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ALL ABOUT the murder of the porcine Mr. Swink and the mystifying events that followed—and introducing Theocritus Lucius Westborough, genial and mild-mannered little history professor, with the instincts of a ferret and the brain of a Holmes.

Swink's murder, in his room at the Hotel Equable, involved a varied group of people: a night clerk, an evil-tongued gossip, two traveling salesmen, a "hotel widow," a man who was anything but what he said he was, a commercial artist and his wife, and a hotel dick with a penchant for ripping up mattresses.

With the police completely baffled, Theocritus gets together this cast of characters and stages a play whose main "props" consist of a hairpin, a cigarette lighter, a drunk's visit to the wrong room, a child's chemical set, a moving picture—*Three Men and a Cobra*—Detective Lieutenant Mack's aunt Harriet from Niles, Michigan, and a girl who married at noon and was killed at three o'clock in an automobile accident with another man.

Here is a long, full-bodied, and modern mystery story, cleverly plotted, with excellent characters and genuine suspense. The final curtain will come as a surprise to all.

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THE FIFTH TUMBLER

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CLYDE B. CLASON

THE FIFTH TUMBLER

Introducing Professor Theocritus Lucius Westborough, a mild little man who meddled in murder—with surprising results.

GARDEN CITY, N. Y. 1936 PUBLISHED FOR

THE CRIME CLUB, INC.

BY DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

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FIRST EDITION

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O. F. BUTLER
PACIFIC
4-15-40

All the characters and events depicted in this book are wholly fictitious.

C. B. C.

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PART ONE

Thursday Evening

I

DOORS! ENIGMATIC DOORS opening from darkened corridors. Closed doors hiding lust and laughter, sorrow and death. Adjacent lives isolated by thin partitions as effectively as though separated by miles of bleak desert. Hundreds of people, unaware of each other's existence, clustered under a single big roof. Mysterious and inscrutable doors! Baffling corridors!

"Dear me!" mused Theocritus Lucius Westborough, the sole occupant of the large double bedroom designated as number 312. "A hotel is like a giant beehive!" It amused him to enlarge upon this simile. Worker bees: out of the hive by eight in the morning and gone until six. Queen bees: imposing black-clad dowagers. "Their husbands, ironically enough, have toiled to premature graves in order that these elderly women might spend the remainder of their lives, bored and miserable, in doing nothing. Poor souls, I am sorry for them. *Labor est etiam ipsa voluptas*," quoted Westborough, who was addicted to bromides in foreign languages.

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Workers? Queens? Oh yes, and of course drones. "I am one—thanks to government bonds and James' kindly forethought. I should be inclined to place that porcine Mr. Swink in the same category. Also, sadly against her will, I fear, that poor child Miss Gant."

Westborough picked up his fountain pen and resumed the writing of a foreword to a manuscript for which, after many months, he had found a publisher. The manuscript was entitled, *Trajan: His Life and Times*, and Westborough had devoted at least ten years to its preparation. He wrote:

"Although it is singularly unfortunate the works of Trajan's four biographers—Marius Maximus, Fabius Marcellinus, Aurelius Verus, and Statius Valens—have been lost, an imperishable record of the great emperor remains in the Trajan column, which describes the campaign against the Dacians more eloquently than could any book account. This tall shaft, as high as a ten-story building and weathered to the color of bronze, is covered with a continuous spiral of carvings in which are represented more than twenty-five hundred human figures. To counteract the visual effect of distance, the artist, Apollodorus, designed the groups progressively larger as the spiral ascended the summit. Curiously enough, a statue of St. Peter now occupies the top of the monument where once stood in lonely grandeur the colossal figure of the great emperor."

Westborough's pen paused—he had said "great emperor" before, and, as he racked his mind for a synonym, his thoughts again strayed.

"Gant! That's an odd name. Dear me, I wonder if it can be traced to John of Gaunt and the Black Prince?"

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In room 309 Chris Larson's alarm clock measured off seconds with raucous zeal. It was not one of your new electric alarms, adjustable to a soft or loud call to suit the sleeper's whim, but a battered wreck. Chris had bought it for $1.29 three years ago and had thrown it across the room at least twice since then. Nevertheless, it continued to run: loudly if not accurately, and, by dint of frequent manipulations of the hands, it would even give a reasonably true approximation to the correct hour. It now said, "twenty minutes to eleven," and, since Chris had set it at five, it was probably not off more than three minutes.

Chris yawned. He was a tall Scandinavian, tawny-haired and fair-skinned. He smothered a second yawn and adjusted the shade of the desk lamp. The light, streaming down upon his book, revealed queer-looking symbols like long slanting "S's." Chris read, "The rate of chemical reaction with respect to the time is proportional to the quantity of substance still unchanged in the mixture."

It was a problem regarding the decomposition of radium, and Larson chewed thoughtfully at the end of his pencil. At length he turned to a table of natural logarithms and ran the pencil along one of the many columns of figures.

"Her name is Yvonne," he thought, jotting a number upon a scratch pad. "Yvonne Gant. Yes, and her hair is bronze and her eyes are a light purple. Or would you call them violet?" His pencil commenced a sudden and furious tattoo against the surface of the desk. "Imagine that low scum Swink trying to get away with the trick he pulled. I should 've taken a poke at him. Yeah—and lost my job." The pencil dropped unheeded to the floor. "Don't be a fool. I couldn't keep a girl like that in stock-

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ings. But her mouth has the cutest little crinkle . . . purple eyes . . . Yvonne Gant . . ."

In room 311 Yvonne Gant labored with commendable persistence to mend a run in a silk stocking. She thought, "It's my last decent pair, too. Oh well, maybe it'll hold. Maybe nothing! It's got to!"

Miss Gant, a tall girl with finely chiseled features and the reddish-bronze hair upon which Chris Larson had remarked, was wearing a peacock blue negligee which spoke eloquently of more prosperous times. She finished her darning and bit off the end of the thread. "There! If that doesn't stay, I'm out of luck."

She filled the porcelain basin in her bathroom with warm water and sloshed an oval cake of the hotel's soap until the surface of the water was covered with a copious layer of stiff suds. "Wonder if it hurts when they throw you out?" Miss Gant asked and smiled at the reflection in the Venetian mirror above the bowl. "It's your own fault, you know. Nobody forced you to stay here."

"It's not your fault," the reflection said consolingly. "Who was to know that the Merdock Company would go ker-phlooey? You had a fairly good job with them, didn't you? And you couldn't help it about Betty."

Miss Gant immersed the stockings in the washbasin and swished them vigorously among the soapsuds. "There are just two kinds of fat men," she generalized. "One kind is fat and jolly. You always like to have them around. The other kind is fat and nasty, and Mr. Swink is like that. Little pig eyes! Ugh!"

She pushed down the white knob which opened the drain, and the suds gurgled down the pipe. Then she

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opened the tap and filled the bowl with fresh water. Immersing the stockings for the second time, Miss Gant thought:

"He's sweet, that boy! Knows how to handle people, too! I don't know what I'd have done without him the other night. He hasn't a cent, of course. Why is it the nice ones never have? But fat porkers like Swink always have plenty." Miss Gant surveyed the reflection with a Mona Lisa smile. "*He'd* pay my bill fast enough! No doubt about that. Ugh! Well, I've managed to get along without having to sleep with anyone yet, and if I do, it won't be with Mr. Elmo Swink." Miss Gant's laughter echoed clear and tinkling. " 'There are things worse than death,' said the Lady Yvonne as she let down her golden tresses and rinsed her silken hose."

Room 317 was a double room with twin beds, but tonight Fred Hammond had it all to himself. He was sandy-haired and ruddy complexioned, a large man just beginning to turn portly. His cigar—his fourth that evening—had suddenly developed a vile taste, for no reason at all that Hammond could fathom. He scowled. The tobacco leaves crumpled apart as he crushed the butt against the bottom of a glass ash tray.

"I'd like a drink," Hammond thought. In his grip was a pint of Old Apple left over from his trip on the road. "I could call room service for a bottle of White Rock." Then he vetoed this plan. "Hell, I don't like to drink alone."

Pacing restlessly across the room he paused to seat himself at the hotel writing desk and commenced to scribble upon a sheet of hotel stationery. Hammond's pencil

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was a thing of onyx and gold, shaped to a sharp point at the end where more plebeian pencils boasted only of an eraser. He dug viciously at the paper, and the lead cracked. Hammond turned the gold tip to bring a new lead into place and renewed his artistic efforts by drawing a circle, which, although a long ways from the famous freehand circle of Giotto, was yet a reasonably good approximation to the curve.

"She's been gone a long time. I should have gone with her and not pulled that headache stall. I wish I had. We get so few evenings together."

He divided the circle into quarters and commenced the shading of opposite segments. "Poor Norah! This is a hell of a life for her. A woman ought to have a home of her own, but when I'm on the road all the time . . . We'd have to get one though if we ever have a kid. Wonder what it would be like to have a little shaver that was mine and Norah's. Norah wants a girl . . . that wouldn't be so bad . . . a girl growing up to look like Norah. . . . I'd rather have a boy. I might be able to make a football player out of him."

He abandoned the circle as offering no further possibilities and tried his hand at a caricature of his sales manager, Thompson. "If that guy is a sales manager, I'm first cousin to the Prince of Wales! I'm sick of his sales contests. He sets a quota twice as high as it should be and expects us to take it and like it if he sugar coats it with enough hooey. We've been baseball players and prospectors and airplane pilots; we've ascended the stratosphere, and we've gone to the Antarctic with Admiral Byrd. Now he tells us we're going to dig for treasure in King Solo-

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mon's Mines. Banana juice! Does he think we're a bunch of ten-year-olds?"

Hammond completed the final touches to his sketch and drew a hand thumbing a nose at Thompson's profile. "You know what you can do to King Solomon's Mines, don't you?" he apostrophized the portrait. "Why the hell don't you tell us to go out and do a good old-fashioned job of selling? I'll bet you never even thought of that, you louse!"

Hammond crumpled up the caricature—the likeness had not been very creditable—and tossed it at the waste-basket. "Damn those old harpies! They sit in the lobby like a bunch of vultures, and I'd like a five-spot for every reputation they've busted." He opened the drawer of the writing desk and felt absent-mindedly within. "I shouldn't let their lousy gossip get under my skin. They were lying. Of course they were lying!" There was a Gideon Bible in the drawer, and Hammond thumbed through it aimlessly until he realized what it was and dropped it like a hot potato. "But I'd give all I've won in poker the last six months if I hadn't heard them."

He took a second sheet of hotel stationery and began another cartoon, muttering under his breath as he sketched.

"Damn that fat hog! There's what he looks like. Diamond stickpin and all. Promoter, is he? Kind of swine that runs after widows' insurance money, I'd say. And if Norah . . ."

In room 319 Benny Devon lit a cigarette. He smoked incessantly, and he usually lit one with the butt from

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the last. Devon was not his real name. He had taken it from a sign glimpsed on a Chicago streetcar.

"I had the pete all lathered and was ready to slip in the oil when that rube cop stuck his face through the window," Devon reminisced. "Jeez! I didn't mean to jimmy the bull, but could I help it? This town's lousy with dicks, and if some cop gets wise, I'll get a stretch that 'll be no valentine."

Devon shrugged his narrow shoulders and tilted his chair to an angle of thirty degrees. He put his feet upon the bed, his shoes leaving a black stain on the clean spread. "That fat mug Swink!" he exclaimed. "The rock he wears is worth half a grand if it's worth a cent. But I don't dare chance it here. Besides, I'm a box man and not a flat worker. And a rock like that lying around waiting to be picked up! Jeez!"

Mrs. Sarah Blakely of room 310 was combing her hair. Mrs. Blakely's hair was faded and lifeless, but such as it was it was her own. She wove the strands into braids and fastened the ends with rubber bands.

"If you ask me, that Gant girl is no better than she should be!" thought Mrs. Blakely, her fingers digging viciously into the cold cream jar. "There are two sides to everything, as I said to Esther this morning." She patted the grease onto her wrinkled face with vigorous slaps. "The Hammond woman is another chippy—or she'd like to be! Her husband ought to stay home and watch the hussy."

Mrs. Blakely raised her head and listened. She had eyes which saw like a hawk and ears which could hear the drop of a pin twenty feet away. But the noise she heard

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now did not call for any such delicate perception of the senses. It was the heavy, disorganized tread of an inebriated man in the corridor. "That must be Mr. Swink," thought Mrs. Blakely. "It sounds like him, but I didn't know he was a drinking man. If I open the door a trifle I can tell for sure."

She tiptoed to the door and peeked into the corridor. A fat man was fumbling with a keyhole. "He's drunk as a lord," Mrs. Blakely reflected. "And to think I let that man take me to lunch!" She watched his clumsy efforts to open the door, and then Mrs. Blakely's excellent ears brought her another sound. A sound which had no business in the west corridor of the third floor of the Hotel Equable. Mrs. Blakely heard the tinkle of broken glass.

"Bottle on his hip!" she reflected. Then she remembered that Prohibition was a thing of the past, and it was neither convenient nor fashionable to carry bottles in that manner. The fat man entered the room. He didn't close the door, however, and Mrs. Blakely thought that was funny. Then she heard a second sound, and there was no mistaking what *that* was.

Mrs. Blakely crossed the corridor and peeped through the half-opened door. And Mrs. Blakely screamed.

II

CHRIS LARSON shoved aside his book. It was ten minutes to eleven, and he went on duty at the hour. He rose to his feet, stretched his long muscular arms, and then walked over to the bathroom where he lathered his hands with careful thoroughness.

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From the hall he heard a boisterous racket; heavy tramping. "Swink's drunk again," Chris speculated. More tramping and a noisy fumbling. "The dirty hog." Silence reigned for perhaps a minute, and then someone screamed.

It was a feminine scream, piercing and shrill, and it penetrated the corridor. A second scream, only a trifle subdued in tone, followed the first, and then a third as Chris raced into the corridor. The screamer was a stout woman in a gray flannel robe. She was standing at the entrance to Swink's room, number 315, which should have been 313 and wasn't.

Other people came into the hall. Mr. Hammond stuck his head out from 317, and there were Miss Gant of 311 (she was wearing some sort of fluffy blue thing) and Mr. Devon of 319. Also owlish little Mr. Westborough from 312.

"What's going on?" Chris questioned.

"Mr. Swink!" Mrs. Blakely gasped hysterically. "I think he's—dead!"

The door stood open about three inches, allowing Chris to peek within the room. Swink, like an enormous Billiken, was lying doubled up on the floor. Someone had cut out a section of the carpet and folded it back, leaving a strip of bare floor about three feet from the doorway. There was a faint odor in the room which Chris sniffed inquisitively. "Good God!" he choked and turned at once to the group clustered about the door. "Please go to your rooms and open the windows. There's a dangerous gas in here. It's——"

Mrs. Blakely shrieked. There was a frantic scurrying, followed by the slamming of multitudinous doors. Adjust-

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ing a handkerchief to cover his nose and mouth, Larson dashed for the window. It was locked. He fumbled for the catch and then threw the window wide open. When he could no longer smell the faint odor he recrossed the room and bent down beside the figure on the floor.

Swink's pale, cold eyes were fixed in a glazed stare. A trickle of froth showed on his thick lips, and the fingers of one hand were rigidly clenched against the palm.

Unbuttoning the coat and vest, Chris laid his hand over the other's heart. He could feel no beating, nor were there the faintest signs of respiration. "It got him all right," he thought. "It can work as fast as two minutes, I've heard." His eyes, scanning the room, came to rest upon an object near the door—something which had no business being in the room—the top fragment of a broken glass tube.

He started to pick the thing up, but remembered, just before his fingers reached it, the admonition, "Don't touch anything until the police come." There was, however, nothing which would prevent him from looking, and he inspected the fragment with a scientific interest. The cork was still jammed within the mouth; there was nothing out of the ordinary about that. But a piece of string had been wound about the rim of the tube and tied in a loop. "What the devil!" Chris ejaculated, getting down on his hands and knees. He found several other fragments, one a large portion of the lower half of the tube, and he found something else. This last object was a wire —it looked like a rather large hairpin. It had been straightened out, however, and then, at a point about two fifths of the distance between the two ends, bent again at right angles. The shorter side of the angle had been bent once more so that it terminated in a small hook.

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Chris rose to his feet; it wasn't his business to play detective. That was up to the police—and Jerry Spanger. He had to notify them right away, but was it wise to use the phone in this room? There might be fingerprints. He closed the door behind him, and it locked automatically.

Within the security of his own room Larson picked up the telephone receiver and explained the circumstances to the operator, Miss Devlin. "And tell Jerry Spanger," he added.

Three men stood gravely in a semicircle, like the judges appointed to pass sentence upon the Egyptian dead. Half an hour had elapsed since Chris Larson had found the corpulent body of Elmo Swink, and that body was still lying upon the floor awaiting the arrival of the medical examiner. Larson's eyes now flitted from one to another of the trio.

First, Jerry Spanger, the Equable's house detective, who was rubbing a pudgy and perplexed hand across his closely cropped mustache. Jerry was about forty-five and inclined to put on weight. His face was round, jovial—almost cherubic. But, though he didn't look the part, Larson reflected, Spanger had the reputation of being a smart detective.

Second, Captain Terence O'Ryan, a colossal figure of a man in a blue uniform. Six feet four, if an inch, and with shoulders proportionately broad. Larson, no small man himself, eyed the giant appraisingly, deciding that he'd be a bad customer to mix with in a rough-and-tumble. O'Ryan was captain of the Water Tower station in whose district the Hotel Equable was located.

Lieutenant John Mack of the homicide section was the

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third member of the triumvirate. Mack was from police headquarters on South State Street. Of medium height and build, he was dressed with an attention to details which rendered him almost dapper. Yet his keen blue eyes were as sharp and piercing as those of a lynx. He surveyed with callous professional interest the motionless form on the floor.

"That's a queer way to bump off a guy!"

Mack turned his head in the giant's direction.

"You said, Terry, that Larson opened this window?"

Larson nodded before the other could reply.

"Yes. I smelt the characteristic odor of hydrocyanic acid and realized the air had to be cleared at once."

"Too late to help him, though?"

"Yes."

O'Ryan resumed his narrative. "I posted a couple of boys at each end of this corridor to keep anyone from going in or out. Then I sent Phelan and McCarter to talk to the room clerk and check up on the entrances. I figured our first step was to make darn sure that this is an inside job."

Mack nodded approvingly, and O'Ryan's face broke into a broad grin. It was plain to see, Chris Larson realized, that the big man had the utmost respect for the ability of his colleague from headquarters. Mack, although inferior in police rank to O'Ryan, was, more or less unconsciously, Chris believed, taking complete charge of the investigation. He stooped now to pick up the glass fragment of test tube which had earlier engaged Larson's attention. He held it carefully by the string.

"You said he died as soon as he got the door open?"

"He was dead when I found him," Larson replied, "and

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that was hardly more than two or three minutes afterwards."

"Humph!" Mack ejaculated. "Then either the whole room had been previously saturated with the gas, or this thing smashed when he opened the door."

"That's what happened," O'Ryan opined. "See how the carpet's been cut and folded outa the way. The only reason for doing that was to make sure the glass would smash when it hit the floor. It's plain enough to me."

"Then the tube had to be fastened to the door in some way," Mack reflected. He picked up the wire from the floor and asked, "What do you make of this hook thing?"

"It's nothing but an ordinary hairpin bent out of shape," Spanger pronounced.

"I don't see much sense to it," came from O'Ryan. "The hook could fit into that loop of string, but how would you get the thing fastened to the door?"

"This way," Mack answered. He closed the door and placed the long end of the wire between the top edge of the door and the door frame so that the short end, the one with the hook, hung vertically downwards. "Here's how he did it—see? When Swink opened the door, the wire was released, and the tube had to tumble to the floor. Swink stooped to see what it was and got a whiff of the gas."

Jerry Spanger's pudgy hand tugged at his mustache in thoughtful deliberation. "The only thing I'd like to know is how he got out again."

Mack returned no immediate answer. His eyes roved restlessly here and there about the bedroom. There wasn't a great deal to see. It was just a conventional hotel bedroom furnished comfortably but simply with a metal bed-

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stead, a bureau, a desk, a large lounge chair, and two or three straight ones. But none of these were the objects of Mack's scrutiny. His eyes flitted from one to another of the three doors within the room. Finally he opened one of these to reveal a moderately large closet. Getting down upon his knees, Mack made a thorough inspection of the closet floor.

"He might 've hid in here—although there aren't any signs of it."

"I don't think so," Larson objected. "For one thing it would be dangerous, and for another he didn't have a chance to get out without being seen. Mrs. Blakely watched Swink going into his room and screamed as soon as she heard him fall."

Mack nodded in confirmation. "I didn't think he did." He returned to the side of the dead man. "Have you looked in his pockets, Terry?" O'Ryan shook his head. Mack pulled out a wallet and hurriedly examined its contents. "Nearly five hundred bucks on him." He glanced toward the top of the dresser. "The rock in that stick pin is worth another five hundred or I miss my guess. And it's right in plain sight where anybody could 've picked it up."

He rose to his feet and walked toward one of the two inner doors he had not previously inspected. "Where do these doors lead to?"

"Rooms on either side," Spanger answered. "Every room on the corridor is connected that way; for that matter, nearly every room in the hotel. It makes for flexibility. You can turn any two adjacent rooms into a suite at a minute's notice."

Mack's thumb and forefinger closed about the narrow

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ring between the latch and the doorknob, and he turned the handle without touching the knob. He tugged and pronounced the door locked, then repeated the experiment on the door at the opposite side of the room.

"Both of 'em are locked."

Spanger nodded confirmatively. "They should be. They're never opened without orders from the front office."

"The office keeps the key?"

"Yes."

Mack asked another question. "Do these doors have special keys of their own or will one of your ordinary passkeys work on 'em?"

"Passkey will unlock any door in the hotel," Spanger pronounced with finality. "That is, the ones we keep at the office will. The maids' floor keys will only work on one floor."

Mack jerked a large and square thumb toward one door. "Who has that room!"

"A Miss Gant," Larson answered. "She used to share a double room with another girl, but her roommate left the hotel a few days ago, and she moved into this single."

"Anybody in the room on the other side?"

"It's a double room occupied by a Mr. and Mrs. Hammond. He's away most of the time. Salesman, I believe."

"You said that a number of people rooming off this corridor were in the hall after Mrs. Blakely screamed. Either Miss Gant or the Hammonds among them?"

"I remember Miss Gant," Chris answered promptly. He ransacked his memory. "Yes, and Mr. Hammond. I don't believe I saw Mrs. Hammond."

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"Want 'em in, Johnny?" O'Ryan asked. Mack shook his head.

"Not yet. Another point I want to clear up before Doc Hildreth gets here. Larson, how'd you know Swink had been gassed by hydrocyanic acid?"

"By the smell."

"Hydrocyanic acid is the same as prussic acid, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I always thought that was a liquid."

"It is—a very volatile liquid, boiling at 78 degrees," Chris Larson explained.

"Well, that's close to room temperature. I suppose he could inhale enough vapor to kill him. It ought to be easy to check up where the stuff was bought. There's a fifty-dollar fine for any druggist who doesn't keep a record of his sales of arsenic, strychnine, corrosive sublimate, or prussic acid, or lets them out of the store without a prescription."

Larson shook his head slowly. "I don't believe he bought this at a drugstore."

"Why not?"

"Prussic acid is used for medicinal purposes only in solution—about two per cent, I believe. Inhaling the solution might make a man feel dizzy and probably give him a headache, but it shouldn't kill him."

"Something did."

"Inhaling anhydrous prussic acid would do the job all right."

"An—what?"

"Anhydrous. Prussic acid without water."

"Where do you buy that?"

"You don't—you make it."

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Mack looked incredulous.

"That's a job for a chemist, isn't it?"

"Not necessarily. All one has to do is put some acid in the test tube, add potassium or sodium cyanide, and cork up the tube. There's a chemical reaction which gives you prussic acid vapor and a sodium or potassium salt."

"That's a new one on me!" O'Ryan exclaimed.

"In the old days they used that method to kill the insects on fruit trees," Larson elaborated. "They covered the tree with a sort of tent, and then they took a two-gallon stone jug, put in some water, some concentrated sulphuric, and a charge of sodium cyanide. Then they uncorked the jug inside the tent and ran for it. Now, I believe, they usually spray the liquid hydrocyanic acid over the tree with a hand pump."

"Do you have to use sulphuric acid?" Mack inquired.

Larson shook his head. "No, any acid—even a weak one—will act on the cyanide."

Mack was writing busily in a black-covered notebook.

"Potassium or sodium cyanide, you say? Which do you think was used here?"

"Either would produce the reaction. Most potassium and sodium compounds are very similar—both in physical properties and their chemical action."

Mack scrutinized his informant quizzically.

"You seem to know a lot about it, Larson."

"I'm taking a chemical engineering course."

"I guessed that. Even so, I'm willing to bet you know more about cyanides than you'll find in your college textbook."

"I boned up on them on the side," Larson flared. "Thought I had a job with the United Cyanide Com-

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pany, but it fell through. If you're trying to insinuate——"

"Now who said I was?" Mack interrupted quietly. "I've got a lot of people to see and a whole lot of questions to ask before I start forming opinions." He continued didactically as though to fix in his memory certain mental notes. "As far as opportunity is concerned, anybody in the hotel could 've done it. That means any employee or any guest, do you understand? Not to mention the possibility of someone from outside. As far as motive is concerned, we'll know more when we get a few stories from people acquainted with Swink. And as far as method ——" He shook his head in a puzzled manner. "There 're several important points to clear up. I want to know——" He broke off abruptly as two blue-coated patrolmen entered the room.

"Phelan and McCarter!" O'Ryan exclaimed. "What 'd you find out, boys?"

Patrolman Phelan was the first to answer. "I talked to the room clerk as you told me, chief. From the desk he has a clear view of both entrances to the lobby as well as the elevators." He handed a paper to O'Ryan, who read it carefully. "There's a list, as nearly as he can remember, of everybody asking for their keys since he went on duty at three-thirty. He's positive no strangers went up alone, and the elevator men tell the same story."

"Well, McCarter?" O'Ryan asked.

"I went to the back part of the hotel and started asking questions," the patrolman replied with the air of one who has performed a duty both thoroughly and conscientiously. "Seems there's a timekeeper—thin-lipped guy with glasses—who has to stand by the employees' en-

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trance and check everyone going out—see? This is a big place, and the management's taking no chances on a guy sneaking out and going home when he's supposed to be working. Well, this guy is sure that no one left the hotel who didn't work here—and that no one came in who wasn't supposed to."

"Did you think about the fire escapes?" O'Ryan catechized.

McCarter's voice soared triumphantly. "You bet I did, chief. There are two fire escapes leading to the alley. Both of them stop at the second floor, but the stairs swing down when a guy gets on 'em, and when he gets off, a weight pulls 'em back up again."

"Practically every fire escape in town is built that way," O'Ryan grumbled. "Did you think to look at the doors?"

"Sure we did. Phelan and I went over every fire-escape door in the hotel—some job!"

"Well?" O'Ryan interrogated. "Find that somebody could beat it that way?"

McCarter shook his head. "Every damn one of 'em was bolted from the inside, chief."

III

"IT'S AN INSIDE JOB." O'Ryan grinned like a pleased Cheshire cat.

"Fat lot of help that is!" Mack snorted deprecatingly. "Yeah—an inside job with only four to five hundred rooms in this hotel and maybe a hundred and fifty people working here. We'll be up all night, Terry."

"Well, that's what we're paid for, ain't it?" O'Ryan

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turned to the house detective. "When you were on the force, Jerry, you weren't a bad cop. What's your slant on this?"

Spanger waved a pudgy hand.

"I didn't like Swink myself—fat, slimy sort of fellow. Maybe two or three other people felt the same way about him. But as for what happened tonight—well, I can't tell you a damn thing. I went to my room early and got off my shoes. Feet were burning something fierce."

"You used that feet stall a hundred times a week when you were on the jewelry detail," Mack cut in. "Tell me what you had against Swink, anyhow."

Spanger's blue eyes opened as wide as those of a baby. "Just a hunch, but I don't have to tell you what hunches mean in this racket. I thought the fellow 'd bear watching, and I kept an eye on him whenever I got the chance. But I didn't learn anything."

"Have any enemies in the hotel?"

"None as far as I know. Nor any friends either. In fact I've only seen him with one man. Guy by the name of Chilton."

"Chilton?"

"Yeh. He's in 305 down the hall. Signed the register as James Chilton of New York when he blew in last Monday. He told Collins, the room clerk, that he was a broker."

"Well, if he's broker than I am I'd like to meet him!" O'Ryan exclaimed. No one smiled at this witticism, and the giant instantly sobered. "Shall we have him in, Johnny?"

Mack reached in his vest pocket for a cigar and spat the end into the wastebasket. "First I want to get Lar-

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son's story straightened out. You're the night clerk here, aren't you, Larson?"

"Yes. I go on duty at eleven."

"Been in your room all evening?"

"Yes."

"Sleeping?"

Chris smiled. "Until nine. I set the alarm clock for that time, and then I get up and study for a couple of hours."

"Study?" For the minute Mack's face looked uncomprehending. "Yeh, I remember you told me about it. Chemistry tonight, was it?"

"No, I was working a problem in calculus."

"Calculus? Some sort of mathematics, huh?"

"You've said it!" Larson exclaimed with a rueful face. "Had to do with a logarithmic derivative, and when you integrate you get an exponential function."

"I get a headache," Mack said with conviction. "Anyway, you were pretty well wrapped up in the logarithmic what-you-may-call-it, weren't you?"

"I guess so."

"So you couldn't hear a noise in the hall?"

"What sort of noise?"

"Like somebody trying to get into a room that didn't belong to him."

"If I had, I'd have investigated," Larson declared. Mack regarded the night clerk with a thoughtful expression.

"Work pretty hard, Larson?"

Chris Larson thought of his daily routine—and smiled. Off duty at seven in the morning. A hastily snatched two hours' sleep and then a grand rush to the "L" to make a ten o'clock class in Organic. More classes. Lab. Classes.

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Lab. Through at four and back to the hotel. Grab a bite to eat and sleep till nine. That alarm clock! Damn the thing anyway! Always interrupting what promised to be the soundest and most refreshing sleep you've ever known. Then study—two hours of it. It isn't enough. You know that. Not half enough. You're falling behind in your classes. But your crammed schedule just doesn't allow room for another minute—outside of Sundays and the few minutes you can put in on the "L." Now you're on duty again. Night clerk. Supreme boss during the wee small hours—and very little to boss. Complaints. Somebody's radio is bothering somebody else. Mrs. Blakely thinks there's a mouse in her room. You have to get the night houseman to turn everything inside out and assure her there isn't the slightest vestige of a rodent. Make out the room value sheet. If you're lucky, it checks with the cashier's record. But sometimes the cashier has forgotten to pull an account after it's been paid. Then you look in the "departure book." If the name shows there you have a "sleeper"—room shows occupied in the room rack but it's really vacant. Sleepers are bad medicine—and a damn nuisance. Slightly drunk middle-aged fellow comes in with flashy girl and wants a room for the night. You're sorry, but the hotel is full. "What 're you trying to tell me, fellow? This here's my wife." You are still sorry, but all the rooms are occupied. He goes out muttering vengeance, and the girl shrills profanity after you. You turn back to the room value sheet. The cashier's record is checked at last, and now you can get the house count and the house value. Somebody comes in drunk and you have to see he gets to his room without falling down the elevator shaft. Now you get to work on the bills—stacks and

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stacks of them. You look out and sky is getting lighter. Presently the sun will stain the clouds a brilliant crimson —but you never see it. It's seven o'clock, and you're through at last. Your eyes are sodden and heavy. There's lead in your veins instead of blood. You never get enough sleep, never get . . . enough sleep . . . sleep.

Chris Larson yawned and turned to the detective.

"Yes," he said. "I probably do."

Whatever Mack had in mind he did not pursue farther. Instead:

"Who's the manager?"

"Mr. Swann—Victor Swann."

"Where's he?"

"Out," Chris answered laconically.

"Yep," Spanger confirmed. "Took his wife and went out on a big party tonight. Collins is keeping the telephone wires hot trying to find out where. Swann 'll be tickled to death to hear about this—I don't think. It sure won't do the hotel no good."

Mack seemed not to be listening to this interjection. "If you go on at eleven, Larson, you ought to be at the desk now."

"Larry Collins is staying on. Larry figured you might want to talk to him."

"Smart fellow," Mack grunted approvingly. "If everyone used his head that well, our job would be a whole lot easier. Well, Larson, you'd probably better stick around here a while longer, then. I may have to ask a question or two—about chemistry."

"Glad to do anything I can to help out," Chris smiled.

"What's next on the program?" O'Ryan put in. "Want Chilton?"

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"Yeh, get him. If he was with Swink this evening we ought to get a good check on the time element."

O'Ryan halted before touching the doorknob.

"Having this checked for prints, aren't you?"

"Sure—everything in the room 'll be checked. Jimmy Selzer of the Identification Bureau is downstairs now—waiting till Doc Hildreth gets through making his report. We won't find any prints, though."

"No?"

"Naw," Mack grunted disgustedly. "A babe in the cradle would have better sense than to touch that knob with bare hands." Larson chuckled. "Well, fellow, what's so funny?" Mack demanded truculently.

"You'll find a full set of my prints on it. I closed the door to keep the gas out of the corridor."

"Oh, sure!" Mack gibed. "Fixing up an alibi for yourself already, huh?"

The fair complexion of the big Scandinavian turned an indignant pink, and he breathed heavily.

"If you mean——"

"I don't mean. I never mean anything at this stage of the game. I thought I told you that before, Larson."

The night clerk's tensed muscles relaxed. "Sorry. Kind of hard to realize that I'm a legitimate suspect."

"Don't worry about it, Chris," Spanger admonished. "Johnny Mack 'll give you a square deal every time."

"I'll have Chilton brought in," O'Ryan declared. He threw the door open to reveal an excited controversy. The patrolman stationed on duty in the corridor was remonstrating audibly.

"Hey, you, I said you couldn't go in there. When they want you they'll send for you."

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"But I have information of vital importance to convey," the other began, then stopped hastily as he caught sight of O'Ryan.

"What's the fuss about, Clancy?" the latter asked. The bluecoat glowered belligerently at the little man in the corridor.

"This guy started to walk in on you, chief. I stopped him just as he put his hand on the doorknob."

"Sweet mess of prints there'll be for Jimmy," Mack grumbled.

From his full height of six feet four inches O'Ryan looked down at the intruder, who couldn't have been more than five feet six and was narrow shouldered, flat chested, and scrawny necked in addition. His thin hands were delicate and small fingered, and his face was triangular: broad and wide at the forehead, narrowing toward a small, pointed chin. His sparse hair was silvery and his eyes peeked owlishly from behind a pair of gold-rimmed bifocals. Chris recognized him at once.

"What's your name?" O'Ryan demanded gruffly.

"Westborough."

"What you want here?"

"My room is across the corridor. I recalled overhearing a fragment of conversation from this room which may or may not be important to you."

O'Ryan paused for a few seconds to scrutinize the other intently. "Go on in," he said at length.

Westborough stepped over the threshold and surveyed the little group inside the room. He looked curiously at the form on the floor, then nodded at Chris Larson.

"Good-evening, Mr. Larson. I don't believe I am acquainted with you other gentlemen."

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"We'll skip the introductions," Mack said shortly. "If you've got anything to say, make it snappy." He brought out a notebook. "What's your full name?"

"Theocritus Lucius Westborough."

"Good Lord!" O'Ryan commented from the doorway. "How your folks must have hated you."

The little man smiled cheerfully.

"It does seem a bit too much, doesn't it? To save you the trouble of asking any more questions, I'll tell you that my room is number 312 across the corridor and that I have no particular occupation."

"What's this conversation you heard?" Mack cut in.

"It can hardly be called a conversation since it was entirely one-sided. More in the nature of a monologue—at least the part I chanced to overhear."

"Who was talking?"

"Mr. Swink."

"Where?"

"In this room two or three evenings ago. As I opened the door of my own room and started toward the elevator on my way to dinner I heard him saying, 'I know enough to put you behind bars. Now I want ten grand and I'll give you just one week to dig it up.' "

"Is that all you heard?"

"Yes, I caught those few words on my way down the corridor, but, as the matter did not concern me, I did not stop to listen to any more."

"You don't know who he was talking to?"

"I really haven't the faintest idea. He may even have been talking to himself."

"Was his door open?"

"No, closed. Ordinarily I shouldn't have heard any-

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thing, but he was undoubtedly excited, and his voice carried."

"When did you hear this conversation?"

"Let me see. This is Thursday. It must have been either Monday or Tuesday. Monday I believe."

"At what time?"

"Just before I had dinner."

"Can't you give us a better idea of the time than that? It might be important."

Westborough flushed with embarrassment.

"Dear me, I am sorry, but I am afraid I am unable to do so. You see I am not a person of extremely regular habits, and I am liable to go to dinner almost any time from five-thirty to eight o'clock."

"Did you eat in the dining room downstairs?"

"Yes."

"Well, we may be able to find the time later on from a waiter or somebody." Mack peered quizzically at the undersized man. "What do you know about tonight's business?"

"I? Nothing at all—Lieutenant Mack, isn't it? I have been in my room since dinner time—since seven-thirty. I really did look at my watch tonight. Although I don't imagine that will be very helpful, will it?"

"Did you hear any noise going on? Anything at all suspicious?"

"I heard Mr. Swink coming down the corridor. He was stumbling heavily as though he had been drinking too much, and he made quite a little noise inserting his key into the keyhole."

"But you heard nothing before that?"

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"Nothing at all. I was completely absorbed in my thoughts."

"Thinking about anybody in the hotel?"

"Oh dear, no! I was thinking about Trajan."

"Who the hell's Trajan?"

"One of the five emperors who ruled Rome from 96 to 180 A.D. I've written a book—*Trajan: His Life and Times* —shortly to be printed."

"Out of my line, I'm afraid," Mack declared.

A short globular man carrying a much worn black bag burst briskly into the room. He glanced downward to the floor. "What the devil happened to this fellow?"

"That's for you to find out, Doc," Mack grinned amiably. He turned to Westborough. "You can go now."

The little man was watching the doctor with an obvious interest. "Lieutenant Mack," he said, "I wonder if you remember my brother, James Westborough."

"Jim Westborough!" Mack exclaimed. "My God, yes! He saved my bacon when I was framed in as dirty a deal as was ever cooked up. I'll say I remember Jim Westborough! And he's your brother?"

"Was," the other corrected gravely.

Mack said slowly, "I heard about that. Angina pectoris, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"There'll be a lot of people miss him—but I haven't time to talk about it now. Drop in at headquarters some time, will you? I'd like to have a good chat with Jim Westborough's brother."

"I shall be glad to. However, I should like first to ask a favor of you tonight. This is the first murder case in

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which I have been even remotely involved. I find it most interesting. If I won't be too much in the way . . ."

"How about it, Terry?" Mack inquired of his associate.

"If Westborough wants to stick around, let him stick. I knew Jim Westborough myself."

Dr. Basil Hildreth straightened up and faced the group.

"This is the damnedest way to kill a guy I ever met in my life. Funny part of it is that the damn scheme worked. It should have been a complete flop."

"What do you mean by that, Doc?" Mack asked.

"The symptoms all point to prussic acid poisoning: signs of convulsions, fingers clenched, pupils dilated. But there's no perceptible odor about the lips. There is on the contrary an odor about the nostrils. If he didn't swallow it, he must have breathed it."

"Well, what of it?"

"The prussic acid you buy is the two per cent aqueous solution of the United States Pharmacopoeia—*Acidum Hydrocyanicum Dilutum*. I never heard of anyone dying from inhaling the fumes. I don't say it can't be done, mind you, but I never heard of it."

The doctor bent to pick up one of the fragments of the test tube, and Mack winked at O'Ryan.

"This is a different kind of prussic acid, Doc. This is the An-something or other kind."

"Anhydrous?"

O'Ryan returned Mack's wink from behind the doctor's back.

"Don't expect Doc to know what that means. He's never been to college."

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"Anhydrous prussic acid would do it all right," the doctor mumbled, plainly chagrined. He inspected the top of the test tube with an air of detached indifference. "I suppose someone put potassium cyanide with an acid in this thing?"

"That's the way *we've* doped it out."

"Yes, the odor of bitter almonds still clings. There is no doubt but what prussic acid was contained in this tube.

"The fellow who engineered this job," the doctor continued, "took considerable of a chance unless he knew he could count upon our fat friend bending down to see what fell. The lethal concentration for prussic acid vapor is rather high—it was probably one of the least efficient gases used in the World War. There's a record of a fellow who breathed air containing one part in two thousand for a full one and a half minutes. Now carbon monoxide——"

"Carbon monoxide," Mack declared emphatically, "has got about as much to do with this as my aunt Harriet up at Niles, Michigan."

"This is an interesting case in several ways," Dr. Hildreth mused as though to himself. "Once the vapor got into his lungs it would traverse the membranes by osmosis."

"All right, Doc. But how does a fellow manage to get hold of this cyanide?"

"Sodium or potassium?"

Mack grinned. "Either, as far as I'm concerned."

"Both of 'em have industrial uses, I believe," the doctor replied, "but industrial chemistry's out of my line."

"What do you know about it, Larson? You seem to be pretty well up on the subject."

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"The biggest use of sodium cyanide is in gold smelting. However, I don't know of any gold smelters in Chicago, so that won't help you much. Sodium cyanide is also used in case-hardening steel. The mild steel is immersed in a fused cyanide solution——"

"Well, that's something," Mack interrupted. "There are a few steel works. Anything else?"

"Potassium cyanide is used in silver and gold plating."

"Silver plating?" O'Ryan echoed. "There's a building right in this district that's lousy with silver platers."

Mack perked his head like a dog scenting the chase. "That's a lead we can follow up." His cigar bobbed thoughtfully at the side of his mouth. "Cyanide's also used in photography, isn't it?"

"Yes, a number of photographers use it as an intensifier solution. So do photo-engravers. You see, potassium cyanide is a very active solvent for all the silver halides . . ."

"You're getting too technical for me," Mack interrupted. "I gather, though, that we can add both photographers and engravers to the list of places where the cyanide might have come from?"

"Yes."

"This guy's been dead about an hour, I'd say," Dr. Hildreth pronounced.

Larson consulted his watch. The hands showed a quarter to twelve.

"That checks with the time he opened the door," Mack declared. He winked again at O'Ryan. "I suppose, Doc, you've got a dozen reasons why it was homicide and not suicide?"

"I can't tell you from the medical evidence," Dr. Hil-

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dreth snapped. "Neither can anybody else. All I can say is that if he did kill himself, he went to a hell of a lot of trouble!"

"Reminds me of how they used to pull out my first teeth by tying 'em to a door," O'Ryan commented jocularly. "Maybe he figured that stunt would make it easier to get into the next world."

"Want the stiff at the morgue, Doc?" Mack inquired.

"Sure, shoot him down there, and I'll do a post." He snapped shut the catch of his bag. "There's not a thing more I can tell you now, not a thing."

"O. K., Doc., and thanks. So long."

"So long," the doctor grunted on his way out of the door.

Mack turned to O'Ryan.

"Now that Doc Hildreth's through, we can get down to work. Let's turn this room over to Jimmy Selzer."

He went to the door and bellowed down the corridor; in a few seconds, a spectacled youth carrying a camera and its tripod base came into the room.

"Lot of work for you, Jimmy," Mack directed. "I want some pix showing just where this guy fell and a close-up showing how he's lying. Also I want you to go over every likely spot in the room with your brush and mercury powder. You should find Larson's and Westborough's prints on the doorknob, so better take their impressions now. Also get Swink's before we have him carted off to the morgue."

"O. K., Johnny," Jimmy Selzer called cheerfully.

"We've got to get out of here while Jimmy does his stuff," Mack told Larson. "Any vacant rooms in this corridor?"

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"Why don't you gentlemen make use of my room?" Westborough suggested.

"Good idea," Mack approved.

He and O'Ryan walked across the corridor followed by the house detective. Larson and Westborough were halted on the threshold by Jimmy Selzer.

"If you two are Larson and Westborough," he said, "I have to take your fingerprints."

In a surprisingly short time both Larson and Westborough had been fingerprinted. As they walked into the latter's room across the corridor, the patrolman stationed at the end of the corridor called.

"Man, two women, and a kid say they want to get to their rooms. Names are Graham and Hammond. Ask Captain O'Ryan if it's all right, will you?"

Chris found O'Ryan and Mack conversing with Patrolman Phelan. He told O'Ryan what the policeman in the corridor had said.

"Do they have rooms here?" O'Ryan asked.

"Yes," Chris replied. "The Grahams are next door to Mr. Westborough and the Hammonds are across the hall."

"Next door to Swink, huh?"

"Yes."

"Tell Clancy it's O. K. No, I'll take a look at them myself. I want to get Chilton up here anyway."

O'Ryan strode out of the door. "Sweet job this is going to be," Mack complained to Spanger. "We'll probably have to see everybody in the hotel. Wish we'd get one of the swell breaks you read about—some way we could localize the killer to this corridor, for instance."

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Spanger crashed a fist against the palm of his other hand.

"By God, Johnny, I may be able to help you at that. Just remembered there's a kindergarten teacher living down the south corridor by the name of Effie Colmar. Homely kind of dame that will never see thirty-five again."

"Well, what of it?"

"This virgin, it seems, has a brother by the name of Marcus. I guess she told me his name was Marcus. He was going to take her out to dinner tonight, and she wanted a good chin with him."

"I don't see that has——"

"Wait a minute, Johnny, and you will. I gathered that Mark lives out of town and Sister doesn't see him any too often. She wanted to talk to him in her own room instead of the lounge, so she comes to your uncle Jerry for permission. It was time wasted, because I never would have suspected anyone with a mug like hers anyhow."

"Come down to earth, Jerry. What's it all about?"

"Well, I told her sure, she could have her brother in her room, but I suggested, to make everything aboveboard, she——" Spanger paused portentously, and Mack snapped:

"She should leave the door open, I suppose!"

Spanger looked crestfallen at the anticipation of his dramatic climax. "Yep, and that's just what she did. And she or Mark must have been able to see everyone who passed along the corridor on their way to the rooms in this corridor."

"There's another corridor on the north, isn't there?" Mack asked.

"Yes, but it's not used nearly as much. The elevator

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shaft is off the south corridor, and it's the natural passageway to this part of the hotel."

"Can't help that. As long as anybody could have sneaked through the north corridor, we'll still have to quiz everyone in the hotel."

Chris Larson had a sudden inspiration. "The linen room——" he began, when he was interrupted by the return of O'Ryan with James Chilton in custody.

IV

CHILTON LOOKED the successful broker he purported to be —if anything a shade too perfectly. He was tall and dignified, his hair splashed with gray about the temples. His tailored English tweed couldn't have cost less than a hundred, and his heavy rep necktie had probably set him back a five spot, Chris speculated.

Mack rose from his chair at Westborough's desk. "Sit down here, Chilton." The chair he indicated directly faced the desk lamp, and Chilton frowned.

"See here, I don't like third-degree methods. I'm not legally required to answer any questions."

"He's right about that," Spanger put in. "You're going to have to be careful about the way you talk to our guests, Johnny."

"Want me to wrap 'em up in cotton wool?" Mack sneered. "All of you are going to find it wiser to cooperate. Where's your home town, Chilton?"

Chilton crossed his legs with a slow and languid assurance. "New York. I don't mind telling you that."

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"Oh, don't you? Well, what do you do in New York?"

Chilton stretched a hand toward the desk lamp and tilted its shade. "I'm a broker. And I don't believe that a light should glare. Do you?"

O'Ryan furiously rearranged the shade. "Yes," he roared. "You let that lamp alone."

Chilton shrugged his shoulders. They were rather a good pair of shoulders too, Chris Larson thought.

"My error."

"What's your firm?" Mack demanded.

"Crabb and Cunningham."

He gave the address, which Mack noted in his little black book. Then:

"What 're you doing in Chicago, Chilton?"

"Business," Chilton replied sullenly. Mack's next question was tinged with suspicion.

"What sort of business?"

"That concerns me and my firm."

"Maybe so." Mack relaxed in the manner of a fisherman allowing his victim more line. He went on in a silky tone. "How long have you been staying here?"

"I registered Monday."

"Morning or afternoon?"

"Morning."

Mack counted on his fingers. "Four full days you've been here." He shot out with sudden force. "How many calls have you made in that time?"

Chilton uncrossed his legs and fumbled for a cigarette. "None."

"None," Mack repeated sarcastically. "Four days and not one call? Why not?"

"People are out of town," Chilton mumbled evasively.

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"And you didn't find that out before you left New York?" Chilton was silent. "For a so-called big business man you don't seem very efficient."

Chilton smouldered at the taunt. "It's none of your business, but this is a combination business and pleasure trip. I have plenty of time to wait for my customers."

"Why didn't you bring your wife along?" Mack inquired.

"He says he's on a pleasure trip," O'Ryan contributed jovially.

Chilton flushed. "Again it's none of your business, but I don't happen to be married."

"April's a funny month and Chicago's a funny town for a vacation. That is, for a fellow from New York."

"I also came on business," Chilton reminded.

"An answer both ways. Convenient, isn't it?"

Chilton made no reply but shifted nervously in his seat. Lieutenant Mack seemed to be getting under his guard, Larson reflected. The night clerk couldn't help but admire the deftness with which the detective was conducting this interview.

"Why don't you tell the truth, Chilton?" Mack suggested. The broker rose indignantly to his feet.

"See here! I'm not going to be called a liar——"

The pressure of O'Ryan's gigantic hand on his shoulder forced him back to his chair.

"You're going to sit right there! See?"

Mack shifted his line of attack. "You knew Elmo Swink?" Chilton nodded. "Very well?" Mack asked.

"It depends on what you mean by very well."

"Well, what do *you* mean?"

"I never saw him before I registered here."

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"How'd you get acquainted with him, then?"

"How do such things usually start?" Chilton tilted his chair backward and recrossed his ankles. "I sat next to him in the bar a couple of evenings ago. Strangers usually start talking after they've poured down two or three Scotch-and-sodas."

"Tried to sell you something, didn't he?"

Chilton glanced at the detective's face with grudging admiration. "That's not a bad guess."

"No guess at all," Mack disclaimed. "You've been seen with him a lot around the hotel during the last few days. Either you were trying to sell him something, or he was trying to sell you something."

"He was."

"Well, what was it?"

"A mine in Colorado—the Link of Gold."

"Did you bite?"

"I'm no sucker," Chilton declared vehemently. "There's been considerable of a boom in Western mining lately, and his proposition seemed like a good buy, but—the motto of my firm is, 'Before you invest, investigate.' "

"The Link of Gold," Mack repeated, writing down the name in the ubiquitous notebook. "Did Swink tell you where it was located?"

"Near Georgetown."

"Swink strike you as being on the level?" Mack questioned, restoring the notebook to his pocket.

"He did—and I've been up against a lot of con men too. I'm able to tell them pretty well by now."

"But you didn't commit yourself?"

"Don't be absurd. I wouldn't put in a cent without a detailed report from my own agent."

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"Which you didn't get?"

"Not yet."

"You had dinner with Swink last Monday night, didn't you?" Mack inquired with assumed casualness.

"Not last Monday," Chilton replied quickly, "tonight."

"My mistake. You didn't see him Monday, then?"

"I didn't know him Monday. I didn't meet him until Tuesday."

"And you weren't with him last night?"

"No, I didn't see him last night."

"But you did have dinner with him tonight?"

"Yes."

"His suggestion or yours?"

"His. He called me on the telephone just before dinner and asked me to be his guest."

"What time?"

"I suppose we went down together a few minutes after seven. I remember we had finished our meal at eight."

"What did you do then?"

"Sat around the lobby for a while and smoked our cigars."

"Did either of you leave the lobby at any time before quarter to eleven?"

"We both did."

"Together?"

"Yes."

"Where'd you go?"

"Up to Swink's room. He had some production charts he wanted me to look over."

"What time was this?"

"About eight-thirty."

"How long'd you stay in Swink's room?"

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"Maybe twenty-five minutes."

"Then you left Swink's room about five minutes to nine?"

"Yes."

"Who went out first—you or he?"

"I did, naturally."

"Did you see him lock his door?"

"It's a spring lock and doesn't require locking."

"But you heard the door close behind you?"

"Yes."

"Everything all right in Swink's room when you went in?"

"As far as I could tell."

"Did you see a diamond stick pin lying on his dresser?"

"I think there was one—yes."

Mack had again produced his notebook and was jotting down an abbreviated summary of the laconic conversation.

"Where'd you and Swink go after you left his room?"

"To the bar."

"And you stayed there with him the rest of the evening?"

"Yes. We didn't leave until nearly eleven."

"Then what did you do?"

"Went to our rooms."

"You left him in the west corridor?"

"Yes, my room's down at the other end."

"See anyone around when you said good-night?"

"Nobody."

"You didn't wait in the corridor until Swink had opened his door?"

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"No, I went straight to my room and took off my coat. Right after that I heard someone scream and rushed out. There were a lot of people in the hall."

"Yes, I know." Mack dismissed the subject as of no importance. "Did you leave Swink at any time while you were in the bar?"

"Yes—a little after ten."

"Why?"

"I suppose I'd better tell you the truth," Chilton began hesitantly. "One of the rear suspender buttons on my trousers popped off. So I slipped down into the washroom in the basement and had the porter sew it on."

"How long were you gone?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"You didn't go back to your own room or up to the third floor?"

"No."

"Sure of that?"

"Yes."

Mack terminated the interview.

"All right, Chilton. That's all we want to know tonight. I'd advise you to stay in the hotel for the next few days, though. Don't try to check out without seeing me first."

"You mean I'm under suspicion?" Chilton demanded angrily.

"Everyone's under suspicion until we get this thing cleared up," Mack said quietly, "you no more than anyone else."

Chilton opened his mouth as though he would like to say something, closed it again, and strode out of the room without glancing behind him. Mack turned to O'Ryan.

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"How does that story strike you, Terry?"

O'Ryan pulled a paper from his pocket and scanned it carefully.

"Phelan wants me to get him a transfer to the detective division, and I think I'm going to do it. I sent him down to have a talk with the room clerk and see what he could find out. Here's what he says." He began to read from the notes.

"About eight-thirty, Swink, accompanied by Chilton, asked for the key of his room and went to the elevator. The elevator pilot stopped at the third floor and both men got off. He picked them up again half an hour later and both men were observed by the room clerk to go in the direction of the bar. The bartender remembers that Chilton excused himself from Swink and was gone a quarter of an hour or so. He isn't quite sure of the time but thinks it was sometime after ten. Both men left the bar again shortly before eleven. Elevator men do not remember taking Chilton up alone at any time."

"That checks with what Chilton told us."

"Almost too well. Of course, there's one thing."

"What's that?"

"There are stairs leading up to the third floor. Chilton wouldn't have to take the elevator."

"But nobody saw him walking up."

"Phelan didn't find anyone who did." O'Ryan heaved a colossal sigh. "What do *you* think of his story, Johnny?"

Mack said slowly:

"The last part sounded better than the first."

"You think there's something fishy about him?"

"Figure it out for yourself. He's been here since Mon-

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day—he came on business and he admits he hasn't done any. I'm going to wire New York to get in touch with Crabb and Cunningham."

O'Ryan looked at his watch.

"Any idea of how many people we've got to talk to, Johnny?" he said somewhat crossly. "If you take as long with everyone as you did with Chilton, we'll be on the job till next Christmas."

"Maybe not," Mack said cheerfully, "Jerry Spanger knows a kindergarten teacher who may save us a peck of trouble."

He explained about Effie Colmar and the proprieties, and O'Ryan grinned broadly.

"Thank God for one woman who's afraid of what the old hens will say." His face grew sober again almost instantly. "There's another corridor, however."

"Pardon me," Chris Larson interrupted, "but I thought of something just before you brought Chilton in. The linen room is on the north corridor, and our night housekeeper, Miss Kriskrowski, spends two or three hours there every evening making a check of supplies. She usually leaves the door open too," he added.

O'Ryan's hamlike hand descended across Mack's shoulder in a slap that could have been heard at the opposite end of the corridor.

"That's the ticket! Now we're beginning to get somewhere. Jerry, bring in your kindergarten teacher and then we'll talk to Miss Criss-cross."

"Kriskrowski," Larson corrected.

"Well, whatever her name is."

Effie Colmar was, as Jerry Spanger had described her, a spinster of about thirty-five, a trifle near-sighted and

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wearing nose glasses, which gave her thin face a slightly pinched look. Her straw-colored hair was gathered up at the back in a plain but efficient knot. Spanger had given her just five minutes to "make yourself decent," and the results of the hasty toilet were apparent.

"Miss Colmar," Mack began without preamble, "your brother spent this evening with you, didn't he?"

"Yes. Marcus doesn't get up from Springfield very often, and it was so nice to see him. He's a dear boy—always so thoughtful."

Mack cut this laudation short.

"You spoke to Mr. Spanger about entertaining him in your room, and Mr. Spanger told you that it would be all right if you left the door open, didn't he?"

"Why—yes. I won't get into trouble with the management over it, will I?"

"I don't know why you should. You did leave the door open, didn't you?"

"Indeed we did. Every minute of the time."

"What time did your brother leave you, Miss Colmar?"

"It wasn't quite eleven."

"And what time did you and he go up to your room?"

"Let me see—we had just had dinner—such a lovely dinner too. Yes, it must have been about seven."

"With the door open all that time you should have been able to see everyone who passed down the corridor."

"Oh, we did." She giggled nervously. "I'm afraid I'm inclined to take just a wee bit too much interest in the doings of my neighbors. I pointed out everyone who passed to Marcus and we would speculate on who they were and what they were doing. Of course, I'm not really acquainted with any of them, but it's fun to pretend."

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"Good girl!" Mack commented. "Now if you can tell me who they were, you'll be a big help. This is a murder case we're investigating."

"Right in this hotel!" Her colorless eyes looked startled. "Why, that's too thrilling! I'm glad to do anything I can. Of course, though, I don't know any of their names—I mean I'm not sure."

"Describe them, then."

"I'll try." Her forehead puckered. "Well, for one I noticed this gentleman." Her glance designated Westborough. "Marcus and I thought he must be a college professor—he looked so absent-minded and scholarly."

"What time did you see him?"

"Oh, dear, do I have to tell the time too? I'm afraid I didn't notice that very much."

"Was he going toward the elevator or away from it?" Mack wanted to know.

She looked at him archly. "Won't it simplify matters if I just say in or out? 'In' when they were going away from the elevator and 'out' when they were going toward it?"

"O. K., Sister," Mack assented wearily.

"This gentleman—in—seven to eight o'clock. Is that the way you want me to put it?"

"You're doing fine!"

"Then there was a party—two women, young, stylishly dressed, one a blonde and the other an Irish brunette with blue eyes. At least they should have been blue—I didn't actually notice. Also a tall, rather thin man, and a little boy—out—at about eight-thirty. I'm sure of that time because Marcus had just looked at his watch."

"That would be the Graham family," Spanger inter-

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polated, "and the brunette sounds like Mrs. Hammond."

"Oh, I forgot," Miss Colmar began in a rapid gush of words. "In—just before the other party went out—two men. One tall, handsome, with gray temples. He looked just like a movie actor. The other was a fat, dumpy man, not very attractive. Out—same two somewhere near nine o'clock."

"Anyone else?"

"Yes, in—nine-thirty—imposing-looking dowager. I know her—it's Mrs. Blakely. I can't say I exactly like her, although she's been lovely to me. In—probably ten o'clock—a little shriveled-up man with a face like a fox."

"That sounds like Mr. Devon," Chris Larson smiled.

"I forgot again. In—maybe fifteen minutes before Mr. Devon—tall, lovely girl with striking bronze hair."

"And that's Miss Gant," Larson interrupted again.

Miss Colmar's brow wrinkled.

"Now that must be all. No, it isn't quite. I went to the elevator with Marcus and said good-night to him there. While we were waiting, an 'up' car stopped and two men got off. Same two we'd seen before. The tall handsome man and the fat dumpy one." She simpered. "I fear they had both been looking upon the 'wine while it is red in the cup' or do people drink nothing but highballs now? Anyway, my tall handsome man was helping my unpleasant fat one along the corridor. In—maybe ten minutes to eleven."

She stopped, finally out of breath, and Mack put in a word or two.

"You're sure you saw nobody else, Miss Colmar?"

"Not another soul, take oath and hope to die!" She

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raised her right hand kittenishly. "After Marcus left me I had a hot shower and then went to bed. That's all I knew until Mr. Spanger woke me up."

"You didn't hear a scream just after you left your brother?"

"Was there a scream? No, I didn't hear it, but then I was in the bathroom with the water running." She paused again, and Mack asked:

"You didn't at any time see your tall handsome man who looked like a movie actor go up or down the corridor without his short dumpy friend, did you?"

"No, I'm sure he didn't."

"You sure you would have noticed him?"

"We were facing the door all the time. I didn't want to be taken by surprise by the manager, even though I had asked Mr. Spanger's permission."

She giggled again, and Mack made haste to say, "We don't want to keep you up any longer, Miss Colmar. You've helped us a lot."

"Have I really helped you? It's just too thrilling to be a part of a real live murder case."

Jerry Spanger escorted her to the door and Mack gave a disgusted shrug.

"There may be sillier dames, but I've never met one." O'Ryan was consulting the list he had received from Patrolman Phelan. "How does her dope check with yours, Terry?"

"Tallies pretty close. Graham handed in his key at the desk around eight-thirty and went out with his wife and Mrs. Hammond. Westborough asked for his key about seven-thirty. Mrs. Blakely, between nine and ten; Devon, between ten and ten-thirty. No dope on Miss Gant." He

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restored the list to his pocket. "Your girl friend didn't see Chilton come back alone either."

"No." Mack was thoughtful. "If you want any help in getting Phelan transferred to the detective division, I'm your man, Terry. And now let's hear from Kriskrowski."

O'Ryan looked at him in admiration.

"I couldn't remember that name, Johnny. Not unless I'd seen it in black and white."

Miss Kriskrowski was a large woman with flashing black eyes and straight black hair strained back from the forehead. Her Slavic ancestry was apparent in every feature. Her voice was hard, efficient, and metallic. She gave as little information in response to a question as was conveniently possible, and it was at first difficult to draw her out.

However, at the end of ten minutes Mack and O'Ryan had elicited the following facts.

—That she had been working in the linen room from eight forty-five until after eleven.

—That the door had been open during the entire time.

—That she would have noticed anybody who had passed down the north corridor.

—That nobody had passed down the north corridor—either "in" or "out"—with the exception of a chambermaid.

—That the chambermaid was in the west corridor about nine o'clock as she was every evening.

—That she could and would give the chambermaid's name (Mack's notebook was again requisitioned into service), but that it would be of no use trying to talk to her this evening because she went off duty at eleven o'clock.

—That hotel guests were the most unbelievable in-

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grates on earth, that a great many towels were always missing, and that nobody could credit the monstrous things they did to sheets.

—That in spite of the extreme care lavished upon their rooms, they could still find it in their hearts to complain.

Miss Kriskrowski was dismissed, and O'Ryan was jubilant. With the advice and assistance of Larson and Spanger, he constructed an improvised floor plan of the third floor. Westborough was an attentive spectator to this phase of the investigation, even going so far as to make a copy of the diagram. "For my own reference," the little man explained apologetically.

The sketch completed, O'Ryan's big blunt forefinger hovered directly between two wavering parallel lines marked, "west corridor."

"The only people we need bother about, Johnny, are right here. There are some vacant rooms, Larson says, and that makes things easier. I'm going to have Phelan and McCarter go through every room in this corridor. They might find some of the cyanide or maybe find the box the stuff was carried in."

"You can't start poking into people's rooms without a warrant," Spanger protested.

O'Ryan gave him a friendly push into a chair. It was meant for a friendly push, Larson believed, but Spanger sat down—hard. "Be your age, Jerry," the police captain advised.

"Swann won't like it," Spanger remonstrated, fussily anxious to shield the hotel's guests from annoyance. Mack left them arguing to go across the corridor and bawl for Jimmy Selzer. The spectacled youth appeared at once.

"Any prints?" Mack inquired.

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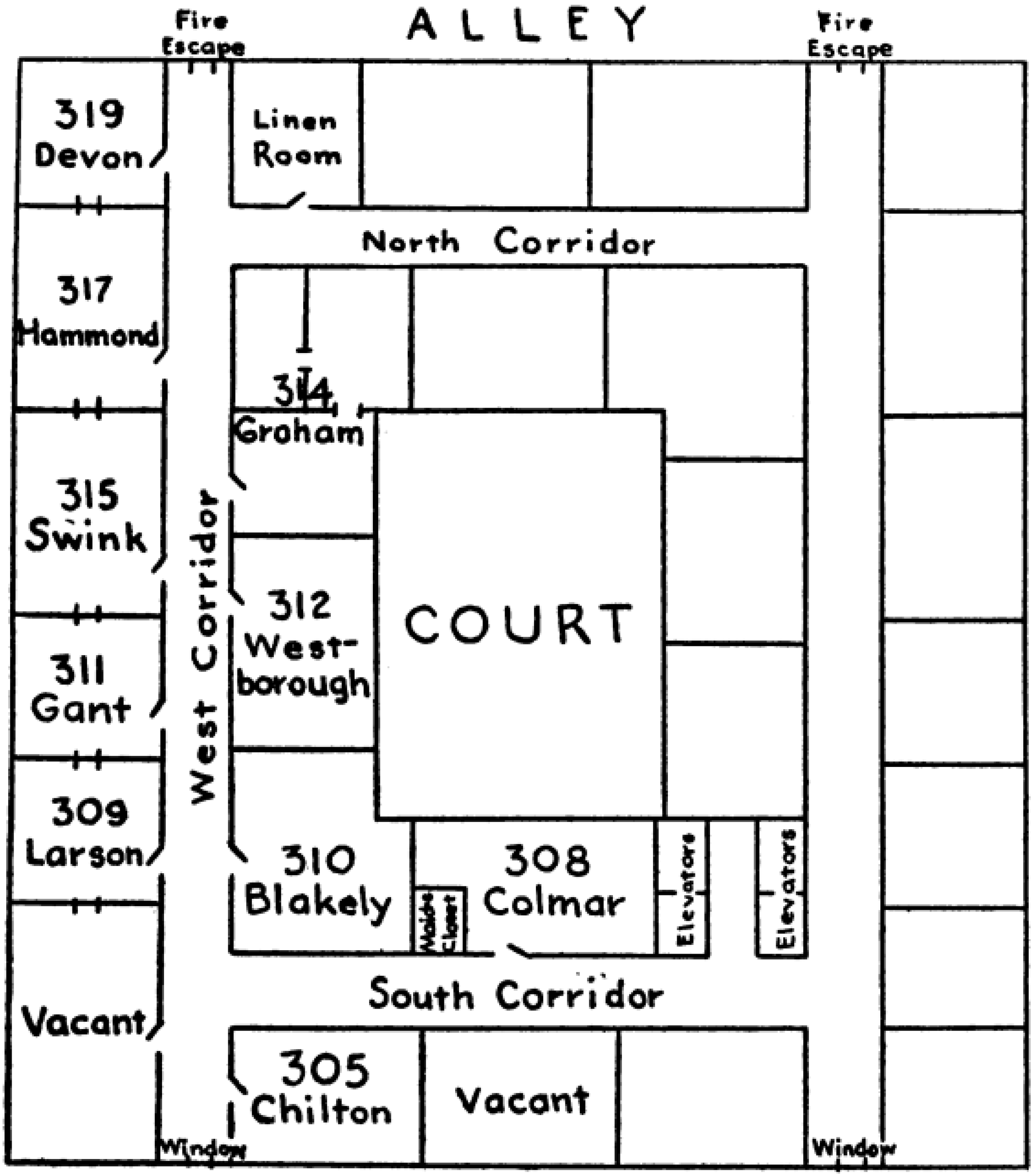

Plan drawn from a sketch in the notebook of Theocritus Lucius Westborough

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Selzer shook his head. "Only on the doorknob. I've used the gray dust over nearly all the likely places, too. The housekeeping staff here do a slick job of keeping things clean."

"Whose prints were on the doorknob?"

"Swink's, Larson's, and Westborough's—all messed up together. It was a tough job to make 'em out."

"Find any prints you couldn't identify?"

"Nope—just found those three."

"Stiff gone to the morgue?"

"Yep. Didn't you tell 'em to give it a ride?"

"Terry O'Ryan did." Mack concluded the conversation. "When you're through we'll move back in here. But be sure to get pix of the prints on the doorknob."

"Already got 'em," the efficient Selzer answered.

Mack returned to Westborough's bedroom. O'Ryan had won the argument with the house detective and assured the homicide section lieutenant that Phelan and McCarter were now at work.

"Searching their persons, too?" Mack inquired.

"Sure! Job's no good unless it's done thoroughly."

"Swann isn't going to like this at all," the discomfited Spanger grumbled.

O'Ryan chuckled. "We should take orders from him."

"Just the same, you ought to have a warrant," Spanger stubbornly maintained.

"What about searching the women?" Mack queried. "You got to get a matron up here, Terry."

O'Ryan made a wry face and reached for the telephone. "Now how the devil did that detail slip my mind?"

Mack seated himself at the writing desk, took a sheet of notepaper from the drawer, and wrote eight names in

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a large, bold chirography. Very slowly he made check marks opposite the first three names on his list. Then he folded the paper and placed it in his pocket.

"No guy can do a job like this without leaving back tracks," he declared, rising to his feet. "People remember and people talk." He reached for a packet of matches and relit his cigar. "If we have luck with just one lead, we've got our man. And we have three leads."

"The cyanide's one," O'Ryan averred.

"Yep," Mack agreed, "that's number one. He had to get it somewhere. There seem to be a lot of likely places —steel works, silver-plating plants, engravers, photographers, photographer's supply houses—but it's just a matter of routine to run 'em down one by one."

"Then there's the acid," O'Ryan suggested.

"That's harder. Larson says almost any acid might have been used. He thinks sulphuric, but he won't swear to it. And even if it was sulphuric, that doesn't help much because that stuff is used damn near everywhere. However, it's a lead."

"What's your third?"

"The test tube," Mack proclaimed. "You buy those things at chemical supply houses, and there aren't so many of those, are there, Larson?"

"Probably more than you think."

"Anyway," Mack went on, "it shouldn't be an impossible job to run it down. We might get pix of everyone in this corridor, and go call on supply houses with 'em. Then if we got an identification——"

"I've got a hunch, Johnny," O'Ryan interrupted. What his hunch was nobody ever learned, for at that moment Patrolman Phelan burst excitedly into the room.

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