the belief that it's harder to hit a

moving target.' Bransome gave a rueful smile. 'I could have scooted anywhere, anywhere at all so long as it made me more difficult to find. For some reason I cannot explain I did what criminals are reputed to do but seldom do in real life: I returned to the scene of the crime.'

'Ah!' Henderson stubbed out his unfinished cigarette, leaned forward with full attention to the other. 'What then?'

'I could find no evidence of it.'

'None?'

'None whatever. I killed that girl outside of a small country town called Burleston. Do you know that place?'

'No.'

Bransome seemed to find the answer disappointing, but continued, 'I went to Burleston and questioned residents who'd spent their lives in that area. They knew nothing about any recently discovered murder. I toured the countryside seeking the spot marked X and couldn't find it or anything resembling it. I raked through past issues of the local newspaper, going back a full year, and could find no mention of a killing coming to light.'

'Perhaps you went to the wrong Burleston,' Henderson suggested.

'I thought of that myself and had a look through the national directory. There is one and only one Burleston.'

'Well, maybe you got the name wrong. It could be some other place with a similar name.'

'My memory says it's Burleston and no other.' Henderson pondered a short while then offered, 'By the looks of it your memory is shot to hell.'

‘Dead right!’ agreed Bransome with peculiar emphasis. ‘Is yours?’

Coming swiftly to his feet, Henderson demanded, ‘Whatd’youmean, is mine?’

‘Do you remember a girl named Arline Lafarge?’

‘Never beard of her and that’s the truth, Bransome.’ Henderson started pacing to and fro across the room, his hands held behind his back, a look of concentration on his face. He was visibly uneasy. ‘Is this the female you think you bumped off?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why should I know of her?’

‘I was hoping that you’d admit to killing her too,’ said Bransome evenly. ‘It would have been an eye-opener for both of us. We could have looked into the question of how we got that way and bow best to share the grief.’ He watched Henderson speculatively as that person continued to go back and forth like a restless animal. The silence was long and full of strain when Bransome suddenly asked, ‘Who did you kill, Henny?’

‘Are you crazy?’ said Henderson, stopping in his tracks.

‘Quite possibly. But if I am I’m far from being the only one. A number of fellows have left the plant in circumstances that are mysterious, to say the least. I’ve had it on good authority that other plants have lost personnel too. Nobody knows or can imagine why they went. I couldn’t have made a useful guess myself. But today is different. I am one of the departees and I know why I’ve played the frightened rabbit. Each and every man knows his secret reasons for hiding away but none of them know of the other men’s reasons. Some don’t even know that there are other fugitives.’

‘I do,’ said Henderson, still punishing the carpet. ‘I was there when some of them left.’

Taking no notice, Bransome carried on, 'I checked back, God alone knows why. Perhaps I am by nature more suspicious than is the average man. Or perhaps the delusion did not take as strong a hold as it may have done on others. I'd no hole into which to crawl and couldn't think of anything else to do; so, whatever the reason may be, I went to Burlleston. I did what checking!could and found myself guilty of a murder that, as far as I can discover, has never been committed.'

'What's all this to me?'

Bransome studied the other's expression as he answered, 'If all the absentees have been got on the run in the same way as I've been persuaded to bolt, I reckon it would be a good thing if they took time off to return to the scenes of their crimes and try to prove their own guilt. What they find - or don't find - may make their hair stand on end. And it would help quite a lot in getting to the bottom of the matter if they could make contact with each other and compare notes.'

'That's why you've come to see me?'Henderson asked.

'Yes.' 'Have you traced any of the others?'

'No, I haven't. They've vanished into the never-never. I got a line on your lurking-place only by sheer luck. I figured it was an opportunity too wonderful to miss - but it won't do me any good unless there's complete frankness on both sides.'

'The approach was yours, not mine.'

'I know. I've given you my reasons. I'm also giving you some excellent advice and that's this: if you've anything on your conscience you'd do well to check on whether it really exists. I'd bet ten to one that it doesn't, no matter how strongly your brain argues to the contrary.'

'I don't regard your own checking as sufficient,'Henderson opined. 'On your own account it's been perfunctory. If I were in your shoes I'd want more than that. After all, you've been looking for proof that you're daft on the principle that it's better to be daft than guilty. For myself, I'd want something a bit more conclusive before I became convinced that I was off my head.'

‘Couldn’t agree more,’ Bransome told him. ‘Tomorrow I’m going to clinch the matter one way or the other.’

‘How?’

‘I’m going to put it to the police.’

‘You mean give yourself up?’

‘Not on your life! I’ll admit defeat when I have to and not before. No surrender, that’s me.’ He grinned at the other and went on, ‘I intend to call the cops long distance and sound them out. If they show no interest and prove to be as ignorant as everyone else, that’ll settle it. I shall then be satisfied that, as you’ve suggested, I’m daft.’

‘And then?’

‘I propose to look into the question of what has addled my brains. If possible, I shall do something about it. I don’t want to acquire another nightmare at some time in the future.’

‘That’s logical enough.’ Henderson gave up his trudging, sat down and helped himself to another cigarette. His smoking was a nervous mannerism rather than a pleasure. He eyed his visitor doubtfully and said, ‘Let’s assume for the sake of argument that you’re as innocent as the babe unborn. You want to find out how you became burdened with a delusion do you know where to start looking?’

‘Yes - back home. It was there!got the jitters.’

‘Right in your own house?’

‘No, I wouldn’t say that. In my house or in the plant or somewhere between. In that area. The only alternative source of information is Burtleston and if the police there know nothing-’

‘All right. So you’ve an approximate idea of where to look - but what are you going to look for?’

‘At the moment I haven’t the remotest notion,’ Bransome confessed. ‘If the Burtleston cops clear me I shall go back convinced that there’s something to be found if only I can find it. I’m not a professional investigator and I’ll have to work by guess and by God.’

Henderson digested this and said after a time, ‘I wish Myerscough were here.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘Fellow I know. Works for the Department of Bacteriological Warfare. I’ve heard some strange rumours about what goes on there. It’s said they’ve got some kind of brew that can drive people up the wall. Maybe a virus has broken loose. If so, he could tell us.’

‘Us?’ echoed Bransome, pouncing on it. ‘It’s your own problem but we’re both discussing it, aren’t we?’ Henderson evaded.

‘Yes, we are. And it’s getting us nowhere. And I know why.’

‘Tell me why.’

‘You’ve been picked on repeatedly and you don’t like it one little bit. So you’re cagey. Right at the beginning you practically accused me of letting myself be used to get at you from some other and more persuasive angle.’

‘Well, Bransome, I’m entitled to keep-’

‘You’ve something to hide and you’re determined to play safe for as long as possible by continuing to hide it. No doubt you’re genuinely interested in my story. No doubt you’re willing sympathize with me on the assumption that the story may be true. But that’s as far as you’ll go because you can’t be sure that it is true. It could be a cunning piece of bait designed to make you blab, You’re not going to allow interest or sympathy to make you blab.’

‘Now look here-’

‘Listen to me,’ ordered Bransome firmly. ‘Let’s take it that you’re in much the same fix as I am but the hallucination embedded itself more deeply in your case and you haven’t undermined it by back-checking. Obviously you aren’t going to ask for trouble by confessing the crime and naming the victim. From your point of view such stupidity would enable the powers-that-be to dig up the evidence with which to convict you.’

‘But-’

‘However, suppose you were to tell me that at some time in the past, somewhere or other, you murdered somebody or other. Suppose I then take this information to the cops. Know what they’ll do? They’ll welcome me in with broad, anticipatory smiles. They’ll find me a chair and give me a coffee. Then they’ll want to know when, where, how and who. I’ll admit I can’t tell them. They’ll snatch the chair and coffee away and kick me out. If they come to see you what will you say? You’ll deny everything and tell them I’m a nut-case. The police can’t take it any further and won’t want to. They’ve enough to do without wasting time on useless gab.’

Henderson rubbed his chin, scratched his hair, fidgeted about and looked deeply troubled. ‘What do you expect me to say in reply to that homily?’

‘I don’t want names, dates or any other damning details. I want a clear reply to a straightforward question. Or, rather, two questions. Firstly, do you honestly believe that you have murdered someone? Secondly, have you found or attempted to find any evidence in support of that belief?’

After a long pause the other said, ‘Yes and no.’

Bransome stood up and said, 'That's all I wanted to know. It's hell to be in a boat floating on a sea of illusion. It's a great comfort to know that somebody is in the same boat. How do you feel about it?'

'The same.'

'Pity we can't get hold of the others. Between the two of us we might persuade them to talk. Then the whole bunch of us could make a joint effort to discover what has afflicted our skulls.' He looked around for his hat and coat.

Henderson asked anxiously, 'Are you going?'

'Yes. The party's over. Must go sometime.'

'Where to at this ungodly hour?'

Glancing in surprise at his watch, Bransome commented, 'I'll find somewhere to sleep. At the worst I can snooze in the station waiting-room.'

'Didn't you come by car?'

'No - I left it with the wife.'

'You're not in the big metropolis now,' Henderson reminded. 'You're deep in the woods. The next train will leave here at ten thirty in the morning. So why not stay here? I've got a spare bed.'

'That's very kind of you! Sure I won't be imposing on you?'

‘Not at all. Be glad of your company. We have something in common - if only mental deficiency.’

‘You have spoken sooth.’ Resuming his seat, Bransome gave the other a direct look. ‘What are you going to do about it?’

‘In view of what you’ve told me I know I must do something. I can’t understand why it didn’t occur to me to check up in the first place, as you have done. I should have thought of it immediately, but I didn’t. My only impulse was to get lost.’

‘One good reason may be that you had a hiding-place in mind whereas I had not,’ Bransome suggested. ‘About the only out-of-the-way dump I could think of was Burtleston. I went there mainly from sheer inability to imagine anywhere else.’ He had another thought and added, ‘Perhaps I was more scared than you were, too scared to figure what to do for the best.’

‘I doubt it. I think some small measure of incredulity was working in your mind and urged you to go there. After all, human beings are not the same. They may react similarly but not identically.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘To return to my own problem,’ Henderson went on. ‘I must check back. I’d be a fool not to. That means OldAddy will have to help me out if he’s willing.’

‘Who’s OldAddy?’

‘The character who used to run this store. He splurged some of my money on a vacation, not having had one for many years. He came back about ten days ago having had as good a time as one can at the age of seventy-two. Since then he’s been hanging around like a lost child. Can’t get used to doing nothing. A couple of times he’s hinted that he’d be glad to lend a hand if ever I need help. I certainly could do with it if I take time off to examine my past. I’ve too much hard-earned money tied up in this store to neglect business even for a week. If OldAddy is willing to take over management for a short time I’ll be able to take a trip to-’

As Henderson's voice petered out, Bransome chipped in with, 'Don't tell me I don't want to know.'

'Can't see that it matters in the circumstances. After all, you've told me about Burleston.'

'Yes, but I feel a bit safer in giving forth. I've done some checking and you haven't. That makes all the difference. Until you satisfy yourself that you're being tormented by a fantasy you'll be happier in the thought that I don't know enough to pin you down. So don't add to your worries after I've gone by wondering whether you've talked too much. The worry you've got is trouble enough. I know - I've had my fair share of it.'

'You've got something there,' said Henderson.

'There is one thing I'd like to know, if you care to tell me.'

'What is it?'

'Suppose you check and discover that all is illusion - what are you going to do then? Will you enjoy your relieved conscience and remain in the hardware business? Or will you sell out and return to your former work?'

'There'll be no opening for me at the plant. They'll have filled it by now. In any case they'll have no time for characters who leave when they like and come back when they please.'

'What, when they've been pestering you to return?'

'They haven't. A couple of official nosey-parkers have nagged at me to give my reasons for leaving. It seems to be the only thing that interested them.' Henderson let go a sigh of resignation. 'I beat them off. They got no change out of me. Soon afterwards I moved here and haven't been bothered since. I made up my mind that if they traced me and harassed me again, my next move would be over the border.'

‘That’s where most of the others have gone.’

‘I know.’

‘Wish we could find them and talk to them,’ said Bransome for the second time. He toyed with the notion of telling Henderson that already he had been traced and that a sly watch was being kept about him. But after brief thought he dismissed it on the grounds that it would create unnecessary alarm and serve no useful purpose. So he continued, ‘What you do in the future is strictly your own affair. However, I think we should keep in touch.’

‘So do I.’ ‘How about me phoning here now and again? If you make another move you can find some way of advising me how to make contact again. I’d like to learn the result of your checking and you’ll want to know the result of mine. One of us may stumble over something particularly enlightening to the other. We lunatics must stick together if we want to avoid being locked up.’

‘I couldn’t agree more. Call me any time you like. Similarly, I’ll phone your home if and when I’ve something to say worth saying.’ Henderson threw a glance at the clock. ‘How about us turning in?’

‘I’m ready.’ Bransome got up, stretched, smothered a yawn. ‘Tomorrow the cops. I should have baited them in Burtleston but I lacked the guts. You must have given me some courage.’

‘You’ve given me some,’ replied Henderson. ‘It’s a fair swap.’

In the morning Henderson wanted to go to the station and see his visitor depart. Bransome discouraged the notion.

‘Let’s not draw any attention to ourselves. You stay in your store and I’ll amble out trying to look like a casual customer.’

They shook hands and parted. Outside the shop Bransome looked for Reardon’s watcher. The only suspect he could find was a scruffy idler on the near corner. This character eyed him dully as he brushed past. Farther along the road Bransome glanced back. The idler was still on the corner and making no

attempt to follow. Either the supposed watch on Henderson's place was too expert to be spotted or it was a half-hearted and sloppy job.

He was not joined on the train by anyone he could deem suspicious. The journey involved two changes at the same places as before, with a half-hour wait at one of them. He filled in his time at the latter by finding a phone booth and calling the Hanbury police. When a voice responded he asked for the chief. The voice became curious, showed an officious tendency to argue the request until Bransome became tough and threatened to cut off. At that point he was switched through.

'Chief Pascoe,' announced a deeper and gruffer voice. 'Who's calling?'

'My name is Robert Lafarge,' said Bransome glibly. 'About twenty years ago my sister Arline went on a visit to Burleston and never returned. We had reason to think she'd run off with a man or something like that — you know, a secret romance. She was somewhat of a wayward and impulsive character.'

'What's all this to me?' asked Chief Pascoe patiently.

'Not known! Not known!' shouted eerily in Bransome's brain. It had a touch of triumph. He continued, 'Recently I've been talking to a fellow from your town. He mentioned that some time ago I don't know precisely when - you had found the bones of a girl buried under a tree. The discovery looked like evidence of an old crime. That got me worried. I wondered if it could be Arline and whether you'd found anything else to help establish the identity of the victim.'

'Who is this informant? A friend of yours?'

'No - just a casual acquaintance.'

'You're sure he said Hanbury?'

'He said it was just outside Burleston. That's in your jurisdiction, isn't it?'

‘It certainly is. And if such a thing had happened we’d know of it. We don’t know of it.’

‘You mean -?’

‘We’ve found no bones, Mr Lafarge. Have you any good reason to suspect that this sister of yours met with foul play?’

‘Afraid I haven’t. It’s only that we haven’t heard from her in years and this story made me sort of put two and two together.’

‘Did your informant know about your sister?’

‘Not a thing.’

‘You said nothing to him about her?’

‘Definitely not.’

‘Then he’s given you a figment of his imagination.’

‘That may be so,’ Bransome conceded, noting that the other was making no attempt to keep him on the line long enough for a pick-up. ‘But! see no point in it. He had nothing to gain by feeding me a fairy story.’

‘He gained a listener,’ opined Chief Pascoe, sounding cynical. ‘A yap needs a listener like a drug addict needs a shot in the arm. That’s why every once in a while we get ‘em here confessing to crimes they didn’t commit. In my opinion it would be a good thing if there were bigger penalties for affecting a public mischief. We get enough of our time wasted as it is.’

‘So you don’t think it’s any use me coming there to have a look around?’ asked Bransome, knowing full

well that Pascoe would make unhesitating use of his willingness to enter the trap - if a trap actually existed. 'There's nothing for you to look at, Mr Lafarge.'

'Thanks,' said Bransome, vastly relieved. 'Genuinely sorry to have troubled you.'

'Think nothing of it. You took the proper action in the circumstances. Our best leads come from folk with suspicions. But yours have no basis so far as we are concerned. That's all we're able to say.'

Bransome thanked him again and ended the call. He left the booth, sat on a near-by seat and thought it over. He was baffled. So far as one can judge a voice without seeing the speaker, Chief Pascoe had sounded sincere and forthright. He had not tried to hold his caller while an aide got the local cops racing to the phone booth. That would have been his obvious tactic when saddled with an unsolvable murder and in telephone contact with a suspect.

He'd even turned down Bransome's offer to stick a head in the lion's mouth. That clinched the matter. There had not been any gruesome exhumation in Burleston despite that Bransome's own memory made it possible and despite the trucker's statement that it had been done.

The easiest and most enticing solution to this puzzle lay in the theory already considered a dozen times, namely, that the trucker had talked about some other remarkably similar crime and thus unwittingly had awakened Bransome's guilty conscience. But the idea had several serious flaws. While it might explain his own panic strickengallivantings, it did not explain Henderson's. It did not rationalize Reardon's activities nor those of the mysterious big man thought by Dorothy to be a foreigner.

Even Reardon's own explanations did not fit the peculiar circumstances. According to him the country's various defence establishments had lost a number of good men and, at that time, he was keeping tab on two of them, one of whom was Bransome. How could one account for all the others - in terms of a gabby trucker?

What was it Reardon had said? The company may become a regiment and the regiment an army if we don't stop it. Stop what? Answer: whatever it is that makes men suddenly seek a hiding place. Yet all those men were scientists, or high-grade specialists of some sort, and therefore of the calm, logical, intellectual type least likely to go off the rails. What could unbalance men like that?

He could imagine only one thing.

Fear of death. Any kind of death - especially judicial execution.

The train came in and he got himself an isolated seat where he could struggle with his problems in peace. For the moment he was hardly aware of the existence of other passengers and little concerned about whether any were interested in him.

Thought was a good deal more orderly and systematic now that some of his emotional disturbance had been removed. He felt as if an invisible hand had been thrust into his skull and taken away a cluster of impeding marbles that had been rolling around too confusingly and too long. One or two remained but they weren't of the heart-straining, sweat-making variety. His guilt persisted to some extent but was no longer fitted with a clamorous alarm-bell. Chief Pascoe had snatched away that distracting accessory and tossed it on the junk pile. For the first time in days he could sit and listen-in to his own thinking processes.

Firstly, Arline, real or imaginary, was still down wherever he'd put her and with luck would remain there until the crack of doom. From his personal point of view that was item number one, the most important of the lot. The police did not want him, did not suspect him, did not care a hoot about him or the murky episode in his past. The death-chamber did not have his name upon it. If it was being held in readiness it was for another who, doubtless, was viewing it in his dreams exactly as Bransome had done.

Secondly, he was being chivvied by groups other than the police for an unknown something of lesser consequence - because any misdeed is of consequence lesser than the one that carries the capital penalty. Alternatively, he was being hunted for something not yet done but thought capable of doing and likely to do.

It was nothing he'd already done. He was quite sure of that. Positively and beyond all doubt Arline monopolized the dark spaces of his mind. There was no other guilt, nothing with which to reproach himself.

So it must be a future crime, the possibility if not the probability of what he might yet do. In his special position there were only two things he could do to outrage the powers-that-be: he could go over to the enemy or at least desert his own side. That was what bothered Reardon who had said so in plain terms. It wasn't flattering. It implied that both sides, friend and foe, had weighed him up as a weak sister. Both sides recognized him as an easy mark, a sucker.

He scowled at the thought of it. Other people's opinions of him must be very low if it was apparent to all and sundry that he was an open chink in his country's armour. They wouldn't pick on hard, taciturn men like Markham, Cain, Potter and several more. Oh, no, they'd just naturally go for a soft touch like Bransome who needed no more than a gentle shove.

Becoming emotional again, he thought. Men tend to go that way when they think their self-esteem is being kicked around. Ego is dangerously diversionary and misleading. It must not be taken into consideration. Let's look at things objectively.

Why should any enemy select me as a suitable target in preference to others? Answer: their tactics are determined by expediency, they choose the target available at a given moment and in given circumstances. Then when am I peculiarly suitable? Answer: when the enemy is ready and I am available while others are not. I represent an opportunity. Why does Joe Soap get knocked down by a car while none of his friends and neighbours suffer the same tragedy? Answer: because Joe and the car created the chance by coinciding in time and place.

Knocked down?

Knocked down?

His hands suddenly became moist while his eyes expressed startlement. That evil day had begun with an inexplicable tumble down the steps. In his mind's eye he could see himself right now doing it all over again. Descending the first ten or twelve steps with forty more waiting below. Then the flash of light and the headlong, neck-breaking dive from which he was saved only by two men coming up. He could picture vividly their outstretched arms, their anticipatory faces as he plunged towards them.

Their hands had grabbed him a split-second before he'd hit and had saved him from crashing the whole way down. Now he came to think of it, they'd been amazingly swift to estimate the situation and do something about it; almost as if they'd known that was about to happen and been ready to play their part. They'd reacted with all the promptitude of men blessed with prevision and that alone had saved him from serious injury.

Nevertheless, he had banged himself around more than he'd cared to admit to Dorothy. He had knocked himself out and regained consciousness sitting midway down the stairs with his two catchers tending him and showing plausible concern. The big bruise on his elbow was understandable because he could remember striking it upon a concrete step just before he'd passed out. The blow on the skull and the bump it had raised was something else. He had no recollection of that injury in the making.

Ye gods, could he have been slugged from behind?

At that time the incident had shaken him mentally and physically to such an extent that his work-free morning had been hopelessly muddled. Capturing it now, he could not remember what he had done with the rest of his time before reporting to the plant at midday. He knew he had worried a great deal about the mental blackout that had either accompanied or caused his fall, had wondered if his heart were acting up, whether he had better consult a doctor at risk of being told the worst.

Yes, his subsequent confusion had been so great that temporarily he'd lost all sense of time. He'd lost a couple of hours somehow or other, somewhere or other, found it far later than he'd thought and had to take a taxi to the plant to get there by deadline.

And so had commenced Friday the Thirteenth.

His unlucky day. A fall. Two men ready to catch him. A bump on the skull from nowhere. Time missing from his morning. A pair of truckers gossiping within earshot and giving him the heebies. The big man following him around. The flight of a frightened rat. Reardon on the trail. A company, a regiment, an army.

He stiffened in his seat, his lips going thin and his fists clenched. It takes arduous and careful preparation to make an atomic bomb after which the thing is of no use except potentially. To function in grim actuality it has to be detonated. 'It doesn't mean a thing if you don't pull the string.'

Suppose, just suppose that one could apply a somewhat similar technique to the human mind, adding to its data-banks an item large enough to create critical mass. The brain would remain at rest until it and the new part were brought forcibly together. It could be left in peace, maybe for weeks and months, until the moment arrived to trigger the situation thus set up.

A few words spoken by a mock-trucker.

The detonating mechanism.

Mental explosion!

He came out of the railroad station at a full run, brushing passers-by, bumping into one or two and throwing them a muttered apology. Several people turned to stare after him. He was aware of their scrutiny, knew that he was making himself conspicuous but was too absorbed in himself to care.

The solution to his predicament lay with the company that might become a regiment. He knew that as surely as he knew of the sun in the sky. Some of them could tell him what had given them the willies, a few might be less cautious and more candid than the not-too-helpful Henderson. A few would do provided they could be induced to open their minds to another nightmare addict.

'Now get this firmly fixed in your leery head: I'm not a cop, I'm not a security agent, I'm not a stooge of authority. I'm Richard Bransome, a fellow research worker, on the run from everybody because I'm in a dream-world of my own. I'm not wanted for a murder I believe I've committed but haven't. I think I slew a girl named Arline Lafarge. What do you think you've done?'

If only one of them, just one of them would say, My God, Bransome, there's something screwy here! I killed her myself, in a one-horse dump called Burleston. I know I did it. How the devil could you-'

'Tell me why you did it.'

'She drove me to it. I did it without premeditation. She got me really mad.'

'How?' 'Well . . . uh. . . I just don't recall offhand. It was so long ago and I've tried hard to forget it.'

'Same with me. How about us tracking down the others and finding out how many more have bumped Arline? It would be nice to know. We could squat in jail together and count the hours to the end.'

Might it work out that way? Nothing the human mind can conceive is impossible. On the other hand, unknown forces might have been too far-seeing and too crafty for such simplification and taken the

precaution of burdening each victim with a different phantom. Henderson, for example, appeared to have a secret peculiarly his own; he had not blinked an eyelid at mention of Burleston or Arline.

He was commencing to feel pretty positive that the ill-fated Arline was an illusion. It was hard, terribly hard to accept this idea because his own memory persisted in contradicting it; to deny the dictates of his memory was as difficult as it would be to repudiate the face in the mirror.

In spite of accumulating evidence and or lack of evidence, in spite of rapidly growing doubts, his memory remained sharp and clear with respect to the worst moment of his life. Even though the vision of the past might be no more than a bad dream built around a ghostly female, he could still visualize Arline's features as she went down to death, her black hair tied with baby-blue ribbon at the nape of her neck, her jet-black eyes full of shock, her thin lips that had curled in scorn too often, the faint freckles on the sides of her nose, the streak of blood crawling down her forehead. She had been wearing a string of graduated pearls with button earrings to match, a blue frock, black shoes, a gold wristwatch. The picture was stereoscopic and in full colour even to her nail-varnish, which was lurid. It was a picture as complete in detail as only a reproduction of the real can be complete.

But was she real?

Or was she a mental figment just sufficiently large to create critical mass?

The others would know all about her or about phantoms like her. It would be hard if not impossible to get at them without Reardon's cooperation. He did not fancy seeking that, especially after recent events. Besides, it might get him all tied up at the very time when he was about to switch from the hunted to the hunter. He would appeal to Reardon and the redoubtable forces behind him only as the last resort.

Therefore his fellow fugitives could be of no help in raising the pursuit though, with luck, Henderson might prove an exception. For the time being he'd have to take up the chase by himself. And, he decided, there was a quarry to be tracked down.

Five men could solve the mystery of Arline Lafarge.

Five men knew all about her and could be made to talk.

Those five were the two who had grabbed him on the steps, the talkative trucker and his stooge, the big foreigner who had egged him into flight. It hewere right in these conclusions there was also a sixth man, the unseen slugger, whom he could not include because he had no means of identifying him.

Any one of the five could give a lead to the others and, perhaps, to a bigger mob lurking in the background.

As he hurried along he amused himself making more or less impassive study of his own thirst for vengeance. Being what he was, primarily an objective thinker, he'd always viewed as a symptom of primitivism the supreme delight of handing someone a bust on the nose. Now the desire didn't seem so retrogressive. Indeed, he'd have despised himself had he lacked it. One cannot dispense with everything, including basic human feelings. He was happily married and that sweet state could never have been attained without emotional qualities on his part.

Yes, if the opportunity came along, or if somehow he could create the chance, he was going to build up pressure of emotion to bursting point, force it all down into his right fist and do his best to knock somebody's teeth through the back of his neck.

In other words, he was riled and enjoying it.

Chapter 9

Night's dark curtain lay across the sky, street lamps were gleaming, shop-fronts lit up. This was his own town but he did not go home; if anyone wanted him it was there they'd keep watch, waiting for the lost sheep to return to the fold. So far as he was concerned they could wait until they took root. He had no hankering to be picked up yet. What he needed more than anything else was time — time enough to prowl around, find a target for his ire and land a hefty punch.

His progress through town was fast but careful. A hundred people, some of them workers at the plant, lived hereabouts and knew him if only by sight. He didn't want to be seen much less spoken to by any of them. The less others knew about his return, the better. Using the less well-lit streets and avoiding the main shopping areas, he stopped only at a small store to buy himself a razor, toothbrush and comb. His journey ended at a motel on the side of town farthest from his house.

There he had a clean-up and a meal. For a short while he suffered the temptation to phone Dorothy and arrange to meet her at a roadside café or some such place. But the children would soon be going to bed and she'd have to find a neighbour willing to baby-sit. The morning would be better, when the kids were at school. In the meantime he could have a word with Henderson if that worthy were still at Lakeside. He put through the call and Henderson answered.

'You still there?' he asked. 'I thought you might have gone by now.'

'Going tomorrow afternoon,' Henderson informed. 'Old Addy's taking over for a while and is delighted to do so. Did you bait the you-know-who?'

'Yes. There was nothing doing.'

'Whatd'you mean?'

'They know nothing about it and that's definite.'

Henderson was sceptical. 'If they did know something they wouldn't necessarily admit it to a voice on the phone. It's more likely they'd have tried to pick you up. Did you give them enough time?'

'No, I didn't.'

'In that case you'd do well to take nothing for granted.'

'I didn't need to give them time. They weren't trying to pick me up.'

'How can you be sure of that?'

‘Because they made no attempt to detain me,’ explained Bran.some . ‘Furthermore, I offered to go there and they didn’t take me up on it. They said it would be a waste of time. They weren’t interested in seeing me, never mind making a grab. I’m telling you,Henny , the whole affair is illusionary and I’m going to proceed on that assumption.’

‘Proceed? What can you do about it?D’youmean you’re returning to the plant?’

‘No, I don’t. I’m not going back just yet.’

‘Then what?’

‘I want to do a bit of nosing around. With luck I might discover something worth finding. At any rate, I’m going to have a try. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.’

‘You’ve got a lead worth following up?’

‘I may have - I can’t be sure about it just yet.’ Bransome frowned to himself and went on, ‘If, as I expect, your own queries really satisfy you that your worries are baseless, I suggest you think back to the circumstances in which they started. You should be able to remember people who shared those circumstances. They are your suspects. See what I mean?’

‘Bransome,’ saidHenderson , unimpressed, ‘you may fancy your chances as a private investigator but I’ve little faith in mine. I’m not suited to that kind of work either by training or inclination.’ ‘Neither am I; but that won’t stop me. You never know what you can do until you try.’

‘Have it your own way.’

‘I intend to. I’m sick and tired of having it in somebody else’s way.’ He clenched a fist and stared at it as if it were symbolic. ‘Henny, if you find you’re in the clear, for Pete’s sake don’t rest content to leave it at that. Don’t settle down to be happyand let sleeping dogs lie. Come back here and join forces with me. We may have been hexed by the same bunch of characters. You might recognize one and me another. We could help each other to pin them down.’

'I'm not committing myself just yet,' said Henderson, instinctively countering yet another come-home-all-is-forgiven gambit. 'You've checked and you're looking for blood. I'm about to check and I'm hoping for salvation. At this moment our positions are different. In a few days' time I may have moved over to your position. For all I know I may then be ripe for mayhem - in which case I'll decide what to do for the best.'

'You won't be human if you don't want to subject someone to the death of a thousand cuts,' Bransome prophesied. 'And you'll need a helper to hold him down. I'm applying in advance for that job. You can reciprocate by doing the same for me.'

'I'll let you know how I get on,' Henderson promised.

'Best of luck.'

Terminating the call, Bransome borrowed one of the motel's telephone books, took it to his room and spent a couple of hours searching through it page by page, line by line. Now and again he scribbled a brief note.

He finished up with a short list containing the addresses and call numbers of a legal advisory service, a mental specialist, a car hire agency, two detective outfits, four trucking companies and several modest eating-places that he had never frequented. Most of this data might never be used but it would be convenient to have it ready to hand. Tucking the list into his wallet, he prepared for bed. His sleep that night was deep and untroubled.

At nine-thirty in the morning, estimating that by now she would have returned from taking the children to school, he phoned Dorothy. He was careful about arranging to see her; she would be a direct lead to him, there was no knowing who might be listening on the line or who might be glad to learn of the rendezvous.

'Listen, Lovely, this is urgent and I mustn't waste words. So let's keep it short, eh? Can you meet me for lunch about twelve-thirty?'

‘Of course, Rich. I’ll be quite-’

‘Remember where you lost your silver compact and found it later? I’ll wait for you there.’

‘Yes, all right, but why do -’

He cut off as she was speaking. No doubt she’d feel irked about that but it couldn’t be helped. Reardon and those behind him had the power to tap a telephone line and, in his opinion, weren’t above doing it if they thought it desirable. Brevity and evasiveness were the only defences against an official eavesdropper.

By ten he was loafing around the gates of a trucking company. This was the industrial district, in a broad road lined with factories, yards and warehouses. Traffic was sparser than in the centre of town, almost all of it consisting of huge vehicles bearing heavy loads. Pedestrians were so few that he was conspicuous and painfully aware of it. Undeterred, he mooched to and fro by the gates for an hour and a half, during which time one truck entered and none emerged. He got a good look at the driver and co-driver. Both were complete strangers.

Just inside the gates was a weighbridge, alongside it a small hut inhabited by another watcher who wrote something in a book as the truck went through, then gloomed boredly through the window. He began to notice Bransome’s frequent amblings past the gates and eyed him with increasing curiosity. Eventually he left his hut, came outside and spoke.

‘Waiting for someone, mister?’

‘I’m looking for a couple of fellows I know,’ said Bransome laconically.

‘Kept you long enough, haven’t they? Give me their names and I’ll tell ‘em you’re here.’ ‘Sorry, I can’t - I know them only by sight.’

‘That’s a big help,’ commented the other. A telephone shrilled in the hut. ‘Hold it a minute.’ He dashed into the hut, answered, consulted his book and transmitted some information. Then he returned to the gates.

'I can describe them,' Bransome said, not very hopefully.

'That's a fat lot of use. I'm no good at that sort of thing. Couldn't recognize my Aunt Martha if you painted her in oils.'

'Be surprised if you could the way I paint.'

'Can't be worse than me, mister.' He scratched his bristly head, pondered the problem, then pointed across the yard. 'Tell you what: go to the office over there and ask for Richards. He knows every employee like he knows his own face. He ought to - he hires 'em and fires 'em.'

'Thanks a lot.' Bransome trudged across the yard, entered the office and said to the girl behind the counter, 'Can I have a word with Mr Richards, please?'

She looked him over with cool calculation. 'You wanting a job?'

'No,' said Bransome, deeply shocked. 'I want a little information.'

Richards came after a few minutes. He was a thin-featured, disillusioned-looking type. His voice suggested politeness that came with effort.

'Can I help you?'

'I hope so. I'm trying to find a couple of truckers.'

'What for?'

‘Eh?’

‘Whatd’youwant ‘emfor? Are they in trouble of some kind? Who are you anyway?A cop or an insurance investigator?’

‘Seems to me you’re all set to expect the worst,’ said Bransome, grinning. ‘You must have plenty of woe from truckers.’

‘That’s my business. What’s yours?’

Since the other seemed accustomed to dealing only with authority, any kind of authority, Bransome gave him a half-truth. ‘I’m an official from the Defence Department.’ He exhibited his pass and noted that it was studied with gratifying respect. ‘I’ve reason to believe that two truckers can provide some information of interest to the department. If I can find them, I’d like to ask a few questions.’

Now satisfied, Richards said lesssurlily , ‘What are their names?’

‘I don’t know. I can give you their descriptions. Your gateman thinks you might be able to identify them for me.’

‘All right.I’ll try. What do they look like?’

Bransome provided verbal pictures of the pair of gossipers in the diner. He flattered himself that they were very good descriptions given in full detail.

When he had finished, Richards said, ‘We have forty-eight assorted roughnecks driving all over the country. About twenty of them correspond more or less with the idea you’ve given of the men you want. Some of them won’t be back for a couple of days, others for a week or more. If you want to have a look at all of them you’re in for a heck of a long wait.’

‘That’s bad,’ conceded Bransome, disappointed.

‘You sure they work for this outfit?’ ‘I’ve no notion of who they work for.’

‘Jumping Joseph!’ Richards eyed him incredulously. ‘What sort of badges were they wearing on their caps or pocket-flaps?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘Well, what kind of vehicle were they using? What colour was the truck painted and what lettering or symbols did it carry?’

‘Don’t know. When last seen they weren’t in a truck. They were on a railroad station, presumably waiting for a train.’

‘Oh, Lord!’ Richards threw an appealing glance towards heaven. ‘Let me tell you something. Ordinary truckers don’t use trains, not unless they’re being taken to the crematorium. They take loads out and they bring loads back, if a return-load can be got. Otherwise they come home empty. So in all probability your men are transfer truckers.’

‘Huh?’

‘A transfer trucker,’ explained Richards with exaggerated patience, ‘takes a load away and delivers it, truck and all, at some distant trucking depot. He gets further orders there. He picks up another loaded truck, either at that depot or some other reached by bus or train, takes that away and delivers it, truck and all. And so on and so on. He also acts as relief-man, handling trucks for fellows on holiday or sick or thrown into the jug. He’s a gypsy, a wanderer, a general messenger-about, here today and gone tomorrow and God only knows where the day after.’

‘I see,’ said Bransome, feeling that as a detective he was proving more than feeble.

‘The point of it is this: transfer truckers are used only by interstate companies with a number of depots. Not by small outfits like the four in this town. There are dozens of big interstaters each employing hundreds of men. All you’ve got is two descriptions that might fit a couple of thousand toughies at present trundling around anywhere from the North Pole downwards.’ He spread his hands in a gesture of futility. ‘It’s worse than looking for a couple of special fleasin a dogs’ home. If I were you, I’d quit. Life’s too short.’

‘That puts paid to that,’ said Bransome ruefully. He turned to go. ‘I’m grateful for what you’ve told me. We’re never too old to learn.’

‘Think nothing of it.’ Richards watched him reach the door, then called. ‘Hey, there’s something else now that I come to think of it. A pair of transfer truckers wouldn’t be waiting on the local station.’

‘Why not?’

‘They never come here. There isn’t an interstate depot in this town.’

Bransome mulled it over. ‘That means they may not have been what they appeared to be, eh? Well, I saw them myself and they certainly looked like truckers.’

‘In our servicing bay we’ve a chump who looks like Napoleon - but he isn’t.’

Returning to the counter, Bransome leaned across it, grasped Richards’s forearm, held it up and said, ‘I declare you the winner.’

He left, moodily crossed the yard and reached the exit. The gateman came out of his hut and asked, ‘Any luck, mister?’ Bransome said, ‘No - they’re both being hanged tomorrow. Justice shall be done.’ He kept on walking, giving no opportunity for further questions. Behind him the gateman spent a moment looking thunderstruck, then dashed into the hut and snatched up the phone, ‘Who’s going to be topped? Or is that fellow a nut-case?’ A voice replied, ‘You’re paid to keep ‘em out - not to show ‘emin. Wake up, Sweeney!’

Knowing from experience exactly what Dorothy’s routine would be, Bransome stationed himself at the

back of a small car park and observed her arrival. About five minutes before meeting time she drove through the entrance, expertly reversed into a vacant space, got out and locked the car's doors. Pausing only to pay for her ticket, she left the park, turned to the right and sauntered along the road. Her handbag was tucked under her right arm, a familiar looking case was swinging from her left hand and she was displaying the usual long, slender legs at which various males threw appreciative glances.

Another car drove in and positioned itself not far from Dorothy's. Two men emerged, bought a ticket and turned to the right. They walked at easy pace a couple of hundred yards behind Dorothy. Ordinarily, Bransome would have felt highly suspicious of this pair; but both were elderly and silver-haired, in his opinion too old to play Sherlock. All the same, he came from his hiding place and followed them in their turn, meanwhile keeping careful watch for any othershadowers that Dorothy might innocently be leading around.

Before long the two oldsters mounted the steps of a business block and pushed through its revolving door. Dorothy was still visible walking onward with occasional slowings in pace as she passed an interesting shop window. Keeping his eyes skinned, Bransome could find no evidence that she was under observation. He was looking only for a too-casual pedestrian ambling in the same direction and it did not occur to him to watch passing traffic.

Dorothy reached the small restaurant where, years ago, she had lost and regained her compact. She went inside, being characteristically right on time. On the opposite side of the road Bransome kept going, walked a hundred yards or so farther on, crossed the road and came back. He failed to spot anyone confused by this manoeuvre. So far as he could tell, the coast was clear. He entered, found her sitting expectantly at a secluded table for two.

'Hi, Ducks!' Slinging his hat on to a nearby hook, he took the opposite chair.

'Hi, Frowsy,' she greeted. 'Been sleeping in your suit?'

Instinctively smoothing his sleeves, he said, 'It's not that rumpled.'

'What have you been sleeping in?' she persisted with dangerous sweetness.

'Beds,' he told her. 'See here, I haven't met you just to - 'He shut up as she leaned sideways, picked something off the floor and placed it on the table. It was the overnight case he'd abandoned on the train.

He gazed at it morbidly. 'How did you get it?'

'A tall, dark stranger crossed my path. He knocked at the door and gave it to me.'

'Did he give you his name as well?'

'Yes - Reardon. Naturally I wanted to know how he'd come by it and what you were doing without your shaving gear and night attire.'

'If you must know, I slept in my underpants. What did he tell you?'

'He said you were growing a beard and sleeping naked for reasons he did not care to mention. If I asked no questions I'd be told no lies, and, anyway, he wanted no hand in a possible divorce.'

'Trust him to say something like that,' commented Bransome, bitterly. 'He wants you to gab about me. No doubt he figures you'd be more willing to cooperate if you were a little annoyed. Did he ask you a load of questions about whether you'd heard from me and where I was and what I was doing and so on?'

'He did ask a few. I told him nothing. After all, there was nothing I could tell him.' She became more serious. 'What's going on, Rich?'

'I wish I could tell you but I can't. Not yet, at least. When it comes to an end the authorities may want to keep it dark. You know how tough they are about people talking too much.'

'Yes, of course.' 'However, I can tell you this: it's a security matter. It involves me and that's what had me worried before I went away. I've since discovered that it concerns a number of others too. I've also found that as far as I, personally, am concerned it's not as serious as first it seemed.'

'That's a comfort,' she said, openly relieved.

‘Not enough comfort by half. For reasons I cannot explain, this thing must be seen through to the bitter end.’ He sought for a way of making her understand without revealing anything. ‘It’s like a rotting tooth. By dabbing it with oil of cloves I’ve stopped the ache and feel happier for it. But it’s only a palliative. To make a proper job of it the tooth must be extracted.’

‘By you?’

‘I’m one of the sufferers and I feel entitled to do something about it - if I can.’

‘What of the other sufferers you mentioned? Are they incapable of taking action?’

‘They’re far out of reach and don’t realize what’s going on. I found -’, He caught her warning look, glanced up and found a waiter standing silently at his elbow. Accepting a menu-card, he discussed it with Dorothy and placed their orders. The waiter went away. Bransome continued with, ‘I found one character who soon may be willing and able to help. Fellow named Henderson, area ballisticsian. Remember him?’

‘Can’t say! do,’ she admitted after some thought.

‘Burly type with a slight paunch, hair thinning on top, wears rimless glasses. You met him some months ago.’

‘I still don’t recall him. Evidently he didn’t create much of an impression.’

‘He wouldn’t. He never tries to. He’s not what one would call a ladies’ man.’

‘Meaning he keeps his paws to himself?’

‘If you want it that way.’ He gave her a knowing look that brought a smile. ‘Henderson may phone

through anytime. I won't be home for a few days but don't let that worry you. I've good reasons for staying away.'

'So this man Reardon implied.' 'Damn Reardon! Now, if and when Henderson calls, tell him I'm on the job but not immediately available and that you're to take his message. If he expects a reply, ask him if I'm to phone the store or some other number. Is that all right?'

'I'll cope. The art of marriage is coping.'

'Another thing: if Reardon or that big foreigner or anyone else arrives at the house and starts pestering you with questions, you still know nothing, see? You don't know where I am or when I'll return. You've never heard of Henderson even though you've just been talking to him on the phone. Doesn't matter who the questioner may be, a reporter, an F.B.I. agent or a ten-star general in full uniform, you don't know a darned thing. Okay?'

'Okay,' she responded. 'Am I permitted to know just who this Reardon is?'

'A security officer.'

She showed surprise and some puzzlement. 'Then surely it's his job and not yours to-'

Bransome interrupted, 'For one thing, suffering is educative and he hasn't suffered, neither can he be expected to understand the mentalities of those who have. For another, there are different ideas of what constitutes security. For a third, he's trained to deal with orthodox problems by orthodox methods. I don't want him treading on my feet, messing me up and pushing me around; there's enough regimentation in the plant without having it outside as well.'

'All right, if he shows up at the house I'll treat him to a demonstration of wide-eyed ignorance.'

'You do that. He won't be fooled but neither will he learn anything.'

The meal came. Until it was finished they resorted to idle gossip. Over coffee, Bransome came back to the subject.

‘One more item: this big clunker whom you believe to be a foreigner. I’ve seen him a few times and know how he looks. But I’d like to have your own description of him. Different people notice different things and you may be able to augment my own picture of him.’

Dorothy obliged in manner showing that she was very observant. To Bransome’s memory of the man she added a thin white scar, about one inch long, set diagonally on the right side of the upper lip. He had a habit, she said, of pursing his lips after putting a question and it was then that the scar showed up as a crease on the flesh. Apart from that she had nothing to add save her instinctive feeling that he was a stolid but brutal type who’d be slow to lose his temper and equally slow to recover it.

‘He seemed to me the sort of man who’d take a lot of provocation before he hit out but once he started he wouldn’t know when to stop.’

‘His manner towards you wasn’t tough?’

‘No, not at all - he was unctuously polite.’

‘H’m!’ His fingers idly tapped on the table as again he visualized the subject of their conversation. The waiter misunderstood his rapping and brought the bill. He paid it and, after the other had gone, said to Dorothy, ‘During the last few days have you noticed anyone following you around?’

‘No, Rich. I haven’t been watching for any such thing. Do you consider it likely?’

‘It’s possible. Anyone wanting to find me would keep an eye on you.’

‘Yes, I suppose they would.’

‘From now on I’d like you to see if you can spot anyone tagging along behind, if you do, don’t let it

bother you. Try to get a clear, close-up view of him so you can tell me what he's like. I might be able to figure away of making him provide me with a lead.'

'He could be another security man, couldn't he?'

'Yes - one of Reardon's bunch. But there's a chance that he's an observer for quite a different mob, in which case he's my meat.' Getting up, he reached for his hat. 'Tell the kids I'll be home before long. I'll phone you tomorrow evening after they've gone to bed.'

'All right.' She gathered her things together, left with him. Outside, she asked, 'Do you need the car? Or can I run you somewhere?'

'I'm better off without it. Too many characters know its number. I don't want to advertise myself all over the town,' She put a hand on his arm. 'Rich, are you sure you know what you're doing?'

'No, I don't. I'm like a blind man fumbling in the dark and hoping to put a hand on something worth grabbing.' He gave her a reassuring look. 'I may get nowhere — but, if I do, I'll be happier in the thought that it wasn't for lack of trying.'

'I know how you feel.' With a doubtful smile, she set off in the direction of the car-park.

Bransome watched her until she was out of sight, then whistled a taxi which took him to the offices of another trucking company. He was not sanguine about the usefulness of this visit but did want authoritative confirmation of the remarks made by Richards.

They said to him, 'Look, mister, without names or photographs you've as much chance of tracing those two guys as of having a drink with Tutankhamen. They might be anybody and they might be anywhere. Whatd'you expect us to do about it?'

He felt the place feeling satisfied that this line of investigation was fruitless. Ergo, he'd have to try some other line. He'd admit himself beaten when he had exhausted every possibility, and not before.

Walking through a series of side streets, he gave himself the opportunity to indulge in fresh thought. Were there any other paths of approach that might lead him to the truckers? He could imagine only one, that being the station and particularly its diner. Somebody who frequented the station might know the identities of those two: a railroad official or a fellow commuter or some other trucker.

If he eliminated this pair, what other leads remained? For one, there was the big shadower who had out-stared him in the mirror, who had disappeared not far from his own home and therefore might be living in the neighbourhood. And there were the two men who had witnessed his fall down the steps. He'd seen them hazily for a few seconds before he collapsed, more clearly for a few minutes afterwards. Their faces remained impressed upon his mind with photographic accuracy and he felt sure that if he should encounter them again he would recognize them at once. But where to look for them? Like the vanished truckers 'they might be anybody and might be anywhere'.

At the last resort, he had the choice of three moves. Using Dorothy as bait, he could try to pick up a shadower and use him as a line leading to others in the background. Or he could make another pass at Henderson in the hope that two might succeed where one had failed. Or he could treat Reardon to an hour of true confessions and leave the powers-that-be to handle things in whatever way they saw fit.

The last idea he found so distasteful that automatically he speeded up his pace and started heading for the station. He did not and could not know it at the time - but it was his first move in the right direction. He was about to start getting somewhere.

Chapter 10

Marching into the diner long before his customary time, he eased himself on to a high stool, ordered a coffee and waited until the attendant had finished serving others. When the fellow was free, he gave him the nod, leaned over the counter and spoke in low tones.

'Walt, I'm looking for someone and you may be able to help me. Do you remember a couple of hefty characters in denims and shiny-peaked caps swilling coffee here a week or so ago? They looked like truck-drivers. They were talking about a murder somewhere or other.'

'Murder?' Walt's eyebrows twitched. He put on the expression of one hoping for the best while expecting the worst. 'No, Mr Bransome, I heard nobody talking about anything like that. I don't

remember those guys either.'

'Try and think. Two truckers sitting right here.'

Obediently Walt tried and thought. 'Sorry, Mr Bransome, I don't recall them at all. I ought to if they were truckers. We don't get 'em here very often. I couldn't have taken much notice of them at the time.' Another notion struck him and he added, 'You sure I was on duty then?'

'Yes, it was a Friday evening. You're always on duty Fridays, aren't you?'

'That's right. Maybe I was busy. I don't take a lot in when I've plenty to do. People can be talking all around me and none of it registers until they shout an order.'

'D'you think you'd remember them if they'd been here several times?' 'Oh, sure,' said Walt. 'As I said, we don't often get truckers in here.'

'So the implication is that they were here only the once and you haven't seen them since?'

'That's right.'

'Well, how about another fellow? He was here by himself a few days later. Six feet or more, two hundred pounds, flattened nose, florid face with heavy chops, white scar on top lip, looked a bit like a policeman in plain clothes. He sat up here, right by the counter, saying nothing and staring at the mirror as if he were hypnotized by it.'

'Wears a snake-ring on his left hand?' prompted Walt, crinkling his brows.

'I believe he did wear a ring of some kind but I didn't see it close up.'

‘Talks like a foreigner?’

‘I haven’t heard him speak a word but have good reason to think he may be an outsider.’

‘Been in here a few times.’ Walt glanced at the clock. ‘Somewhere about now. Haven’t seen him for about a week though. I can remember him because he was always by himself, used his eyes a lot and said nothing. He used to stare at me as if he was making ready to complain about something but he never got round to it.’

‘Know anything about him?’

‘Only that I weighed him up as a foreigner.’

‘Ever see him in the company of anyone you do know?’

‘No, Mr Bransome.’ Walt wiped a few imaginary stains from the counter and looked bored.

‘Too bad,’ said Bransome.

A customer called for attention and Walt moved along the counter, served him, tidied a back shelf. Bransome brooded over his cup. After a while Walt ambled up to his end and offered an afterthought.

‘I think that big lug is called Kossy or Kozzy or something like that. What is all this, anyway?’ ‘I’m asking to stop the cops asking. How did you get his name?’

‘I was here one evening and he was squatting by the counter and watching the mirror as usual. Four young fellows came in and sat at the table over there. One of ‘em gave him the hi -ho and called him Kossy or Kozzy . He didn’t like it. He gave this youngster a long, hard look and put down his cup and went out. The other fellow sort of shrugged it off.’

‘Know who this young fellow is?’

‘No, I don’t. I’ve seen him before but not often. Probably a casual customer who comes here once in a blue moon.’

‘What about the three who were with him?’

‘Oh, I know one of those, JimFalkner .’

‘Stand back and let the dog see the rabbit,’ said Bransome, putting down his cup and getting off the stool. ‘Where can I find JimFalkner ?’

‘Don’t know where he lives, Mr Bransome, but I can tell you where he works.’ Another look at the clock. ‘InVoce’s Barber Shop onBleekerStreet . He should be there right now,’

‘Thanks, Walt. I shall mention you in my prayers tonight.’

‘That’s nice,’ said Walt, giving the ghost of a smile. Bransome trudged round to the barber shop on BleekerStreet , which wasn’t far away. It was a small, dingy place with four chairs and two attendants. Plenty of loose hair lay scattered over the unswept floor. One barber, grey-headed and in his fifties, was trimming a customer in the chair farthest from the door. The other barber was ashrimpish , sallow-faced youth sprawling on a bench by the wall and reading a comic. As Bransome entered the youth reluctantly got up and signed to a chair. Bransome sat in it.

‘Short back and sides.’ When the other had finished he slipped him a tip and whispered, ‘I’d like a word with you at the door.’ Following him to the entrance, the youth asked in equally low tones, ‘Whatd’you want?’

‘Are you JimFalkner ?’

‘Yes - howd’you know my name?’

‘Got it from a friend of mine, Walt at the railroad diner.’

‘Oh, that zombie.’

‘I’m trying to trace a fellow last seen in the diner. He’s a big, ugly clunker who’s been there only a few times. Walt says that one evening you were there with three friends. One of them spoke to this man and was given the brush-off. Do you remember that?’

‘Sure do. The big bum took off looking sour. Gil just laughed and said he was as chummy as a rattlesnake.’

‘Gil?’

‘Gilbert.’ Suspicion clouded Falkner’s face. ‘What are you after? Are you a cop?’

‘Do I look like one? I’ve lost track of this big character and want to find him. It’s a private matter. Gilbert won’t have anything to worry about, I can promise you that. Now, who is he and where can I find him?’

Falkner said, a little unwillingly, ‘His full name is Gilbert Mitchell. He’s at the Star Garage, at the end of this road.’

‘That’s all I wanted to know. Thanks for the help.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Falkner, still doubtful about the wisdom of giving away his friends.

Mitchell turned out to be a well-built blond with a fixed half grin. His hands were black with automobile

grease and he'd a few smears of it across his face. Wiping the face with an even greasier sleeve, he gave Bransome his attention.

'I'm searching for a heavyweight whose name and address I don't know. He was last seen in the railroad diner. Walt says you were there one evening with Jim Falkner and a couple of others. You greeted this character with the name of Kossy or Kozzy and he gave you the cold shoulder. What'd you know about him?'

'Nothing.'

'You did speak to him, didn't you?'

'I wasted my breath on him.'

'Then you must know something about him.'

'I don't. I've seen him plenty of times in a billiards hall downtown. I go there two or three times a week and more often than not he's there too. Usually he's using the table next to mine. He plays with a tough, deadpan bunch who call him Kossy. That's all I know.'

'Where is this billiards hall?'

Mitchell obliged with the information.

'When does Kossy usually show up there?'

'It varies. Sometimes he's there early, sometimes late. About nine o'clock would be a good bet.' Mitchell's grin widened as he added, 'Don't let him play you for money, mister. You'll get skinned.'

‘Thanks for the information - and the advice.’

He had no intention of playing billiards with Kossy or with anyone else. His only desire was to get the quarry in sight - what he'd do after that would depend upon the circumstances.

The billiards hall held thirty tables of which about twenty were in use. He wandered casually through the smoke-laden atmosphere examining players and spectators all of whom were too interested in the games to take much note of him. Nobody was present whom he could recognize.

Arriving at a little shack-like office in one corner, he peered through its doorway. Inside sat a bald-headed man smoking a thin cheroot and playing with the guts of a time-recorder. Several tipless cues were racked against one wall and a box of green chalks stood open on a tiny desk.

‘Happen to know a big pug named Kossy?’

Baldhead looked up, showing lined and liverish features. He extracted the cheroot.

‘Why should I tell you?’

Ignoring the question, Bransome opened his wallet, took out a note. The other made it disappear as if he were performing a conjuring trick. The money vanished but its recipient's expression did not become less vinegary.

‘His name is Kostavik or something like that,’ informed Baldhead, speaking without moving his lips. ‘Lives somewhere near by. Only been coming here the last five or six weeks but he shows up often. Think he moves around quite a lot. Don't know what he does for a living and don't want to. That's all I can say.’

‘How about his pals?’

‘One of them is called Shas and another Eddy. There’s a fourth but I’ve never heard his name. All of them speak English with an off-beat note. If they’re citizens the ink is still wet on their papers.’

‘Much obliged.’ He eyed the other significantly. ‘Nobody has asked you anything. Not a question.’ ‘Nobody ever does.’ Baldhead rammed the cheroot in his mouth and resumed his fiddling with the time-recorder.

Leaving the billiards hall, Bransome crossed the road, settled himself in a doorway and proceeded to keep watch on the place. This was as far as he’d been able to get and he’d have to stay with it. If nobody showed up this evening he’d try again tomorrow and the day after. It was a welcome change to be the chaser instead of the chased.

Already the sky was darkening with impending nightfall and many shops had shut, including the one in the doorway of which he was lounging. Lack of sunlight was no handicap; street lamps and neon signs made pedestrians clearly visible on both sides of the street. Desultory traffic was the chief nuisance because anyone could slip unseen into the billiards hall when masked by a passing car or truck. Apart from that, he was doing all right provided that no officious cop hustled him onwards. He could expect that sooner or later. Cops do not like lurkers in shop doorways.

The thought had hardly crossed his mind when a cop did appear a hundred yards away and on his side of the road. He watched the official figure parading towards him at slow, deliberate pace and decided that this spying business was not as simple as it looked. He’d been stationed there less than ten minutes and now was about to be moved on. So far as he could see there was no way of avoiding it; to leave the doorway might look suspicious, more so than to remain.

Ponderously the cop came on, lumbered right past, and ostentatiously refrained from seeing him. That was strange indeed. The officer’s manner and bearing shouted aloud that he was aware of Bransome’s presence but determined to ignore it. The incident was out of character and contrary to cop-custom. Bransome stared after the retreating figure and was baffled.

Exactly one hour later the cop came back and carefully surveyed all doorways save the one Bransome occupied. At that one he acknowledged the watcher’s existence with a grunt and a curt nod. Then he pounded onwards, still looking into doorways and occasionally testing locks. Bransome felt like a man who has been awarded a medal without knowing why. At that point his attention was drawn back to the facing billiards hall. Six men were coming out and four going in. He could see the faces of the departees but not those of the arrivals. However, all of them were of average height and build and obviously did not include the elusive Kostavik.

His vigil ended at eleven-thirty. Three men emerged and, with a tremendous thrill of excitement, he recognized one of them as a member of the pair who had so deftly caught him on the steps. The other two were complete strangers. He had not seen this suspect inside the hail, neither had he observed him entering it; presumably he must have been among the few who had shown only their backs on going in at a time when his mind was obsessed by Kostavik. Temporarily he dismissed all thoughts of Kostavik and followed this trio. So far as he was concerned one lead was as good as another.

Chatting together and apparently without a care in the world, the three paced rapidly down the Street with Bransome a hundred yards behind and on the opposite side. Farther back two more men came out of the dark and followed Bransome, one on each side of the road. On a corner farther back still the cop made a gesture and a car loaded with four men crawled into the street.

This procession wended its way half a mile along the road and through several side-streets to a major crossing. Here the leading trio stopped, conversed for a couple of minutes, then split in three directions. Without hesitation, Bransome kept grimly after the one he'd recognized.

Behind him, the two shadowers on foot likewise split and trailed the pair Bransome had disregarded. The car halted and disgorged one man who hung behind Bransome while it, in turn, crept at a discreet distance behind him.

Crossing a vacant lot, the presumably unsuspecting leader made for a phone booth on a corner, entered it and started dialling. Bransome stopped in the shadow of a wall and leaned against the brickwork. His follower lolled by a parked car and pretended to be boredly waiting for someone.

The man in the booth got his connexion and said, 'Kossy, I'm at Slater and Tenth. I'm being tailed. Eh? Feds my eye! This one's so raw he's flashing a red light and ringing a fire-bell. Whatcha say? Yes, all right, I'll bring him round to Sammy's.'

Leaving the booth, he refrained from looking backward towards the place where Bransome was waiting. He walked steadily on. Bransome gave him a bit more of a lead and followed. So did the pseudo car-owner.

Half a minute later the shadowing car reached the phone booth and stopped. A man got out, called a special number, cross examined somebody. He then made a second call and returned to the car.

‘This boy is good if he doesn’t get his head blown off before he’s through.’

‘Have any luck on that wire?’

‘Yes. They know now who he called.’

The car surged on, the leaders of the chase now being out of sight. It didn’t matter much: the man on foot would point the way.

He did, too. After three more streets he stepped out of the dark and halted the car by an alley. He whispered to those within it, indicated agreystone apartment house half-way up the road and on the right. Two men got out and joined him. Cautiously the three approached the house. Left to himself, the car’s driver felt under the instrument-board, drew out a hand-microphone, switched on a radio transmitter and sent out a call. Elsewhere in the town, and not far away, two more loaded cars started heading in his direction.

Without bothering to cast a wary glance behind, the man leading the multiplepursuit made a sudden turn, ran up four steps and entered agreystone building. His figure became swallowed in the darkness of the interior while the front door remained invitingly open.

Still hugging the opposite side, Bransome maintained his cautious rate of progress, passed the building, halted on the next corner and considered the situation. To decide his next move was simple enough. Either he must go into that house or stay out of it. In the latter case the entire chase became futile unless he was prepared to keep watch on the place all night and until such time as he could link this character with all the other suspects he had in mind. He was badly in need of such a linkage because without it he had nothing more than theories and suspicions that in official estimation would smack of the fantastic.

Keeping a given address under constant and expert observation was a job more suitable for the police or a private detective agency. He had the addresses of two agencies in his pocket. They’d be of little use in these circumstances; like the police, they wouldn’t know for whom to look. Descriptions would be their sole data and - after his experience with the trucking companies - he had little faith in verbal pictures. The blunt fact remained that only he, Bransome, could recognize certain people on sight. Therefore he must tackle the task himself.

But to hang around all through the night would try his patience which was elastic enough for dealing with scientific problems but lacked stretching qualities in this matter of sweet retribution. Besides, this evening he had found definite suggestion of a link: he had staked-out the billiards hail in hope of tracing one man and had found another. At least two of them, therefore, must be frequenting the same playground.

Inside this near-by pile of masonry might be a third member of the bunch. Or even all five or six of them, gabbing together, plotting together and laughing over their beer. Yes, grinning like apes because somewhere or other a better man had become burdened with an imaginary corpse.

As anger mounted within him, he knew he was going to go in there and take a chance. For the first time in his life he wished he had a gun. A weapon need not be essential, though. If prowlers who were none too bright could enter bedrooms and rifle the pockets of sleepers, surely he could sneak around long enough to learn a few things and escape unharmed.

He would go inside, creep quietly around from floor to floor and try to learn the identities of the various apartment owners who, in all probability, would have their names upon their doors. If one of them proved to be an elephant named Kostavik it would be further linkage enough to justify running out and phoning the police and inviting them to come and break up the fight. Then he'd return to start the said affray.

Returning to the greystone building, he mounted its steps, went through the door, found himself in a long, narrow hail dimly lit at the back by one flickering gas-jet. The hail ended in a narrow staircase with a small elevator at its side. Four apartment doors opened on to the hail. This level was silent, as if unoccupied, but he could hear faint noises of movement above. From higher still came the muffled sound of a radio playing the Radetsky March. The whole place was scruffy, with peeling paint on the walls, the woodwork chipped and scratched.

As quietly as possible he moved from door to door and read the names thereon. In the poor light he had almost to put his nose to them. He was peering closely at a grubby card pinned to the door near the rear of the hall, and had time only to note that it said Samuel someone-or -other, when the door whisked open and a violent thrust in the small of the back boosted him through it headlong.

The double event took him so completely by surprise that he went into the room at an off-balance run, heard the door slam behind him just as he toppled and buried his face in the threadbare carpet. A series of ultra-rapid thoughts flashed through his mind even as he fell. A shove like that is deliberate and of malice aforethought. Whoever pushed up behind and did it meant business. This is no time for professions

of mistakes, explanations and apologies: none will be permitted. Whatever can be done must be done good and fast.

So he thumped the carpet, rolled like mad, glimpsed a pair of columnar legs, grabbed them around the ankles, heaved with all his might and promptly gained himself a playmate on the floor. The boards shuddered as the other came down to his level. It was Kossy .

Somebody else was bending over Bransome with evil intent and found himself thwarted by Kossy's downfall. He spat a guttural oath, danced around seeking a vantage point, got one of the violently thrashing Kossy's big boots on his kneecap. He swore again and dropped something that rang like a piece of old iron. Kossy had good reason for waving his heavy limbs around. His big, florid face reached the carpet at which point Bransome recognized it. Unable to get in a hefty swing at it while in a prone position, Bransome did the next best thing: he clutched Kossy's fat neck in a grip good enough to stay fixed until death do us part, and dug his thumbs into the other's windpipe.

A week or so ago he'd never have believed himself capable of taking sadistic pleasure in trying to strangle someone. But that was what he was doing right now, forcing his thumbs with strength and violence derived partly from justifiable resentment and partly from the knowledge that his opponent was plenty big enough to eat him if given half a chance. An alliance of anger and fear was giving him power such as he'd never possessed before.

So he strove mightily to force his thumbs through Kossy's gullet and out the back of his neck while all the time his brain kept reiterating, 'I'll give you Arline, you bastard! I'll give you Arline!'

Kossy's shairy, spade-like hands clamped on Bransome's wrists and tried to tear away his grip but he held on so determinedly that the other merely pulled his own head forward. They thrashed madly around with Kossy slowly purpling. The third man ceased cursing, leaned over them, grabbed Bransome's hair and tried to pull his scalp from his cranium. Bransome's recent haircut deprived the assailant of enough grip and his fingers slid free. The other then clutched his shoulders. Bransome kicked like a mule, made connexion somewhere and heard a yelp of agony as the hands let go.

The shout and the sounds of their struggling caused another door in the hall to open. There was an incoming rush of feet but Bransome could not look up because his full attention was upon his victim. By now Kossy's chest was heaving with wheezy, bronchial noises and he was striving to jerk a huge knee into Bransome's groin.

Then a number of hands simultaneously seized Bransome and tore him away by main force. He was

lugged erect. A hard and horny hand slapped his face several times, swiftly and brutally, with force that dazed him and made him reel backwards.

Dimly he was aware of sounds all around, heavy breathing, muttered curses and exclamations, the shift of many feet. A heavy blow on one ear made his mind whirl. He blinked his eyes in effort to focus, couldn't see Kossy anywhere but in a hazy sort of way did see a bunch of faces one of which was that of a pseudo-trucker, the fellow who'd had so much to say about bones found in Burleston. He lashed out and hit that face with everything he could muster, felt the hard crack of knuckles landing on the other's mouth.

Then a mess of stars exploded in his left eye and he went down for the second time. He fell knowing that he had made a major blunder in entering the building and would be denied the opportunity ever to make another. There were at least six men in the room, all of them enemies of ruthless type. The odds were too heavy. He hadn't a chance. One does strange things in desperate moments; his was to emit a sigh of regret as he hit the floor.

Somebody either jumped on him or kicked the breath out of him. Wind expelled from his lungs and stomach in one great whoosh. Instinctively he knew that the next vicious wallop would break a rib but he was too near the knock-out to roll sideways and avoid it. Perforce he waited for it, lying flat on his back and fighting for oxygen.

There sounded a heavy thumping in the hail, followed by a loud crash, a waft of cool night air and a harsh voice that bawled, 'Hold it!'

Resulting silence could almost be felt. The rib-busting kick did not arrive. Making an effort, Bransome turned over, face downwards, and tried to be sick. Failing, he turned back, got into a half sitting position, nursed his stomach and bled out of one eye. He'd been wrong. His opponents didn't number six: there were eight of them. They stood together in a scowling group, facing him but staring towards the doorway behind his back. They posed like figures in a waxworks, stiff, unspeaking, motionless.

Hands slid under Bransome's armpits. He came slowly to his feet with the hands helping him upwards. The strength flowed back into his legs. He turned around, saw four men in plain clothes and one uniformed cop, all holding guns. One of the former was Reardon. Unable to think of anything suitable to the occasion, Bransome said, 'Hello!' It struck him then that nothing could have sounded more daft. He smirked with the uninjured side of his face, the other side refusing to cooperate.

Reardon refused to see anything funny about it. He spoke with severity. 'You all right?'

‘No - I feel like death warmed up.’

‘Want hospital attention?’

‘I’m only bashed around a bit. I’ll be okay.’

‘You give me the gripes,’ informed Reardon, mincing no words. ‘First you refuse us a chance. Next you want it all to yourself.’

‘Looks like I got it - with you rushing in.’

‘Good thing for you that we did.’ Reardon turned to the uniformed cop, made a gesture at the silent eight. ‘That’s the wagon by the sound of it. Take ‘em away one at a time.’

By now blank-faced and impassive, the eight departed, going singly. Not even Kossy showed the slightest expression as he exited. He was holding his mouth open and massaging his throat but for all the emotion he displayed he might have been caught in the act of saying his prayers.

Reardon’s sharp eyes examined the room before he spoke to the men in plain clothes. ‘Right, boys, give this dump the treatment. Go through every other apartment in the place as well. If any amateur lawyer yaps about search warrants, book him on suspicion and bring him in. Make a thorough job of it and pull down the walls if you have to. Phone me at headquarters immediately you find anything that looks good.’ Then he signed to Bransome. ‘Come with me, Sherlock.’

Bransome followed him, full of aches and pains and a little dizzy. He clambered into the rear seat of the car, grunted to a quirk of agony as he bumped a bruise, gently rubbed the side of his face. His cheekbone burned and throbbed, he had a fat eye, a singing ear and a split lip. His stomach felt full of green apples and his whole abdomen was sore.

Getting into the front seat, Reardon had a few words with the driver, used the radio before they moved

off. Three more cars were now lined up outside the greystone building and a small crowd of curious spectators had gathered around, some of them in their night-clothes. The car sped along the street. Cocking an elbow over the back of his seat, Reardon twisted to one side to address his passenger.

‘If I wanted to know the characteristics of alloy-creep at high temperature, I’d come and ask you. If you want to know who’s looking through your bedroom keyhole, you should come and ask me.’

Bransome said nothing.

‘As a scientist I don’t doubt that you’re highly competent,’ Reardon went on. ‘But as a crook you’re a dumb bum. And as a detective you stink.’

‘Thanks,’ said Bransome glumly.

‘When you jumped out of that train you might have killed yourself. A stupid thing to do. And it served no useful purpose that I can see. It certainly didn’t get us off your neck.’

‘No?’

‘No! From that moment onwards we had you located within a progress- circle that expanded hour by hour. We knew that some segments were likelier than others because of better transport facilities.’ He paused, hung on to the door-strap as the car swung around a sharp corner. ‘Chief Pascoe had been told to report without delay any odd datum remotely concerning Burleston. So when he called us long distance and said that someone had been asking about an unknown murder there and we find the query was phoned from a point on the main route back here -‘

‘You put two and two together, eh?’

‘And made it four. Nobody else but you would call from that particular place at that particular time to chew the fat about mysterious bones said to be buried near Burleston. We began to see daylight. In effect, you were telling me by proxy what you had refused to tell face to face, namely, that you had - or believed you had - a killing on your conscience.’

Bransome nursed his bruises and offered no comment.

‘It made everything add up,’ Reardon continued. ‘Yet there was no such crime. Pascoe vouched for that. And he’d told you as much. It made your resultant moves obvious. Having got rid of a deadly burden on your mind you’d be wildly delighted or coldly furious. According to the state of your liver. In either case you’d head back here. If delighted, you’d return to the bosom of your family and forget everything. If on the boil, you’d come back to try to take it out of somebody’s pants. We couldn’t do much about it because we didn’t know the identity of that somebody. But you did - and you could lead us to him. So we watched incoming cars, buses and trains. It was easy to pick you up at the station and go around with you.’

‘I didn’t see anyone following me.’ Bransome licked a lip that seemed as thick as a rubber tyre and rapidly growing thicker.

‘You weren’t supposed to see. We don’t make a sloppy job of it.’ Reardon bared his teeth at him. ‘You didn’t go home. You ran around thirsting for blood. That suited us top-notch. You got a lead from that coffee-slinger in the diner, then from the skinny runt in the barber shop, then from the ginger mechanic. When finally you took root outside that billiards hall we figured that you were about to point to somebody for us - and you did.’

‘A couple of them skipped,’ said Bransome, seeking some small source of satisfaction. ‘I couldn’t follow three ways at once.’

‘We could and we did. They’ll be collared after they have taken us to wherever they’re going.’

The cruiser pulled in alongside a business block with lights showing only on the second floor. Reardon got out, Bransome following. Entering the building, they ignored the elevators and used the stairs, passed many clearly lit offices, reached one marked only by a number on its door. The entire floor had the air of being active twenty-four hours per day, seven days a week.

Taking a chair, Bransome stared around, seeing with one eye and half-seeing with the other. ‘This doesn’t look to me like police headquarters.’

‘Because it isn’t. The police are called in as and when required. Espionage, sabotage and other crimes against the Constitution are our business, not theirs.’ Seating himself behind a desk, Reardon flipped an intercom switch. ‘Send in Casasola.’ A man arrived within a minute. He was young, olive-skinned and had the brisk air of a doctor with little time to waste.

Reardon nodded towards Bransome and said, ‘This chump has got himself mauled. Patch him up and give him the semblance of a human being.’

Casola smiled, beckoned to Bransome, led him along the corridor to a first-aid room. There he set to work and painted the rainbow around Bransome’s eye, sealed the split lip, swabbed the swollen cheek and thick ear with an icy-cold liquid. He worked swiftly and in silence, obviously accustomed to repairing the beaten-up at any hour of the day or night. By the time he’d finished and returned his patient to the office, Reardon was fidgeting in his chair.

‘You still look like something the cat dragged in,’ He greeted. He waved towards a wall clock. ‘It’s the unearthly hour of ten to two and by the looks of things we’re going to be fooling around all night.’

‘Why? - has something else happened?’

‘Yes. Those two fugitives led us to a couple more addresses. There’s been some strife at one of them. A copper’s been hurt. Got a slug through his left hand. They took four prisoners. I’m still waiting to hear about the other address.’

He glowered at the desk phone which must have felt sensitive about it because it promptly shrilled. Reardon snatched it up.

‘Who? McCracken? Yes? Three more of them, eh? What’s that? A mass of apparatus? Don’t bother trying to make head or tail of it - I’m coming out right away with experts competent to handle it. Send in those three and keep a guard on the place.’ He reached for a scrap of paper. ‘Give me that address again.’ Racking the phone, he stuffed the paper into his pocket and stood up. ‘I think this is the end of the trail. You’d better come along.’

‘Suits me,’ said Bransome. ‘Might find somebody else I can slap in the gob.’

‘You’ll do nothing of the kind,’ Reardon asserted. ‘I’m taking you in the hope that you can tell us about this apparatus. We want to know what it is and how it works and what it does.’

‘I’ll be a big help - I know sweet nothing about it.’ ‘You must know. Maybe when you see it you’ll wake up and remember.’

Calling at another office on their way out they picked up two men named Saunders and Waite. The former was middle-aged, plump and ponderous; the latter elderly, thoughtful and myopic. Both had the self-assurance of characters who’d never had trouble estimating the number of beans in a bottle.

They piled into a cruiser which took them at a fast pace across town to a tiny warehouse and office located in an obscure back street. A big-jowled, over-muscled individual opened the door and looked out as they pulled up.

‘Mac’s taken away the three we found here,’ he informed Reardon as they went inside. He jerked a thumb towards a door at the back of the office. ‘Two of them were asleep in there, snoring like hogs. The other was the mug who led us here. They took a dim view of being grabbed. We had to ruin their health somewhat.’

‘Anyone else shown up since?’

‘Not a soul.’

‘Somebody might before morning. I’ll leave a couple more men here.’ Reardon gazed around expectantly. ‘Where’s this dollop of gadgetry Mac reported?’

‘Through there.’ Again he indicated the rear door.

Reardon shoved it open and went through, the others following. Dirty and tattered posters on the walls showed that once upon a time the warehouse had held toys and fancy goods. Now it was divided by

plaster-board partitions to provide a sleeping-room for three, a small and roughly furnished recreation-room with kitchen and toilet attached, and finally a section holding the apparatus.

Standing in a row, they examined the shiny contraption. Its sides were concealed behind detachable casings that would have to be removed to reveal its mechanism. It stood six feet high by six long by three wide and may have weighed a couple of tons. An electric motor was connected to its back and a pair of hooded lenses projected from its front. The lenses pointed to a black velvet curtain hung on the facing wall.

Reardon said to Saunders and Waite, 'Get to work on it and see what you can discover. You can have as long as you need - but the sooner we know, the better. If you want me I'll be in the office.'

Signing to Bransome, he led him back to where the guard was sitting in semi-darkness with his attention on the front door.

The guard said, 'We won't get any more rats scuttling into this hole. The car outside is a give-away.'

'I know.' Reardon sat behind a dilapidated desk and put his feet on it. 'I want you to take it and fetch back another two men. Dump the car out of sight, two or three streets away, and leave one man in charge of it. We don't want it pinched. You and the other fellow come back here. That'll make six of us. It ought to be enough.'

'Right.' The guard opened the door, took a look outside and departed. They heard the car roar away.

Bransome asked, 'Six should be enough for what?'

'Until we've finished with the mugs we've grabbed we won't know whether their mob numbers twenty or two hundred. We may have all of them but we can't be sure about that. Any still running loose are likely to take alarm when they call the roll and find a number missing. In that event they may rush here to remove or destroy that contraption in the back. Or they may take to the boats and planes. I don't know what the heck they'd do but I can't overlook a possible attempt to swipe the evidence.'

'I suppose you're right.'

Reardon bent towards him, eyes intent, 'Do you remember this dump?'

'No.'

'Well, did you recognize that apparatus?'

'No, I didn't.'

'You quite sure you've never seen it before?'

'Not that I can recall.' The other's disappointment was so obvious that Bransome raked his mind for a vague memory. 'I've a queer feeling that it ought to be familiar to me - but it isn't.'

'Humph!'

They went silent. The office remained without lights lest illumination scare off wanted visitors but a Street lamp shining through the windows gave gloomy visibility within. For three hours they sat there waiting, during which time the two guards arrived and sat with them. At five o'clock in the morning somebody rattled the front door and tried its lock. A guard whipped it open, gun in hand, while the others came to their feet. It was only the cop on the beat.

Twenty minutes later Waite appeared from the back. He was holding along, dangling strip of shiny substance in his right hand. His features were strained and his glasses sat half-way down his nose.

'That thing in there,' he announced, 'shouldn't be used on a dog. It's a stroboscopic horror. The fellow who thought it up would do the world a favour by having his head amputated.'

Reardon demanded, 'What does it do?'

‘Half a minute.’ Waite eyed the back door.

Saunders came through, sat on the edge of the desk, mopped his plum face with a handkerchief. His complexion was dark red. Perspiration beaded his forehead.

‘Being forewarned and not drugged, I got away with it. Otherwise I certainly wouldn’t.’ Saunders wiped his face again and stared at Reardon. ‘In that torture-chamber I’ve just killed a fellow. I finished him off good and proper and I did it with the greatest gusto. I pinned him down on his bed and cut his throat from ear to ear.’

‘That’s right,’ chipped in Waite. ‘It was a deliberate and cold-blooded murder, as juicy a one as you could witness in a thousand years. There was one thing wrong with it.’

‘Namely?’ asked Reardon, studying him beady-eyed.

‘He couldn’t possibly have committed it because I did it myself. Ear to ear, just like that!’

Unimpressed by these rival claims to bloody slaughter, Reardon said, ‘Same technique, same place, same victim, same motive?’ ‘Of course,’ replied Waite. ‘Same picture.’ He waved around the shiny strip. ‘This is a slice of the killing. Take a look at it.’ Tossing the strip onto the desk, he continued, ‘That gadget is a very special movie projector. It throws a stereoscopic picture in natural colours. The image is shown on a screen composed of thousands of tiny pyramid-shaped beads and the three-dimensional effect is visible without need for using polarized glasses.’

‘Nothing new in that,’ scoffed Reardon. ‘It’s been done before.’

‘There’s more to it,’ Waite explained. ‘Firstly, the picture is made so that the camera identifies itself with the audience. Its viewpoint is that of the onlooker.’

‘That’s been done before, too.’

‘What hasn’t been done before is partly in that strip. It runs frames in side-by-side pairs with three-inch angular shift to give the stereoscopic effect. The frames aren’t standard 35-mm. stuff. They’re a bastard calibre. Theywhizz through at three-thousand three-hundred frames a minute. At every fifth frame the illumination momentarily boosts sky-high. That gives light-flare at the rate of eleven pulses per second which coincides with the natural rhythm of the optic nerves. Know what that means?’

‘No - go on.’

‘It’s the rotating mirror effect all over again. The pulsations shove the onlooker into a state of hypnosis.’

‘Hell!’ said Reardon. He held up the film-strip and tried to view it by the light of the outside street-lamp.

Waite offered, ‘Unless he’s first been doped - which is likely - the viewer starts seeing the picture knowing full well that it is only a picture. But he soon slides into hypnotic condition after which, in effect, he becomes the camera. His mind is then compelled to accept and register a false memory. The brain cannot take it against a time and place where a contrary memory already exists. But plenty of empty pigeonholes are available, those being times in the past when one experienced nothing worth remembering. This apparatus creates the crime, the characters, the place, the motive, the circumstances, and the approximate period in the past. The brainfiles the memory in a previously empty place when, for one reason or another, nothing was recorded.’

‘It would seem incredible to anyone who hadn’t experienced it,’ put in Bransome, a trifle morbidly, ‘but I know to my cost how really convincing the effect can be.’

‘Some genius has devised fully automated brainwashing,’ said Waite, ‘and it’s plenty good enough to convince anyone that black is white - provided, of course, that he’s caught off-guard and doesn’t know what is being done to him.’ Feeling in his pocket, he brought out another short length of film. He gave it to Bransome. ‘In the containers there’s a small library of ready-made killings. They’re placed anywhere between here and Timbuctu. One of them bears the tag of Burleston though in all likelihood it wasn’t made within thousands of miles of there. Howd’you like it?’

Bransome held it up to the poor light. ‘Holy smoke, that’s Arline?’

‘Probably a small-time actress the other side of the planet,’ suggested Reardon.

‘I doubt it,’ put in Saunders, speaking for the first time in a while. He was still perspiring. ‘Those murders are far too real. I’ve a sickening feeling that the leading characters literally acted themselves to death.’

‘Me, too,’ said Waite.

‘Whatd’you mean?’ Reardon pressed.

‘The deaths are far too convincing to be faked. My guess is that certain people were marked down for permanent removal. But instead of being subjected to summary execution they were kidded along and taken for suckers. Each was persuaded to play his movie part and discovered too late that the last scene was in deadly earnest.’

Reardon thought it over blank-faced and without emotion. ‘I wouldn’t put it beyond some people.’

‘Anyway, it’s a hell,’ opined Waite, ‘because those who get the treatment are given every inducement not to talk. What can you do for a man who finds himself a hidey-hole and determinedly conceals the fact that something has gone wrong?’

‘I know, I know.’ Reardon threw a meaningful look at Bransome. ‘I’ll have that gadget taken elsewhere for further examination.’ He consulted his watch. ‘No point in us hanging around any longer.’ Then to Bransome, ‘I’m taking you back to headquarters. We’ll give you eight hours’ sleep and any meals you want. Then you’ll tell us your story, in complete detail, and identify those you can of the characters we’ve caught. After that you can go home.’ At six o’clock in the evening Reardon drove him home, conversing on the way. ‘There’s no doubt you were picked on as the easiest mark in the particular circumstances of that week. You were slugged, drugged and carried away. They gave you the treatment, brought you back to the steps, patted your face and sympathized with you. Then another guy triggered the effect and another got you on the run.’

‘That’s how it was,’ agreed Bransome. ‘It’s a pity I didn’t worry more about those two missing hours.’

‘You were confused.’ Reardon mused a bit, went on, ‘There’s all the other victims yet to be collected. They don’t know they’ve been haunted and that the ghosts have been laid. How’re we going to cope with them? How’re we going to make sure that all this doesn’t happen again? The gang we’ve trapped may be only the first of several gangs now making ready to function elsewhere.’

‘The answer’s an easy one,’ Bransome told him. ‘Hold me up as a bad example. Tell everyone what happened to me and how and why. I don’t mind - I’d be a good antidote. The scientific mind appreciates a scientific trick even when it’s a dirty one.’

‘Think that’ll bring back the others?’

‘Sure thing. They’ll return to the fold looking sheepish. And they’ll be so annoyed they’ll spend hours trying to think up a bigger and better counter-stroke. Sooner or later they’ll invent one, too.’ He glanced at his listener and invited, ‘There’s one thing you haven’t told me, one thing I’d like to know.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Exactly who was behind all these shenanigans?’

‘Sorry, I mustn’t say. But I can give you two items for your satisfaction. First, three officials of a certain embassy are leaving by plane tonight at our urgent request. Second, you won’t get a medal - but you’re likely to find your pay packet a bit fatter.’

‘That’s something. I think I’ve earned it.’

‘Do you? I think there’s no justice in this world.’ The car slid to a stop outside Bransome’s house. Reardon got out with him and accompanied him to the door. When Dorothy appeared he said rapidly. ‘I’ve brought the runaway back, battered but still whole. I’ve promised him a pay-rise and that entitles me to a large whisky.’

Taken aback, Dorothy hurried to get it.

Holding the glass high, Reardon looked at both of them, said, 'Here's to murder!' and downed the lot.

The phone rang, Dorothy answered, said to Bransome, 'Someone for you.' She edged away, watching Reardon warily. Bransome grinned at her and picked up the phone.

A voice shouted excitedly, 'Bransome, you were dead right. I'm in the clear. Did you hear what I said? - I'm in the clear! We've got to look into this together, Bransome. I'm on my way back and will arrive at ten-thirty. Can you meet me?'

'I'll be there.' He dumped the phone, said to Reardon, 'That was Henderson. He's coming back at ten-thirty - to take up the hunt.'

'We'll pick him up the moment he shows his face. He can do some identifying for us.' He eyed the whisky bottle. 'I reckon that's worth celebrating too, don't you?'

Dorothy, still mystified, filled his glass.

Raising it, Reardon said, 'Well, here's to another murder!'