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THE author of the very successful THE DEATH ANGEL tells in this book the amazing story of the murder of Hezekiah Morse; a murder motivated by the clause in his will which left to his granddaughter only his purple parrot. As a result of the will, the murder, and the fact that the parrot had vanished, Sylvia Morse went to jail. Little Professor Westborough, as usual meddling in murder, felt that an injustice had been done and preferred his own unorthodox methods of investigating to the police's routine conduct of the case. He first discovered that the purple parrot was in reality a *kakapo* and a native of New Zealand, and after he learned of the stolen bottle of *Est, Est, Est*, and of the bookies, Lucius turned to the Law of Sufficient Reason for further aid. This, he felt, about settled the case, since, as he afterwards pointed out, the will named the murderer. But even this would not have sufficed had it not been for the little professor's acquaintance with Samuel Johnson's definition of "postern."

Here is a remarkable mystery story with excellent characterization and great suspense. It marks Clyde Clason as one of the outstanding authors on the Crime Club list and further establishes the professor as one of the most delightful and lovable sleuths in the field of detective fiction. *A Crime Club Selection.*

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THE PURPLE PARROT

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BOOKS BY

CLYDE B. CLASON

The Purple Parrot

The Death Angel

The Fifth Tumbler

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THE PURPLE PARROT

By

Clyde B. Clason

A THEOCRITUS LUCIUS WESTBOROUGH STORY

GARDEN CITY, N. Y. PUBLISHED FOR

The Crime Club, Inc.

BY DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & CO., INC.

1937

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FIRST EDITION

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C. F. BUTLER
BEQUEST
4-10-40

ALL *the characters and incidents of this book are wholly fictitious.* C. B. C.

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PART ONE

Wednesday, November 18

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I

"AND TO MY GRANDDAUGHTER, Sylvia Elaine Morse, in the event she marries other than the aforesaid Thomas Raymond Vail, I give and bequeath only my purple parrot . . ."

The words (I had drafted them myself only a few days before) were singing in my ears as our cab spun northward on Lake Shore Drive. I said aloud:

"I shouldn't let you. If I had the courage I wouldn't let you."

Sylvia only laughed. "Money, Barry? When we have—*this!*"

I gulped down the lump in my throat. I couldn't say anything, couldn't acknowledge my indebtedness. Even though I knew it was the act of a heel to allow her to go on with it I wasn't able to help myself. As far as I was concerned Fate had knocked on the door the first time I'd seen her.

She is a tall girl, dark-haired, and her eyes are of that deep velvety blue found only in fine sapphires. Her face is a delicate oval, and—well, sweet isn't much of a word, but it's the only word I know that comes anywhere near describing Sylvia.

But, when I decided to put down on paper my recollections of what turned out to be one of Chicago's most dramatic murder sensations, I didn't expect to be rhapsodizing this way. Still—Sylvia was the center of all that happened during those few hectic days, and, if I keep my own feelings about her entirely out of this account, it will be as lifeless as a dried out sponge.

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Our cab turned left, off Lake Shore Drive, and then made a U turn in the middle of the block to pull up before a three-story house, faced with gray stone and set close to the sidewalk. After I had paid the driver we stood there for a moment uncertainly and watched the cab, a blob of bright canary yellow, melt away in the darkness.

"He must be told tonight," she declared firmly, and that was Sylvia. Courage when it was needed—always.

"I'll take that job myself," I promised. I was unable to keep the grimness from my voice.

"No, Barry, you mustn't. He—oh, I'm not just sure how to explain."

"Well, we'll settle the argument inside."

We climbed the five or six stone steps which led up to the covered vestibule, steps flanked by wrought-iron railings which must have been the last word in elegance during the nineties. The front door was massive and inset with panes of mullioned glass. Perched sadly on it a weather-beaten gargoyle stared at me in stony reproach. As I fumbled for the door key I was reminded of Hezekiah Morse.

The door swung open. " 'Better thou hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better,' " Sylvia quoted softly. She confessed: "Barry, I do feel something like poor Cordelia."

And there was something Lear-like about Hezekiah Morse. Nothing as superficial as a white beard because Morse, with the exception of his bristling mustache, was clean-shaven. No, the resemblance, provided that it didn't exist solely in my own imagination, lay in Morse's dominating imperiousness.

He was built along the general proportions of a grizzly bear, with tremendous hands and a grip that,

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despite his seventy-two years, was still bone-crushing. Add a large bulbous nose, small, deeply set, slate-colored eyes, and a florid complexion which probably meant a tendency toward apoplexy, and you have the picture of Sylvia's grandfather. I own that I wasn't looking forward with any pleasure to our interview that night.

The front hall was an inky black. "The switch is behind the door, Bar——"

She wasn't allowed to say more. Space and time dissolved momentarily as I pulled her into my arms.

"You're lovely, so lovely! Like all the princesses in all the fairy tales!"

But, if this were a fairy tale, I recognized presently, upstairs was a very fierce old ogre to be placated.

I helped her off with her wrap. It was ermine and had probably cost more than my year's salary. Once again I realized all that I was forcing her to sacrifice. And yet—even then—I was powerless to halt her.

She turned her head, and I saw that her face wore the expression she has when her mind's once and for all fully made up. She's rather like her grandfather then.

"I shall talk to him alone, Barry."

I exclaimed indignantly: "What kind of spineless worm do you think I am?"

"Please." Her hand rested an instant on my sleeve. "He's an old man, you must remember. I owe him a lot. The very least I can do is to tell him myself."

I kissed her.

"We'll have to compromise, I see. Suppose I wait down here for ten minutes and then come up after you. We'll face him together—like John and Lorna before old Sir Ensor. Do you remember?"

Her smile was a little wistful. "I remember that Sir Ensor called them two fools."

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"And John answered that they were well content to be two fools together," I replied.

"Well, aren't we?" Her eyes gazed beyond me, into the dim shadows of the upper stairs. "Only I consider it the wisest thing we've ever done, my dear."

The tall clock in the front hall boomed. I counted the strokes; there were exactly a dozen. Their echoes were swallowed by the silence everywhere around us and vanished like ghosts.

"Only ten minutes," I reminded as she started up the stairs. She turned an instant to wave at me.

Silhouetted against the darkness her white taffeta gleamed like a moon ray. Sargent—and Sargent alone—could have done full justice to that portrait. Then she was gone—blotted out by the blackness of the upper hall.

The house became suddenly empty, and I realized then how intently I disliked it. A house of creaking floors, of gloomy hallways. A house, dank and musty, seldom, even in midsummer, visited by the sun. A house which suffocated Sylvia's gaiety beneath Victorian oppression.

Or was I blaming the house when the blame should be placed squarely upon the shoulders of Hezekiah Morse?

Taking off my overcoat I went into the living room to wait my ten minutes. With all the lights on this room wasn't so bad. It would even have been cheerful if flames had been flickering—as they should have been—in the open fireplace under the marble mantel.

I sat down in a lounge chair, which faced the open door to the hall and from which I could keep my eyes fixed on the stairs where I had last seen Sylvia. Lighting a cigarette I reflected that the situation was rather like something out of the *Mikado*. Something fantastic and ludicrous and utterly muddled!

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It was I who had drawn up for Hezekiah Morse the document which would so effectually disinherit his granddaughter if she married other than one specified man (who was decidedly not Barry Foster). Sylvia was forbidden, unattainable. Yet I, who should have realized that fact better than any man, had ventured to reach for her nevertheless, helpless in the grip of a force I could not control. And what would be the outcome of it only the gods could conjecture.

Morse loved his granddaughter, yes. Probably as much as it was in his make-up to love anyone. But he couldn't bear to have his will thwarted. And he didn't back down. Those beetling eyebrows, that rugged jaw, showed unmistakably how impossible it was for him to capitulate.

Well, what of it? I asked myself fiercely. Sylvia could come to me without one nickel from her irascible old grandfather, and I asked nothing better. The money didn't matter to her either, she had assured me.

Besides, I wasn't doing so badly myself. I was well on the way to a junior partnership with Steelcraft, Cunningham and Swift. But the catch came right there.

Morse wouldn't forgive easily. It might be more accurate to say that he wouldn't forgive at all. Although I didn't have a better friend in the world than Lawrence Steelcraft would his friendship be enough when Hezekiah Morse began to pull wires? There were plenty he could pull—Morse was well able to make his influence felt in Chicago.

And if Steelcraft were forced to bow his head to the storm? It's never easy at best to locate with a new firm; it might be an impossible task if Hezekiah Morse wanted to hound me, as he probably would. And then what? Wearing out shoe leather walking hostile streets? Wait-

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ing vainly in anterooms where many are called but few are chosen?

And Sylvia? No, I didn't have any right to ask her to share *that* sort of life. I had to tell Hezekiah Morse that it wasn't true, I wasn't going to marry his granddaughter. Rising from my chair I took a hasty step toward the door. But to give up Sylvia? I couldn't!

I sank back, undecided. No, I couldn't see any way between the horns of this dilemma. Besides, things had gone too far for action now. I could only wait.

Time had dragged interminably, but the hands of my watch stubbornly insisted that only five minutes had passed. I crushed my cigarette into a convenient ash tray and thought of Hezekiah Morse.

He would be in his study, of course. That was his favorite room, and he was generally to be found there —among the books which lined its walls from the floor nearly to the ceiling. Idly, I wondered how many of them there were. Two thousand at the very least, I estimated. Some dated back to the sixteenth century, rare first editions. The total value of the collection couldn't be much less than a hundred thousand dollars. Morse had shown me one book for which alone he'd paid enough to keep an entire family in decent comfort for a year. Yet he'd considered it to be a great bargain— because it had been printed in 1579 and because, as far as anybody knew, there was only one other copy in the world.

My thoughts strayed from the study, and I became aware that Morse's house was surprisingly quiet. Was Sylvia talking to her grandfather upstairs? One would think their voices could be heard, or at least Morse's rumble. He should, if past experience were any criterion, be bellowing with a bull's anger by now.

I listened intently, but could discern nothing. The

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silence continued to envelope the house in the manner of a thick, heavy gas. Haunting walls of silence! Where were the servants? Where was Morse? This eerie quiet was like some sinister emanation from a disturbed Egyptian tomb.

Glancing again at my watch I saw that it was now nine minutes past twelve. And at that very instant every nook and cranny of the room was alive with sound, its waves beating their message into my eardrums. A scream! The shrill paroxysm of a soul in terror. A woman's voice. *Sylvia's!*

I ran to the stairs, dashed up three steps at a time. Memory is vague with regard to what I had expected to find up there. Perhaps I had envisioned Morse twisting her arm or some such sadistic nonsense . . . Faintly as in a dream I was conscious of other footsteps than my own, footsteps that were clattering up the other stairs, the stairs which descended to the kitchen.

I reached the upper hall, and Sylvia, like a hunted thing seeking refuge, ran into my arms.

"Barry!" Just that single word repeated over and over. "Barry! Barry!"

She raised her head from my shoulder. Though I live to reach the century mark I shall still be haunted by the sheer horror which I saw imprisoned on her face.

"Grandfather! In there!"

Her gesture indicated the study, and I tugged at the doorknob. The door met my pull with unexpected resistance. Baines hurried toward us from the far end of the hall, and I was vaguely conscious that it had been his footsteps I had heard on the back stairs.

"It's locked!" I said stupidly. As though doubting my word Baines tried the knob also.

"So it is, sir."

"The other door!" Sylvia cried. "In here!"

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I stepped across the threshold of the room she pointed out—her own room I recognized at once. From it a door opened onto the study, a connecting door which now stood open.

A wide circle of light from the tall lamp on Morse's desk illuminated the room, permitting me to see, only too clearly, every hideous, horrible detail.

He was slumped far forward in the chair, his chest resting against the edge of the desk. His fingers were gripped about the handle of a small knife, the blade of which penetrated through the coat of his gray suit, disappearing from view within his very flesh.

"Why it's—it's Mr Morse!" Baines gasped weakly. His voice seemed to be coming from a great distance, an irrelevant element in a kaleidoscopic nightmare.

I lowered my eyes. A red pool had formed on the desk top. A horrible pool of glistening crimson which was trickling drop by drop down to the blue Chinese rug. I glanced hurriedly about the room. It was in no disorder with the single exception of one desk drawer, which had been pulled open as though the desk had been hastily rifled.

I turned my head and found Sylvia shuddering behind me. Her eyes were fascinated, seemingly unable to break away.

And it was then that I saw for the first time, staining the hem of her white gown, that damning red smear!

II

I SENT BAINES back to the kitchen, acting upon some vague sort of idea that he ought to be at his post when the police arrived. I urged Sylvia to lie down in her

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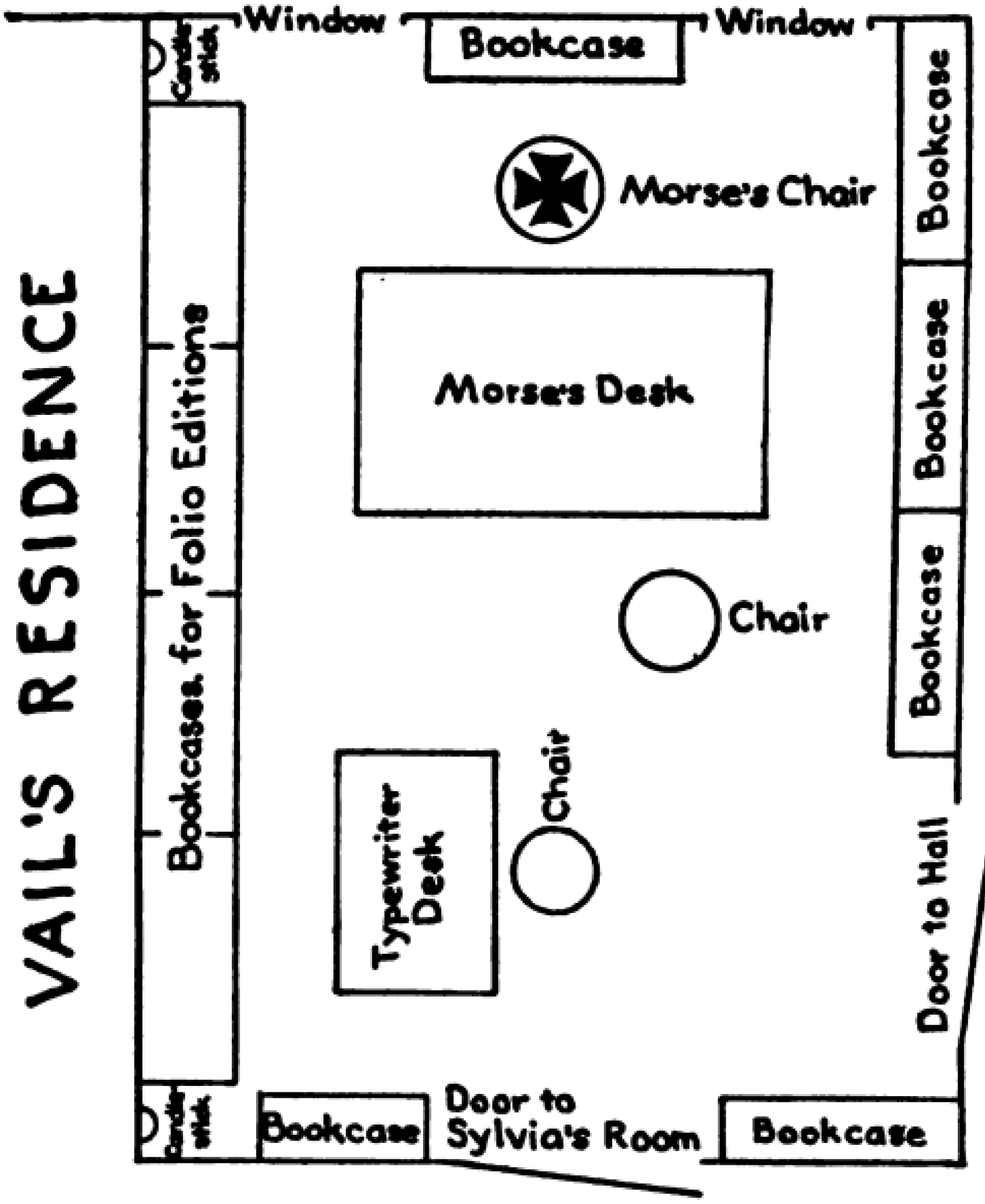
(North)



Floor Plan of Morse Study

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own room; it was the only thing I could think of that might make it even a trifle easier for her. She obeyed me, moving mechanically as an automaton; she was too stunned even to cry. I would have liked to shut the study door, to cut off that sight from her eyes, but I knew I had no business disturbing the status quo.

The desk telephone was fortunately well out of the range of that bloody puddle. Lifting the receiver I dialed "Police 1313." After I had made as brief and noncommittal a statement as possible to the police operator I called Steelcraft. His voice, answering sleepily over the wire, heightened in tense surprise as I told my story. Yet his tones, cool and calm as always, carried assurance, and I felt a trifle easier when I left the telephone. Since my legal experience had been largely limited to probate and corporation work I was unable to predict what course the police would take in such a case as this. But Steelcraft, now forewarned, could be counted on for immediate action in the event that both Sylvia and I should be arrested and held incommunicado. That possibility, however, seemed very remote then.

Before leaving the room I made a hasty reconnaissance. As I have shown in my diagram (page 11) mahogany sectional bookcases lined the walls on the four sides of the study. All the bookcase doors were closed, and there was no evidence that anything else in the room had been disturbed. However, I noticed a piece of paper lying upon the floor near the hall door.

I bent to pick it up. Disgustedly, I saw that it was merely an obvious form letter from an advertising agency, which must have blown from the top of the desk. Just in time I stopped myself from tossing it back there. The police, I recalled, would certainly not wish any disturbance of that crimson pool on the glass

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top, a pool which seemed, as I watched it, to be ominously enlarging. Under the light from the desk lamp it glinted like a molten lake. Slightly nauseated I turned away.

Sylvia sprang anxiously to her feet as I entered her room.

"Barry, why did he do it? Why?"

I shook my head blankly. I was wondering if Hezekiah Morse *had* killed himself. It did not seem at all like him. But if he had not, then who had? Besides ourselves and the servants there was no one else at present in the house.

Or was there?

The place should be searched, of course. But not now, not by me. My first duty was to stay with Sylvia. Besides, if there were such an intruder, he could scarcely escape unobserved now. Unless——

I said quickly, "Did you hear a noise while I was telephoning? A sound like someone moving around?"

"No, nothing."

"Nor I. And the front stairs squeak. You'd think—— Oh well, shall we go downstairs?"

A blinding spotlight pierced through the glass of the front door as we reached the bottom of the stairs. The squad car! Flinging the door open I admitted two patrolmen, one of whom trudged at once to the kitchen.

"Picked up the call less than five minutes ago," declared the other, who had taken his station by the front door. "It's only twelve-fifteen now."

"I'm Barry Foster," I told him.

"And I'm Jim Sullivan," he said pleasantly. He was a fair-haired lanky kid, who couldn't have been over twenty-two or twenty-three.

I took Sylvia into the living room. "Dear, can you sit down here in this big chair and not think of it?"

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"I can try," she said with a wisp of a smile. She did sit down, but that was as far as she could comply with my instructions. "Barry, why did he do it? Why?"

To that tortured cry I had no answer. Reluctantly I left her, to return to Officer Sullivan.

"He's upstairs." I pitched my voice low so that it would be inaudible to Sylvia. "I'll show you——"

"My job's to keep the door covered," he interrupted. "There 'll be plenty of fellows from headquarters to take care of the rest. Maybe O'Ryan 'll come too."

"O'Ryan?" I repeated for the sake of saying something.

"Captain O'Ryan," he amended. "Water Tower Station. Don't you know this is in his district?"

I hadn't known, but the doorbell pealed again before I was able to confess my ignorance. Sullivan opened it and let in three blue-coated officers. One of them was about as fine a physical specimen as I ever hope to see anywhere. He was at least six feet four, and his shoulders would have shamed an all-American fullback. This giant, I soon found out, was Captain Terence O'Ryan, and he took instant command of the situation.

"Stay by this door," he roared at Sullivan. "Anyone watching at the back?"

"Patrolman Murphy," Sullivan told him.

"All right, let him stay there." For the first time he appeared to be conscious of my presence. "And who might you be?" His manner was bluff, yet not offensive.

"Barry Foster." I added, "I was Morse's attorney."

He asked bluntly, "Where 'd it happen?"

"Upstairs. I'll show you."

He turned to the two patrolmen who had come with him to the house. "Phelan, McCarter, both of you had better come up, too." Our cavalcade filed up the pol-

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ished steps. When we had reached the upper hall I stopped before the door leading to Morse's room.

"He's in there."

O'Ryan tugged at the doorknob just as I had done. "It's locked."

"There's another door," I explained. "This way."

We entered Sylvia's bedroom, and I noticed O'Ryan's searching glance toward the flounced dressing table with its array of crystal bottles.

"Woman's room," he pronounced. "His daughter's?"

"Granddaughter's," I corrected. "Miss Morse is the only sur——"

But O'Ryan was staring through the open doorway.

"So that's Morse! He looks like he'd been carved up plenty! Well, we'll take this thing in order. Who found him—you or Miss Morse?"

I hesitated before answering. The truth was the best policy in dealing with the police, but—I remembered that smear upon Sylvia's dress. If a lie would help her I didn't mind telling several of them. Then I realized that I couldn't say that we had been together. Baines had already seen me running alone up the steps.

"Well?" O'Ryan demanded irritably. "Was it you?"

"It was Miss Morse," I was forced to answer. "But I was here almost as soon as she was."

"Anyone else in the house? Any servants?"

"Two. Baines—Morse's butler—and Matilda Sampson, the cook."

"Are they downstairs?"

"In the kitchen. At least I told Baines to wait down there."

"Phelan," O'Ryan directed to one of his henchmen, "go down to the end of the hall and down the back staircase and bring up this fellow Baines. There is a back staircase, isn't there?" he asked me.

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I admitted that there was, and O'Ryan smiled broadly.

"Usually is in houses like these. What's that little toy sticking into his chest? A paper knife?"

It was—but it had about as keen a double-edged steel blade as you'd find anywhere, I remembered. Morse had picked the thing up in China during his last round-the-world cruise, attracted, I suppose, by the cloisonné handle, which was really a work of art.

"It's his own knife," I said. "I've seen it lying on the desk several times."

"Humph," O'Ryan grunted. "I hope Johnny Mack gets here before long."

"Mack?" I asked. "Who's——"

"Homicide squad," O'Ryan explained tersely. "I'm not so sure this case isn't up his alley."

"You think Morse was murdered?" I ejaculated. Before he could answer, Phelan brought in Baines.

Rather slender in build Baines carried himself with an air of quiet dignity. There was a large bald area upon the top of his head, and he had a solemn face. I had never actually seen Baines smile, although once or twice I had noticed a glint in his pale blue eyes that showed he'd like to. He waited attentively at the door, his head slightly bowed as though to receive his master's final orders.

"What do you know about this?" O'Ryan interrogated gruffly.

"Very little, sir. Miss Sampson and I were together in the kitchen when we heard the scream."

"Scream?" O'Ryan echoed. "Who was doing all the screaming?"

"It sounded like Miss Morse, sir."

"Oh, it did! And did you find her when you ran up-

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stairs?" He studied the butler's face intently. "You did run upstairs, didn't you?"

"The back stairs," Baines told him. "I found Miss Morse in the hall, sir."

"Was Foster with her?" O'Ryan questioned.

"No sir. I noticed Mr Foster running up the front stairs. We reached the hall at almost the same minute, sir."

O'Ryan's vigorous snort might have meant almost anything. "How long were you in the kitchen tonight, Baines?"

"All evening, sir."

"All evening? Didn't you see Morse any time tonight?"

"No sir. Some time before nine o'clock I went upstairs, but I did not see Mr Morse then."

The doorbell rang again. Sullivan's voice sounded from below and another voice which O'Ryan recognized at once. "Johnny Mack!" he roared delightedly.

Lieutenant John Mack of the homicide section walked into Sylvia's bedroom a few seconds later. I examined him closely, impressed by the deference which had obviously been in O'Ryan's voice. He was about forty, of medium height and build, and he was almost dapper, being immaculately dressed in a dark-blue overcoat, white silk scarf, derby hat and tan gloves. His first act was to remove his overcoat and fold it carefully upon a chair, putting the derby hat and the gloves on top of it. But, although he was apparently absorbed in these details, his eyes weren't missing an item of the scene in front of them. They were restless eyes—keen and alert as those of a lynx.

So intently had I been staring at Mack that I had paid little attention to the inconspicuous little man who had followed him inside.

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"How are ya, Terry?" Mack greeted. "Remember Westborough? I promised to give him a break on the next big case, and this may be it."

"Captain O'Ryan, it is a great pleasure to renew our acquaintance," the little man declared earnestly. O'Ryan laughed and clapped him on the shoulder—so hard that the little fellow was very nearly bowled over.

"Theocritus Lucius Westborough! Good Lord, yes! Haven't you had enough of murder cases yet?"

"I fear," said the little man apologetically, "that an unsolved mystery will always exercise a peculiar fascination for me."

He was standing there a little shyly, twisting his black Homburg in his hand. Not much of a man as far as size went was Theocritus Lucius Westborough—if that incredible name could really be pinned upon him. He couldn't have been much over five feet six, and he was narrow-shouldered, flat-chested and scrawny-necked. His hair was sparse and silvery; his features showed that he must have been very close to seventy. His face was triangular: the forehead was both high and wide, but his cheeks narrowed down to a small, pointed chin. And, on top of everything else, his eyes peeked from behind a pair of gold-rimmed bifocals in a manner that reminded me of an owl blinking at a bright light.

Yet, oddly enough, this unprepossessing person was sponsored by a detective lieutenant. Not until later did I learn that this old man's brilliant chain of reasoning had solved for Mack a perplexing problem with regard to the killing of an unpleasant fat man named Elmo Swink.*

Westborough and the police lieutenant had been firm friends ever since the Swink incident. It was a good

*_The Fifth Tumbler_—Crime Club, 1936.

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thing for me that they were—but I am getting ahead of myself.

"Nice mess you got!" Mack grunted. "So Morse did himself in? Or did he?"

O'Ryan shrugged his broad shoulders. "I haven't had time to get very far into things. Miss Morse—his granddaughter—was the one who found him."

"Who are these two fellows?" Mack asked. O'Ryan made belated introductions.

"Foster was Morse's attorney, and Baines was his butler."

"Dear, dear, but this is very interesting," exclaimed Mr Westborough. He had at last ventured to remove his overcoat.

"It's his right hand holding the knife," Mack mused. "Was Morse right-handed?"

"He was, sir," Baines informed.

"The knife is driven inward very deeply," said Mr Westborough softly, as though to himself. "Undoubtedly it was inserted with great force."

"Blood's all right here by the desk," Mack declared. "It happened while he was in this chair—whether he did it or somebody else did it."

"One would not think that a seated man would have the leverage necessary for so powerful a blow," reflected Mr Westborough.

Mack went to the windows and inspected the catches. One was unlocked—the window near the west wall—I noticed for the first time. Mack returned to the closed door leading to the hall.

"This is locked—locked from the inside."

"Yes," O'Ryan confirmed. "Foster found it that way."

Mack turned to the butler. "Were you here when Foster tried the door?"

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"I was, sir."

"Did you try to open the door yourself?"

"I did, sir."

"And it was locked?"

"It was locked," Baines repeated with positive conviction.

"Key's still in the lock," Mack pondered. "Not that that necessarily means anything. What about this other door, Foster?"

"It was open when I found it."

"Open or unlocked?" Mack asked.

"Open."

"The hall door is the natural entrance to this room," Mack declared. He seemed to be thinking out loud. "This other door——" He wheeled abruptly upon Baines. "Whose bedroom is this?"

"Miss Morse's, sir."

"Why should this door be open when the hall door's locked?" Mack inquired.

"An odd circumstance," observed Mr Westborough. He seemed to be making a sort of inventory of the articles on the top of the desk, and I began to note them myself. There was the olive-green steel cabinet which contained the card index to the library. Then there was an open book—I was standing too far away to read its title—a pile of typewritten pages and an onyx desk pen set. One of its two pens had been taken from the stand and was lying, half submerged in blood, just before Morse's body. The typewritten sheets were drenched in blood, too. The book, however, was lying farther away and appeared to have escaped the red deluge.

Baines, who was also examining the desk, suddenly bent down to peer into the open drawer.

"Don't touch anything," Mack snapped.

"Oh, no sir. I was not going to, but——"

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"Well, what's the matter with you? Anything missing there?"

"I'm not sure, sir," Baines faltered. "But Mr Morse always kept his purple parrot in that drawer, and I do not see——"

"Purple parrot?" Mack repeated in a puzzled manner. "Are you crazy?"

A faint hint of a smile crossed the butler's solemn face. "A terra-cotta statuette about six inches high," he explained. "Of a purple color, sir, with red glass eyes. Mr Morse, I believe, once referred to it as a kakapo, which I understand is a New Zealand ground parrot."

"A New Zealand parrot?"

"New Zealand was his birthplace, sir."

"This statue worth anything?" Mack asked.

Baines shook his head. "From other than a sentimental standpoint, sir, it was very nearly worthless."

"Well, it must be in some other drawer," Mack grumbled.

But it was not.

III

THE DOORBELL CLANGED AGAIN, just as we completed our hurried inspection of the desk. "We'll have to talk over this business later," Mack growled. "The Identification Bureau fellows must be here now."

Several newcomers crowded into the room. The only one whose face I can remember was a spectacled young man carrying a tripod and camera. Greeting this youth as Jimmy Selzer Mack directed curtly:

"Shoot all the prints you find, but don't monkey

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with the body until after Doc Hildreth gets here. Better not touch the knife, either. And get some good pix from several angles—you know what we want. And be sure to get some shots of this mess on the desk; that's evidence."

The spectacled youth nodded in a bored manner as he unpacked his camera.

Meanwhile, O'Ryan was telling his two patrolmen:

"I want you to go over the whole house. Start at the top and work your way down. Look for any traces of a fellow hiding and any signs of blood. If you find either of 'em, report at once."

Phelan, a red-cheeked young man, nodded and was out of the door as eager as a hound upon the scent. His colleague, McCarter, a grizzled veteran of many years' service, followed at a more leisurely pace.

O'Ryan marshalled Baines and myself from the study in order to leave the room to the ministrations of the fingerprint men. Little Mr Westborough wrenched himself from the bookcases with palpable regret. Mack followed and closed the door behind him.

"Did you get Foster's story, Terry?"

"Only part of it," said the giant O'Ryan. "He was downstairs when Miss Morse found her grandfather."

I added hastily, "She had left me only a few minutes before. We were out of the house all evening and didn't return until midnight."

"Why were you downstairs?" Mack asked bluntly. "Why didn't you go home?"

I hesitated, not quite sure how to word my answer. Baines coughed discreetly.

"Beg pardon, sir, but do you wish anything further of me?"

"No, go on downstairs," Mack told him.

"Let's all go downstairs," O'Ryan suggested.

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"Good idea," Mack concurred. "It's time to see what the Morse girl has to say."

We descended the stairs in pairs. Mack and O'Ryan were ahead, and Mr Westborough and I brought up the rear. The little man said to me:

"Mr Morse, judging from the manuscript upon his desk, appears to have been engaged upon some literary pursuit."

"Yes, he was writing a book," I confirmed. "He had a secretary come in every day and dictated it to her."

"Although most of the manuscript is at present unreadable I discovered that he had apparently been engaged in verifying a quotation from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. A first edition of that work was open upon the desk."

Seeing that he was upon such good terms with the police, I risked putting a question to him.

"Do they think this is suicide?"

"Dear me, I really cannot say. Certainly it is obvious that Mr Morse died in the chair in which he was found, but further than that I do not believe Lieutenant Mack will go without additional evidence. He is not the man to jump at unjustified conclusions."

"You mentioned," I continued, "that a powerful blow was necessary to drive the knife in as far as it went."

"In my opinion, decidedly."

"Morse was a powerful man physically. Do you see any reason why he could not have stabbed himself?"

"I do not know," he returned slowly. "That question must be determined by the medical examiner."

But if Hezekiah Morse had not taken his own life, I was thinking, who else could possibly have done so? Baines had not seen Morse since nine o'clock. Could my erstwhile client have been dead as long as three hours before we found him?

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I knew in a vague sort of way that the medical examiner would be able to fix the time of death within very close limits—although the processes used were totally unfamiliar to me. But there was nothing at all to be alarmed about, I told myself. The murder—if it were a murder—had undoubtedly been committed some time before Sylvia and I had reached the house, and we could easily prove our whereabouts right up to the last moment if I could find the taxi driver again. No, there was nothing that need cause us the slightest worry. And yet, so inconsistent is the human mind, I was beginning to worry by the time we went into the living room.

Sylvia was seated in a big lounge chair facing the window. A tiny white handkerchief was clenched tightly in her hand, and she had been crying. One look at her grief-stricken face told me that.

O'Ryan began almost apologetically.

"Sorry, Miss Morse, but we have to ask you a few questions."

"Naturally," she agreed. There was something imperious about Sylvia's manner—something that persisted in spite of this shock—perhaps a touch of old Hezekiah Morse. Or perhaps merely a slight reserve that came from living too long in a lonely house with a domineering old man for guardian.

"This ain't no third degree," O'Ryan said goodhumoredly. "Let's all sit down and be comfortable."

He seated himself upon a sofa and crossed his huge legs while he was talking. Somehow I was reminded of a big, good-natured mastiff.

But if O'Ryan were a mastiff, Mack was a greyhound hot on the chase. His lynx eyes never left Sylvia's face. And as for Mr Westborough, who was completely dwarfed upon the sofa beside the big O'Ryan—well,

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he was a silent little man, content to be a mere spectator and not an actor in the drama. Or so I thought then.

It was Mack who did most of the questioning.

"Where were you this evening, Miss Morse?"

"With Mr Foster." Her voice was steady, but there was a sudden rush of color to her cheeks. "He took me to dinner, and we stayed for the floor show. However, we were home by midnight."

"Not before?"

"Perhaps a minute or two earlier." She pointed through the open door to the hall. "That clock struck while we were talking."

Mack rose to his feet and walked to the hall, comparing the time indicated by the tall Jacobean-cased clock with his own watch.

"Okay, you were here at twelve. But Foster didn't give the alarm until twelve-ten."

"We didn't know till then," I broke in angrily. "I phoned as soon as——"

"I'm doing the talking," Mack reminded curtly. "Miss Morse, why was Mr Foster downstairs? Why hadn't he gone home after you left him?"

"I—I had agreed to rejoin him in a few minutes."

"You went upstairs to get rid of your wrap?" Mack suggested.

Sylvia scorned the subterfuge. "I went upstairs to speak to grandfather."

"What about?"

"A personal matter."

"That's no answer. You can tell us more than that."

She hesitated. "Why did you go upstairs to see your grandfather?" Mack persisted.

"Miss Morse is under no legal obligation to answer that question or any other," I informed. "You under-

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stand that every answer she makes is made voluntarily and of her own free will?"

"Sure," Mack growled. "Miss Morse, do you refuse to answer the question?"

"She does," I snapped.

Sylvia nodded her confirmation, and Mack passed to the next subject.

"What time was it when you went upstairs?"

"Didn't I tell you?"

"No."

"I'm almost sure I did."

"You told us the time when you and Mr Foster were talking in the hall."

"Well, I left him just as the clock had stopped striking."

Truthful Sylvia! I admired her, even while regretting that she had been quite so explicit. True, we had been separated not quite ten minutes, but in that time——

O'Ryan said:

"She screamed, and then Foster ran upstairs. I got that from the butler."

"What time was it when you screamed?" Mack asked.

"I—I don't know," she faltered.

"Do you know, Foster?"

"It was nine minutes after twelve," I said truthfully.

"You sure of that?"

"Yes," I replied, volunteering no further explanation.

Mack produced a cigar, bit off the end and spat it into the fireplace. "Your story doesn't hang together, Miss Morse. After leaving Foster in order to speak to your grandfather, you waited nearly ten minutes before you went into his room. Assuming, of course, that you didn't see him before the time you screamed."

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Her hand tightened slightly about the arm of the chair; otherwise she displayed no signs of undue anxiety. "You are correct in that assumption."

"Very well, Miss Morse." Mack's face was that of a seasoned poker player. "Why did you wait ten minutes before going in to see your grandfather?"

"It's not necessary to answer that question, Sylvia."

"But I will answer it, Barry. You know how grandfather detested rouge and mascara. I sat down at the dressing table to remove my evening make-up."

"Humph!" Mack grunted. "That take ten minutes?"

"The operation frequently requires an even longer period, I believe," said Mr Westborough from the sofa.

Mack started his investigation in a new direction.

"When you came into your room, Miss Morse, did you notice the door which opens into your grandfather's room?"

"It was closed," she returned promptly.

Mack asked, with pretended casualness, "What was this matter you were going to talk over with your grandfather? Did it concern Foster?"

"I have already refused to discuss it," Sylvia said regally. Her dark curls made a stunning picture against the tapestried back of the chair.

"Sure it concerned Foster," O'Ryan contributed jocosely. "He wouldn't have waited for her downstairs if it hadn't."

"A non sequitur," murmured Mr Westborough. "The inference does not necessarily follow, Captain O'Ryan."

Mack was chewing on his cigar with a sullen ferocity. "Miss Morse, what was the first thing you saw when you opened the door to the library?"

Her face was ash-white. "Grandfather," she said in

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a low voice, her hand pressing convulsively against the chair arm.

Brutally, Mack asked: "Was that knife in his chest?"

Her lips barely breathed the affirmative.

"And then you screamed?"

"I—I don't remember screaming. The next thing I can recall is seeing Barry in the hall."

"Was the door from the library to the hall locked?"

"I didn't notice."

"Didn't you try it to see?"

"I don't remember."

"No?" Mack's tone was edged. "Well, please try and remember this: How'd that blood get on your dress?"

Glancing downward she shivered. Was she seeing that stain for the first time? I wondered.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"Did you go near the desk?"

"I don't know," Sylvia said helplessly. Once more her eyes strayed to the hem of her dress. "Evidently, I must have. But it is all a blank until I saw Barry."

"Not very helpful are you, Miss Morse?" Mack observed sarcastically.

I jumped angrily to my feet.

"As Miss Morse's attorney I demand that you stop this at once. You've no right at all to subject her to this sort of thing."

Mack met my glare with one of his own. "You're not in a courtroom, Foster. Not yet."

Before I could reply the camera expert, Jimmy Selzer, ran into the room, sputtering like a bomb about to go off.

"Take a look at this key, will you?"

"Hall-door key?" Mack asked.

Selzer nodded. "No prints on it. Handle it if you want to."

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Mack took the key, and I moved close to get a better look. It was a round key with a solid, tubular shank—the kind that is used in interior locks everywhere. Nothing at all out of the ordinary except for one thing.

The single drop of dried blood on its bow!

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr Westborough. "This is very important evidence, indeed."

IV

PATROLMEN PHELAN AND MCCARTER entered the living room, the red-cheeked Phelan acting as spokesman.

"Chief, there's no one hiding in the house. We've been over the whole place from top to bottom, and we didn't even skip a mousehole. And there weren't any bloodstains, either."

"How about the windows?" O'Ryan asked.

"All those on the first floor were locked from the inside. And so were most of 'em on the second floor. What's next, Chief?"

"You can look for a bloodstained glove," Mack ordered.

Mr Westborough nodded approvingly. "Excellently reasoned. It is obvious that there must be one." He paused briefly. "Although it might be a handkerchief or any other similar article."

"Yes, it might be a handkerchief," Mack concurred.

"Where should we look?" Phelan wanted to know.

"Come out in the hall, and I'll tell you," Mack said.

He returned alone a few seconds later. Jimmy Selzer completed his report.

"There 're plenty of prints on the telephone and on the two doorknobs—most of 'em are badly blurred.

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We're about ready to call it a day if you want back up there."

"All right," Mack agreed. "Tell the fellows we'll come up in a few minutes." He scratched a match to relight his cigar as Selzer was leaving the room. "What's your slant on this now, Terry?"

The big Irishman was staring at Sylvia. "Murder," he said guardedly.

"Murder!" Sylvia echoed, springing to her feet in alarm. "You mean that grandfather——"

"Just that," Mack said curtly. "As I dope it out, he was stabbed by someone standing behind him. Whoever he was, he locked the study door for some reason and went out through your room, Miss Morse. We won't know when it happened until Doc Hildreth gets here."

"The butler 'd know if Morse had had any visitors," O'Ryan suggested. Striding toward the dining room he bellowed "Baines!" in a voice that a bull would have had difficulty in emulating. Baines appeared from the direction of the kitchen.

"Do you wish anything, sir?"

"Anyone here to see Morse tonight?"

"One gentleman, sir. He gave the name of Mr Wells."

"Gave the name?" O'Ryan repeated in a puzzled manner. "What do you mean by that crack? Wasn't his name Wells?"

"I do not know, sir. He was a stranger to me."

"Can you describe him?"

"I can try, sir. He was wearing a dark overcoat and a derby."

"So were a million other fellows," Mack exclaimed disgustedly. "What did the man look like?"

"A rather small man, sir. About the build of this gentleman."

"You mean Mr Westborough?"

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"Yes sir."

"Would you recognize him again?"

"Oh yes, sir. His beard was unmistakable."

"Beard!" Mack shouted. "That's something. What sort of beard was it?"

"A gray Vandyke, sir."

"Gray, huh? Was he an old man, then?"

"About the age of this gentleman, sir."

Further questioning revealed that Baines had noticed nothing else about the unknown Mr Wells except that he had insisted upon keeping on his overcoat when Baines had escorted him upstairs to the study.

"What about his hat?" Mack asked.

"I deposited that upon the table by the stairs, sir."

"Did he have a card?" O'Ryan inquired.

"He did not offer one, sir."

"What was his first name?"

"He did not inform me, sir."

"Do you know what time he came?"

"Yes. It was some time before nine, sir. Perhaps even as early as eight-thirty."

"And when did he leave?"

"I am unable to say. From the kitchen I could not have heard the front door close, sir."

"Did you see Morse when you took Wells upstairs?"

"No sir. The door to the study was closed, and I conversed with him from the hall."

"You didn't see Wells go inside?"

"No sir. I left Mr Wells at the study door and descended the back stairs to the kitchen."

"His story," O'Ryan broke in, "is that he was there all evening with the cook. That hasn't been checked yet. Baines, tell Miss What's-her-name we want to see her."

Baines bowed with imperturbable dignity. "The name is Sampson, sir."

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Matilda Sampson had eyes at first only for Sylvia. She was a short, pudgy woman of middle age, and she was wearing a pair of tortoise-shell rimmed spectacles.

"Miss Morse, you poor lamb! I'd have come in here before to tell you how sorry I was, but that fat cop in the kitchen wouldn't let me."

Rising from her chair Sylvia patted the older woman's shoulder.

"Thank you, Matilda. I know you would."

"What have these men been saying to you?" the cook demanded. Standing with arms akimbo she glared furiously at all of us. "I'm a respectable woman, not used to killings and such. And I've always worked for respectable people, not that that doesn't include Miss Morse, the poor lamb!"

Sylvia suggested gently, "I believe that they wish to ask you some questions."

"Questions!" Matilda exclaimed angrily. "I'll question them! That cop has left his dirty feetprints all over my floor. I scrub and scrub, and you can just tell him he's got to clean it up before he goes."

"Never mind that," O'Ryan said gruffly. "Just tell us where you spent the evening."

"Right here in this house. In my kitchen."

"Alone?"

"No, Baines was with me from dinnertime on. We was playing cribbage—just like we do every night. Now what are you going to do about that mess in my clean kitchen?"

"You can give Murphy a mop and tell him I said to scrub the floor," O'Ryan told her. He chuckled as Matilda flounced from the room. "That 'll keep him out of mischief, I guess."

The doorbell pealed again—I had lost count of how many times it had rung since I had first seen old Heze-

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kiah in the study. This time it was the coroner's physician, Dr Basil Hildreth, who was a short, rotund individual of forty-five to fifty. He carried a worn black bag, and a stethoscope protruded from his coat pocket.

"Johnny Mack and Terry O'Ryan!" he exclaimed the moment he had set foot inside the hall. "Hello, I've seen this little fellow somewhere before."

Mr Westborough extended his hand. "At the Hotel Equable, I believe. Dr Hildreth, do you remember the body of a certain Elmo Swink?"

"Good Lord, yes!" the doctor exclaimed. He wrung Westborough's hand so heartily that the little man winced. "So you're working with the police again, eh?"

"You honor me too much," Mr Westborough murmured. "This time I am a mere spectator."

I glanced back at the living room, where Sylvia had resumed her chair by the fireplace. If there was any way in which she could be shielded from the details of this sordid business! But I could think of none.

"So it's Hezekiah Morse, is it?" the doctor was saying. "Met the old coot once several years ago. Where do we go from here, Terry?"

O'Ryan led the way upstairs. I trailed along with them. I didn't like to leave Sylvia alone, but the servants were in call and I felt that I had to know the doctor's verdict.

The hall door was now unlocked and stood open. The fingerprint men had finished with the room, but they had left it much the same as when I had first seen it. Hezekiah Morse was still slumped over the desk, his eyes wide and glassy. Dr Hildreth, however, appeared to be most interested in the dagger.

"Knife got the heart, all right. Musta nicked the aorta, or there wouldn't be so much blood here. I can

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remember a stabbing case where the chest cavity and the heart chambers were filled, but there wasn't as much blood on the surface as you'd get cutting your face shaving. Yet the knife had penetrated the back between the fourth and fifth ribs, and the man was deader 'n a mackerel before he had time to know what it was all about."

Dr Hildreth, it didn't take me long to discover, was an exception to the usual taciturnity of the medical profession. He seemed to enjoy talking, and he kept up a brisk rapid fire of patter all the time he was making his examination.

"You can skip the ancient history, Doc," Mack advised. "What's the dope on Morse? When was he stabbed, and did it happen here, and could he have done it himself?"

"Of course it was done here," the doctor snapped. "You don't see any blood around the room, do you? He was probably killed right away, although that doesn't always happen. The coroner's office has a record of a Mexican who'd been stabbed in the right ventricle—he ran twenty yards before he dropped." He started to touch the knife, then stopped hastily. "This been checked for prints yet?"

"Hasn't been touched, Doc. I told 'em to leave it just as it was."

"All right, I'll be careful. This looks the right size, and it's certainly sharp enough to make the puncture." Taking a small pair of scissors from his bag he cut away Morse's clothing. "Blade's double-edged, about three quarters of an inch wide, under a sixteenth inch thick. Wound's larger—looks like the knife handle had hit against the desk when he fell forward."

"That's the knife, though?" Mack queried.

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"If it isn't I'll never do another job for the coroner," the doctor said cheerfully. "No signs at all of rigor. Say, how long ago did they find this fellow?"

"An hour and a quarter," said Mack after he had referred to his watch.

"Well, I want to talk to the first person who——"

"That was Miss Morse. We'll have her——"

"Maybe I can answer your questions," I broke in. "I was here almost at once."

"Who 're you?" the doctor asked bluntly.

"He's Morse's attorney," Mack informed. "Name's Foster."

"Well, Foster, I hope you kept your eyes open. Most people don't. See this pool of blood?"

I wasn't likely to overlook that sight.

"Sorta thick, isn't it?" the doctor went on. "Something like jelly? Was it that way when you first saw it?"

"It was not," I said.

"It hadn't begun to thicken?" the doctor questioned.

"No, it was a thin red liquid."

Dr Hildreth whistled. "Well, that fixes your time of death for you. Blood coagulates in from five to ten minutes. If it hadn't started to coagulate when Foster first saw it Morse couldn't have been stabbed longer than ten minutes from that time."

The full import of his words swept over me in a sudden damning flood. That would put the stabbing no earlier than midnight—but God in heaven how impossible that was!

Because there hadn't been anyone in the house at that time but Sylvia, myself, Baines and Matilda. I was downstairs; the two servants were together in the kitchen. That left only Sylvia . . .

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V

THIS CASE was fast assuming the aspects of a gigantic nightmare to me. If Doctor Hildreth was right concerning the time of death he had proved the impossible, *because no one had left the house after Sylvia and I had entered*. That was self-evident: From my chair in the living room I could have seen anyone approaching the front door; the back door opened from the kitchen, where the two servants had kept each other company; nearly all the windows (except the one in the study) had been found locked from the inside.

And Morse's murderer was not lurking within the house; no, it had been thoroughly searched. Unless——"

But reason itself recoiled from a supposition so hideous. There must be some other explanation; perhaps it was suicide after all—in spite of that drop of blood upon the study door key.

There must be some logical way in which to account for that. If there were traces of blood between the door and the body of Hezekiah Morse I could advance the theory that Morse himself had locked the door *after he had stabbed himself*. Why not? Dr Hildreth had just mentioned the case of the Mexican who ran twenty yards after receiving a knife thrust in the heart. It was a pretty theory, but it didn't fit the facts. Scan the rich blue Chinese rug as closely as I might, I couldn't find a sign that even a single bloody drop had fallen there.

Well, then, Dr Hildreth must be mistaken about the time of death. Or I had been wrong about the condition of the blood when I first viewed it. But I couldn't con-

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vince myself of that; the picture was etched upon my brain in a manner that couldn't be erased.

Besides the globular doctor had not yet finished. He was now taking a reading from a thermometer.

"The loss of body heat gives another check on the time. The temperature of the body drops about 1.6 degrees an hour on an average. It takes about twenty-four to thirty hours for the body to cool completely. That's normal for a clothed body. A naked one cools faster for obvious reasons. And a fat one will usually hold its heat longer than a thin one."

"That is a very interesting piece of information," chimed in Mr Westborough. His eyes, peering behind the bifocals, hadn't left the doctor for several minutes. "If I mistake not the temperature of the body should enable you to fix the time of death with reasonable precision, thus confirming the evidence of blood coagulation, which alone might not be conclusive."

"It *is* conclusive," the doctor snapped.

"Dear, dear! I was referring to"—he looked squarely at me—"the uncertain human element."

"Oh, I see what you're driving at," the doctor nodded. "Well, the loss of body heat gives just a good rough approximation. There's so many things to be taken into consideration. A hemorrhage like this quickens the cooling, for instance. And the temperature of the air makes a difference, too. Have these windows been opened since you came?"

"They were closed when we got here," O'Ryan informed. "We haven't opened 'em."

"Well, you take two objects at different temperatures: say the stiff here and the air in the room. The bigger the temperature difference between them, the faster the——"

"Yeah! We get it!" Mack acknowledged. "Even

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dumb cops like us ought to know a stiff is going to cool off quicker in a cold room than in a warm one. What's the dope from your little thermometer?"

"As nearly as I can tell the body temperature confirms the evidence of blood coagulation."

Mack glanced sharply at me. "So Foster was telling the truth about the state of the blood when he first saw it?"

"I see no reason whatever to doubt his word."

"I don't either. Not about that point anyway," he emphasized meaningly. "Well then, Doc, you'd say that Morse was killed at midnight?"

"Certainly no earlier, if Foster's watch is right!"

It was. Mack and O'Ryan had already checked it.

"Okay, Doc, now tell us whether it was murder or suicide."

"Expect the coroner's office to do all the brainwork?" the doctor grumbled. "You ought to have sense enough to dope that out for yourself."

"Maybe I did," Mack grinned. "Maybe I just want to find out how dumb you are."

The doctor snorted. "Maybe I'm a green-eyed hippopotamus! I can give you half-a-dozen good reasons why it wasn't suicide!"

"Shoot!"

"In the first place the direction of the wound is obliquely downward—the edges of the incision are unequal and that indicates the knife went in obliquely. A fellow going to stab himself in the heart would stick the knife in horizontally nine times out of ten. Then the wound would be straight from front to back and not right to left, as it is. Suicides rarely stab downward at the heart—you get more force pushing it straight in."

"Anything else?"

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The doctor pointed to the clothing he had cut away from the wound.

"Just look at the work this knife had to do! First it went through his coat, then his vest, then a heavy Oxford cloth shirt, then his underclothing—all before it penetrated his body. Now a man sitting down and stabbing himself would have one hell of a time getting the knife through all that—it could hardly be done except by a man standing and coming down from behind with a powerful swing. Morse's Oxford cloth shirt alone might deflect the knife unless it traveled with considerable force."

He pointed to the incision.

"Now look at this bit of cloth from Morse's underwear—driven into the wound! That 'll give you an idea of the power with which the blade went in."

So Mr Westborough had been right! The little man had been a shrewder observer than I had supposed.

"Yeh, you've made a pretty good case for homicide," Mack conceded. "Now what kind of fellow did it?"

"What the devil does the city pay you for?" the doctor demanded. "Well, I'd say the murderer had to be quick—and pretty strong. He was standing behind Morse's chair and came down with the knife through the chest and into the heart—from the position of the wound I'm not so sure but what the blade didn't nick a rib! That help any?"

"Some!" Mack grunted. "Think it could be a woman's job?"

I had been dreading this question—even though I sensed its inevitability.

"Maybe. Let's see: Morse is seated in a low chair—that would help to make up for the difference in height—well, I'd say your woman couldn't be any shorter than five feet six or seven inches. And she'd have to

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have strong wrists—probably used to playing lots of golf or tennis."

Strong wrists? Well, Sylvia fenced, I was thinking. And I had talked to her fencing master, a lively little Frenchman. What had he said? "Ah, monsieur, nothing in the world will so strengthen the wrist muscles. *Nom d'un nom*, nothing!"

I had fenced with Sylvia myself; I knew only too well the supple strength of those wrists, the strength which had been able to parry so easily my most powerful thrusts, while her darting ripostes touched just above my heart. Sylvia's hand was used to grasping the hilt of a foil . . . a foil and a dagger! One blunt, the other sharp, but was there not a certain psychological association . . . ?

I broke off this trend of thought abruptly. I didn't have the courage to follow further on that path. But, in spite of everything, I remembered that Sylvia was tall. She was nearly five feet eight!

VI

HAVE I MENTIONED reporters? A whole clanjamfrie of them descended upon the house shortly after Dr Hildreth's departure. O'Ryan left the study to handle these genial ghouls of the press, and, thinking of Sylvia, I went with him. I was just in time. Three or four of them were grouped about her, all firing questions at once, but they deserted her without a qualm the instant O'Ryan appeared on the scene.

O'Ryan gave them some information—not too much—and allowed them to ascend to Hezekiah Morse's study. Useless for me to attempt a protest against the

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invasion! Moreover—the thought came to me with sickening suddenness—to antagonize the press at this juncture would be about the most stupid move possible to make.

However, I was thankful to get rid of them so easily, because at that instant what I wanted above everything else in the world was a chance to talk to Sylvia alone.

Strictly speaking we were not alone. The cop by the front door, a beefy, red-faced patrolman who had relieved Sullivan, could see us, but he was too far away to overhear if we spoke in low tones. And besides he wasn't even looking our way now—he had tilted his chair at a precarious angle off the floor and seemed to be entirely absorbed in his thoughts—whatever they might be.

After the last reporter had filed from the room I stood without speaking for perhaps half a minute. Sylvia was seated in a lounge chair; her back was toward me; I couldn't see her face at that moment, but I could read only too plainly the grief expressed by the dejected droop of her shoulders.

"Sylvia," I began, with as much hesitancy as little Mr Westborough. "Sylvia, dear!"

She turned her head; her deep blue eyes were misty, and her mouth quivered slightly. "Yes, Barry?"

Minutes were flying, minutes that were more precious than emeralds. And still I couldn't tell her. Couldn't say, boldly and brutally as I must, "Your grandfather was murdered—at twelve o'clock—while you were upstairs. As your attorney it is my duty to caution . . ."

No, I couldn't say it, but Sylvia was braver than I.

"Barry, is it true—what that detective said a little while ago? That grandfather was——"

She shrank from the word; I could sense her inward

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shrinking. Desperately I blurted out, "It happened at midnight—while we were in the house."

She sprang from her chair, her face suddenly as white as her gown. "Barry, he was killed? Killed at midnight, you say?"

I nodded. Somewhere, no doubt, there were words adequate to explain, but I could think of none of them. I couldn't even look her in the eyes. Instead I gazed at the ring on her fourth finger, and I noticed, dully as one does notice such trivialities at such times, that the stone was glowing a dull raspberry red. Outside in the daytime it would be as green as spring leaves. A peculiar rare stone, alexandrite, I believe. The ring had been a present from her grandfather, I could recall her telling me. From old Hezekiah who——

Sylvia's clutch on my arm brought me sharply back to my senses. There was strength in those slender white fingers.

"Barry, what are you saying! You know that couldn't be possible."

"But the medical examiner——" I began uncertainly. She scarcely seemed to hear me.

"He was locked in his study. The only way in was through my room. And nobody left the house."

I groped for words. "But the medical examiner swears he was killed no earlier than midnight. Something about the blood . . . oh, Sylvia!"

Fool! I was thinking. Barry, you damned fool! You were the one who told them about the blood. Couldn't you have known something was wrong when you first saw it? Couldn't you have lied to them—lied for her?

Sylvia grasped intuitively what it had taken me several moments to reason out—too late.

"If that's true, Barry, if the medical examiner is right——"

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"They usually are," I said inanely.

Her voice didn't falter. "Then the police will say that I killed grandfather?"

I hung my head in mute acquiescence. I would rather have faced a firing squad than her eyes.

"But I didn't kill him, Barry," she said simply.

I didn't have a chance to answer her. Looking back at it all now I often wonder what I would have said if the cop at the front door hadn't interrupted us. He carried his chair from the hallway to the living room door and set it down with a loud thump.

"Captain's orders, Miss. You're not to talk with him alone. I've heard what you've been saying so far, and I have to hear the rest of it."

I glared—somehow it relieved me just to find an object at which I could glare.

"Miss Morse is not under arrest, and even if she were she has the right to talk privately with her attorney. You're exceeding your authority, my man."

He didn't like my tone—I hadn't intended that he should. I was rapidly losing control of my temper, which was a mistake because the police aren't to be bullied.

"Anything you have to say to her, you'll say in front of me. If you don't like it, tell the captain." He sat down with a decisive grunt by way of a period to the sentence.

I made the best of it. "All right, then, have a cigarette?"

He shook his head. "Never smoke 'em. Now if it was a cigar——"

Heavy feet sounded on the stairs. They were coming for Sylvia now, coming to put on the thumbscrews of third degree, to force her to confess—— But it was not that.

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No—it was a wicker basket which was being carried down the stairs. A wicker basket six feet long! Hezekiah Morse's farewell to this old house on Division Street! Before I could make any move to shield her Sylvia had seen it, too.

If she had cried it would have been easier. Tears would not have unnerved me as much as that deathlike rigidity with which she stood. I put my arm around her and led her to a chair.

"Would you like a glass of water?" I asked. It was an asinine question but it was the only thing that popped into my mind, and I had to say something. Comfort her? As if I could!

"No, I'm all right now, Barry, honestly! It's just that—well, it was sudden . . ."

The cop was pretending not to notice us; not a bad fellow after all.

"Barry, they will question me, won't they? What shall I answer?"

"Nothing at all. You're not obligated to tell them anything. Even in court a person doesn't have to answer questions when he might incrimi——"

I stopped. It sounded too much as though I already believed in her guilt, and I didn't! Or rather I couldn't be sure of anything. Feelings were mixed up with facts in a queer sort of hodgepodge in my brain. But Sylvia's voice was not the voice of a guilty person.

"If I told them the truth, Barry, just the plain, simple truth, no more and no less, could they twist and turn it around so that it would all sound like lies?"

"Absolutely not," I returned promptly. Hope was pushing its way forward in my mind, hope growing like a lily from an oozy black mire. "Only stick to the truth, and they can't make you contradict yourself. Third

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degree, all kinds of cross-examination are helpless against the truth. It's the shining armor which——"

How much more I would have said in this vein I don't know, but Sylvia interrupted me. There was a look on her face which meant—well, everything in the world to me.

"Thank you, Barry. I shall tell them the truth. The truth, the whole truth, and——"

"A very wise decision indeed, Miss Morse," said a voice behind me. I turned. Little Mr Westborough was standing, a trifle self-consciously, in the hall.

VII

WHATEVER THE CONNECTION of this odd little man with the Chicago Police Department, he was not at all unfriendly. I sensed that in his shy manner as he waited in the hallway.

"You will pardon the intrusion, Miss Morse?" He made no attempt to enter the living room uninvited. "Lieutenant Mack wishes to ask a few questions of Mr Foster."

"Won't you have a chair, Mr Westborough?" Sylvia invited.

"Thank you, I shall." He selected a large wing chair which almost totally eclipsed him from view. "Do not hurry yourself, Mr Foster. No hurry at all. Dear me, there is at present a veritable bedlam upstairs, if you will forgive my mentioning it, Miss Morse. The ingenuity displayed by four reporters in the fabrication of questions is almost unbelievable."

Sylvia tried to repress a shudder. "It will be a front-page sensation? In all the newspapers tomorrow?"

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His grave voice was sympathetic. "I very much fear so."

O'Ryan's big voice boomed from upstairs, "You know as much as we do about it now, boys. Run on back and write your stories."

There were shouts of "Okay!", "So long" and "Sure you're not holding out on us, Cap?"; then they trooped down the stairs pell-mell. Rushing into the hall, I intercepted them at the foot of the staircase.

"I'm Miss Morse's attorney. It may endanger her health permanently if she has to talk any more tonight. I hope that you'll be decent enough to let up on her and put me through the works instead."

They were sporting enough to agree to this, and I spent a very busy five minutes answering (or evading) questions. Considering it was my first experience I don't believe I did so badly. At length even the most persistent of the four was willing to concede that I was a turnip from which all nourishment had been squeezed, and I was able to return to the living room, where I found Sylvia deep in conversation with Mr Westborough. Her manner was more relaxed than I had seen it since I had first waited at the bottom of the staircase.

She called to me, "Mr Westborough is quite an authority on Roman history, Barry."

"Dear me, no, I am a mere student of the subject," the little man disclaimed modestly.

"Anyway he is writing a monograph on Heliogabalus," Sylvia finished. "And he's already written a book about the Emperor Trajan. Isn't he a real celebrity?"

"He certainly is," I concurred. So the little man wasn't a detective at all, but a historian.

"And now, if you don't mind, shall we return up-

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stairs? Lieutenant Mack will be growing impatient."

Hezekiah Morse's study was exactly the same; there was the same bloody smear upon the desk and the rug. But Hezekiah himself was gone, and the room seemed strangely empty, in spite of the fact that Mack, O'Ryan and the two patrolmen, Phelan and McCarter, were all present.

Or perhaps I must except Mack, who could hardly be called present. He had climbed out of the west window and was standing on the sill outside, a flashlight in his hand. "There's been no monkey business," I could hear him saying. "This window wasn't forced open, Terry."

He jumped back to the floor of the study. "Hello, Foster. Answer a question for me. Wasn't this window usually kept locked—like the other one is now?"

"I believe so," I assented. "Morse's books are valuable, and he took every precaution."

"Then why the hell do we find it unlocked?" Mack wanted to know. "No, I'm not saying anyone could 've got in by it. There's no rain pipe or anything; only a human fly could 've crawled up that front wall. But why does this window happen to be unlocked just on this particular night at this particular time?"

"An odd circumstance indeed," contributed Mr Westborough. He leaned far forward out of the window which Mack had left wide open. "Lieutenant Mack, may I borrow your flashlight?"

"Sure," grinned Mack, handing it to him. "What's on your mind now?"

"Very little. I merely wished to see if the impression of a ladder could be discerned upon the turf below us, but I fear the distance is too great to—dear me, whatever are those?"

I followed Mack to the window, to tell the truth,

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well pleased at the turn the investigation had taken. If it could only be established that someone had left Hezekiah Morse's study by its one unlocked window! However, Mr Westborough had found nothing to confirm that supposition. What he pointed out was merely a series of small holes in the gray stone about a foot below the window ledge. The nearest was almost a foot and a half from the edge of the sill and there were others under the second window and also under the window of the adjoining house. All of them were in a straight horizontal line.

"Whatever can their purpose have been?" pondered Mr Westborough.

"Might 've been some ornamental ironwork hung there," Mack theorized.

O'Ryan nodded. "Might 've been at that. There used to be a lot of that old junk around these parts."

"Baines might be able to tell you something about it," I suggested.

O'Ryan bellowed for the butler, who was presently escorted upstairs. He looked sleepy—and a little scared. Neither he nor Matilda had been allowed to go to bed. They had been kept together in the kitchen with a patrolman to report every word they said to each other, I learned afterwards.

Bowing, Baines waited for O'Ryan to speak.

"What do you know about these holes under the windows?"

"There was at one time a small decorative balcony, sir. It was suspended not only from below these windows but also from under the windows of Mr Vail's house next door. But it was demolished several years ago since Mr Morse feared that this architectural adornment might facilitate the ingress of burglars. His collection of rare books is extremely valuable, sir."

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"Well, it looks like your boss had shut out his second story men, all right," Mack conceded. "Nobody can climb up that wall without a rope or a ladder, or I'll eat my hat. But what did the fellow next door say when Morse started to haul down his ironwork?"

"Mr Vail had given his consent, sir."

"Vail?" Mack repeated. "Who is this Vail?"

O'Ryan interrupted before Baines could reply. His bulky body was stooped over the wastebasket by Morse's desk, and his big, clumsy hands were pawing through its contents.

"There's paper and a string here, Johnny! Paper and string!" He straightened up and turned sternly upon the butler. "Say, what time did you empty this wastebasket?"

"This morning, sir."

"Then Morse unwrapped some sort of parcel since then. Know what it was?"

"No sir."

"Morse go out today?"

"Only for a brief walk about four o'clock, sir."

"Was he carrying a package when he returned?"

"He was not, sir."

"You're sure of that?"

"Yes sir."

"Did any packages come for him today through the mail or from some store?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Anyone bring a package to him?"

"I believe Mr Wells, of whose visit I informed you a short time ago, sir, was carrying a package under his arm."

"Well, why the devil didn't you say so?" Mack demanded in an exasperated voice.

"You didn't ask me, sir."

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"Say, who is this Wells, anyhow?"

"As I told you before, sir, I haven't the slightest idea."

"You went up with him to the study, didn't you?"

"Yes sir."

"Could you hear anything that Morse said to him?"

"I do not eavesdrop, sir."

"Well, slap my dirty face!" Mack exclaimed. "Baines, you win the jack pot. Who else besides Wells called on Morse today?"

"Only Mr Vail, sir."

"The fellow next door, huh? What did he want?"

"He was a very intimate friend of Mr Morse's," Baines informed reprovingly. "Mr Vail came about three this afternoon and stayed until shortly before Mr Morse went out for his walk."

"And those two were all the visitors Morse had today?"

"There was also his secretary, Miss Guild, but she can scarcely be placed in the category of visitor."

"Any telephone calls?"

"One while Mr Morse was at luncheon. About one-thirty, sir. A man's voice which I could not identify."

"Could you hear the conversation?"

"I did not remain in the room while Mr Morse was talking."

"Suppose that call was from Wells making an appointment for the evening," I cut in. "If you trace it, you——"

"Trace it," Mack cut in disgustedly. "How the hell can we trace a call from one dial phone to another? If it was made from a toll phone we might have better luck—they keep a record of those calls." He had several more pieces of information to add on this subject.

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"Anything else, sir?" Baines inquired respectfully.

"No, run back to the pinochle game," Mack ordered, relighting his cigar and throwing the match on the rug.

"Cribbage, sir," Baines corrected as he left the room.

"Nuts!" O'Ryan glowered. "I'd like that guy a whole lot better if he'd forget to say 'sir' once in a while."

"Willing enough to talk, though," Mack commented. He looked at me sternly. "Hope I can say the same for you, Foster. You ought to know all about Morse's affairs."

"As far as I know his affairs were simple. He had been a client of my firm, Steelcraft, Cunningham and Swift for a number of years, but lately we have had very little to do for him."

(Leaving out those confounded wills, of course! But I wasn't going to bring up that subject!)

While Mack questioned me O'Ryan was rummaging through the drawers of Morse's desk, and Mr Westborough seemed very intent on the bloodstained papers upon its top. Those papers were innocuous; I knew that, but I felt a little uneasy at O'Ryan's investigations. No telling what might turn up in one of those capacious drawers.

"Oh, you didn't?" Mack went on. "How did Morse have his money invested?"

"The bulk of his fortune was largely in government bonds and other sound securities. He also owned some real estate, mostly apartment buildings."

"How much was he worth?"

"I couldn't say exactly. Two million dollars might be a close estimate. His holdings had shrunk considerably during the depres——"

Mack grinned. "Where have I heard that story before? But Morse had at least piled up enough dough

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so he didn't have to work. What 'd he do with all his time? I'd go nuts just sitting around."

I waved my hand at the bookcases. "This collection kept him fairly well occupied. He was writing a book about them. A sort of glorified catalogue, you might call it."

"It was evidently the latest installment of this work he was perusing at the time of his death," Mr Westborough remarked. Thumbing through several sheets he read aloud:

"'And for those other faults of barbarism, Doric dialect, extemporanean style, tautologies, apish imitation, a rhapsody of rags gathered together from several dunghills, excrements of authors, toys, and fopperies confusedly tumbled out, without art, invention, judgment, wit, learning, harsh, raw, rude, phantastical, absurd, insolent, indiscreet, ill-composed, indigested, vain, scurrile, idle, dull and dry; I confess all ('tis partly affected), thou canst not think worse of me than I do of myself.'"

"Say, that guy didn't have much of an opinion of himself!" O'Ryan exclaimed.

"What's it all about?" Mack wanted to know.

"It is from 'Democritus to the Reader', Burton's satirical preface to *The Anatomy of Melancholy*," Mr Westborough explained. "That is the book now lying upon Mr Morse's desk. Undoubtedly, he wished to verify the quotation, which he had cited in his own work."

"Well, I don't see much in that lead!" Mack uttered with the contempt of the thorough realist. "Books aren't going to get us anywhere on this case."

"I am not so sure," Mr Westborough demurred gently.

"Foster," Mack demanded peremptorily, "what do

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you know about Morse's will? He had made one, hadn't he?"

It had come at last—but I was calmer than I thought I would be!

"Yes, several of them."

"Several? Couldn't he decide who was to get——"

"It wasn't so much a question of who as of how."

"You'll have to explain that."

"As is common when disposing of large fortunes, the property wasn't willed outright, but was tied up in the form of a trust. Mr Morse kept changing the trust provisions—continually altering the power of the trustees."

"But the same people were to get the dough?"

"Yes, the beneficiaries, with very minor exceptions, remained unchanged."

"Sylvia Morse one of 'em?"

"Naturally. She was his granddaughter and his only living relative."

"Who were the other beneficiaries?"

"In the last will signed by Morse about two thirds of the estate was left in trust for Miss Morse and one third in trust for Vail. Baines and Matilda were to get five hundred dollars each and about half-a-dozen charities were mentioned."

"Vail, eh?" Mack perked up at the mention of this name. "Say, what sort of guy is he?"

O'Ryan, who had continued his search of the desk, interrupted before I could answer.

"Here's Morse's checkbook, Johnny, and you can take a look at this."

"This," I noticed as I leaned across the desk, was the stub of a check made out for one thousand dollars on the Continental Illinois National Bank and Trust Company. It was made out to cash, and the date indi-

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cated that Morse had signed it on the last day of his life.

VIII

"WAS MORSE in the habit of drawing large sums of money from the bank?" Mack asked Baines, who had been called in once more for consultation.

"No sir. He was not. Once a week he visited the bank and drew out enough cash to pay the household expenses, sir."

"When'd he do that?"

"Every Monday, sir."

"Hm! This is Wednesday—or rather Thursday morning. He went last Monday as usual, I suppose?"

"Yes sir."

"It's dated Wednesday," Mack speculated aloud. "Wonder where Morse cashed it if he didn't go out until four."

"Banks are closed then, and a grand is quite a sizable amount to get together on the spur of the moment," O'Ryan commented.

"What does that suggest to you, Terry?" Mack asked after Baines had again left the room.

"I'd say Morse had to have some cash pronto for something."

"Or somebody!"

"Blackmail, eh?"

"When a guy collects as much jack as Morse had he can expect to be shaken down for a little of it now and then."

I was able to confirm this, and I did.

"An attempt was made about four months ago to blackmail Mr Morse. A man by the name of Ernest

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Hands, ex-clerk in a broker's office, had collected what he thought was evidence implicating Morse in an off-color stock speculation. He wanted five thousand to keep quiet."

"He get it?"

"He got six months instead! Morse's skirts were legally clear on that deal—if it had smelled to the general public—and he could afford to be tough. He was!"

"What happened?"

"Morse played along with Hands, let him think he was scared to death and persuaded the fellow to come to his study. Hands was a rank amateur at the game and didn't have much sense at that. Morse led him along to spill the whole story, while I waited in the next room with a dictograph and a representative of the State's Attorney's office thrown in for good measure. Hands didn't have a Chinaman's chance when it came to court. He got the full sentence too—six months."

"What kind of fellow was Hands?"

"Little dried-up shrimp of a man with pale blue eyes and a drooping mustache."

"Hum," Mack grunted thoughtfully. "Is he still in the big house?"

"He was the last I heard."

O'Ryan had come to the wide, shallow top drawer of the desk. As he jerked it open, he let out a yell.

"Here's Morse's gat!"

Mack left me at once and dashed across the room. "Let's take a look at it, Terry." He handled it very carefully with his handkerchief, I noticed. "Smith and Wesson thirty-two." He broke it open and the cartridges popped out upon the glass top of the desk. There were six of them. "Chambers full," Mack ob-

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served, "and the barrel's clean, too. This didn't have any more to do with it than my Aunt Harriet up at Niles, Michigan."

But O'Ryan had found something else in the top drawer of Morse's desk—a number of typewritten sheets, which were bound together by brass fasteners within a blue manuscript cover. I glanced over his shoulder, and the minute my eyes fell upon the first two words, my heart traveled downward to the general vicinity of the patent-leather Oxfords I was wearing. Hezekiah Morse had made a carbon copy of the typewritten instructions he had given me. The instructions for his last, diabolically conceived will!

"It's Morse's will," O'Ryan roared. "And it's got a lot of dope here that Foster kept mum about. Baines was to get five thousand—not five hundred. And good God, what's this?"

"Let's see!" Mack shouted, snatching the document from O'Ryan's hands. He perused it rapidly, his eyes skipping over words but extracting the sense of the whole. "Listen to this, Westborough. Here's the motive for our case—and my God, what a motive!" He read aloud: " 'In the event my granddaughter, Sylvia, fails to comply with my wish to marry Vail I want it clearly expressed that she shall receive nothing upon my death but my purple parrot.' "

"The purple parrot!" Mr Westborough gasped. "Dear me, how very odd!"

Mack put down the manuscript the better to glare at me. "Why did you lie to me about Morse's will, Foster?"

"You asked me the terms of Mr Morse's will, and I told you," I returned. "What you have been reading are some notes concerning a will which never became effective."

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O'Ryan turned back to the top sheet. "The date's a week old, Foster. Don't try to put anything over on us."

"Nevertheless," I persisted, "Morse had never signed the will."

"You drew it up for him, didn't you?" Mack demanded.

"Well, yes," I admitted.

"He was gonna sign it, wasn't he?"

I told the exact truth; they were bound to find out sooner or later. "So far as I know, Morse expected to come to the office today for that purpose."

"Was Mr Vail still to get his third share of the estate?" inquired Mr Westborough.

"Only the bequest relating to Baines had been changed," I returned. "Otherwise, the new draft merely alters some trust provisions with the exception of——"

"Of this clause relating to Sylvia Morse?" Mack finished. "Two thirds of two million dollars! Christ, what a motive! And the girl's in love with you, Foster. She wanted to marry you."

"No," I said. But my denial failed to carry conviction.

"That's what she had to tell the old man that was so important it couldn't wait until morning," O'Ryan contributed with a sudden flash of Celtic insight.

"Sure, it all hangs together," Mack agreed. "You and she were engaged, Foster. Probably just got that way tonight. She wants to marry you; she goes up to tell the old man, and bingo the fireworks start!"

I found an unexpected ally in Mr Westborough.

"The deceased, I should judge from his face, was a gentleman of a somewhat irascible character, was he not, Mr Foster?"

"That's putting it mildly," I said with a wry face.

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"De mortuis nil nisi bonum," he quoted softly. "What a pity that we shall have to break the tradition in this instance! And I should also judge that he possessed a very loud and carrying voice?"

"Like a bull's," I admitted. "That is, when he really got mad at someone."

"Excellent!" beamed Mr Westborough. "Now, Mr Foster, as a sensible gentleman, I trust you will see the folly of answering my next question other than truthfully. Did you or did you not hear voices from the study while you were waiting downstairs for Miss Morse?"

I started. This little fellow had an uncanny knack of hitting upon the truth. Why, it had struck me rather queer at the time, I remembered, how fantastically quiet the house had been!

"No," I said. "I give you my word that I heard no voices from upstairs."

"Well, what about it?" Mack asked, looking rather puzzled. "What 're you driving at, Westborough?"

"Dear me," smiled the little man. "The inference appears so obvious! Unless Mr Foster is lying (and if so he has not helped his fiancée as he will learn presently) *Miss Morse could not have apprised her grandfather of their engagement.*"

"Something in that," Mack mused thoughtfully. "The old boy would 've raised plenty of commotion if he'd heard *that* news."

"Yes indeed. If my judgment of physiognomy is at all accurate, his roars of rage would have shaken the house down—speaking figuratively, of course. Therefore, either Miss Morse's story of not going into her grandfather's room is entirely true, or——"

"Or what?" Mack demanded.

There was a peculiar expression on the little man's

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face. "If Miss Morse killed her grandfather she *killed him without warning*. Killed him in the midst of caresses, coaxings, blandishments—all maneuvers to get behind his chair where, unseen, she could seize the dagger. A terrible crime, gentlemen! A crime that could be conceived only by such a misshapen monster as Gloster. Gloster whose boast, if I recall my Henry VI aright, was 'Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile.' "

"Sylvia couldn't possibly have done that," I found myself saying.

Mack sniffed doubtfully. " 'Murder while I smile', eh, Westborough? Well, it's usually a woman's way of killing!"

"But," Mr Westborough objected, "in the event your hypothesis is true, how explain the disappearance of the purple parrot?"

"I don't," Mack admitted. "What difference does it make? It wasn't worth a damn."

"For that very reason it becomes of even greater significance," smiled Mr Westborough. "Were it of value one could conceive of innumerable reasons for its disappearance."

"I get it," Mack said, a little sheepishly. "That is something of a puzzler when you come to think of it!" His face brightened. "Hell, it isn't either! Miss Morse knows the old man was planning on booting her out with nothing but that damn parrot. She simply got mad and pitched the thing out the window. I can't say I'd blame her."

"Well, we can check up on that, and check up right away," O'Ryan cut in. He turned to the two patrolmen, who had been waiting patiently by the doorway. "Phelan, McCarter, go downstairs and look under all the windows—as far in any direction as a girl 'd be

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able to throw. See if you can find any pieces of a purple-clay parrot."

Mack added instructions of his own.

"And take a look at the turf under the study window—the one that was open. See if there 're any marks that look like someone had a ladder resting there."

The patrolmen nodded understandingly and were gone. "You were engaged to her?" Mack asked of me. There seemed to be little point in lying further about it.

"Yes, we were engaged."

"Happen tonight?"

I admitted that the assumption was correct.

"Well, tough luck that this had to come up," Mack said with a gruff sympathy. "Right now I'm kinda interested in the fellow who was to get a third of the estate, regardless of whether or not he married Sylvia Morse. What kind of fellow is this Vail?"

By all rules and regulations Sylvia should have preferred Tom Vail to Barry Foster! Even though she didn't I couldn't help being a little jealous of the man. However, I tried to be fair in my appraisal.

"He's rather slender, stands about five feet nine, has steel-blue eyes that can stare you out of countenance. Roman nose and long, thin hands. Talks with a slight drawl, and you think when you first meet him that he's affected, but there's nothing sissified about Vail. He's a fine boxer and a crack revolver shot—as a matter of fact he won several prizes shooting in tournaments. Well, that's about all I know, except that he was once in the diplomatic service."

"Related to Morse?"

"Not that I know of."

"Damn funny the old man should take such a big shine to him," Mack mused.

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"Say, how'd Vail feel about marrying Sylvia Morse?" O'Ryan cut in.

The answer to that was easy—only too easy.

"He was in love with her," I said slowly.

"Well, that makes the cheese more binding," Mack exclaimed. He left me to stroll about the room, glancing at the bookcases, but I soon found that he was not looking at the titles of the volumes inside. "These are queer old houses, do you know it! Most of 'em were built two or three in a row with one wall between them. Architect's way of saving money, I guess. Not a very thick wall at that. Any carpenter could make a door between this house and the next. Is there one?"

"I never heard of it."

"Guess we'll have to have Baines up again."

The butler's legs must be getting tired of climbing the back stairs, I couldn't help thinking. However, it was difficult to visualize Baines complaining.

"Ever hear of a passage between this house and Vail's?" Mack asked.

"If there is such a thing, sir, it is quite unknown to me. I never heard Mr Morse speak of it."

"Did he ever tell you when he was going over to see Vail?"

"Frequently, sir."

"Well, did he go out the front door at those times?"

"Always, sir."

"Humph!" Mack muttered, still unconvinced. "I've heard of bookcases being built to hide a door—you worked a spring or pulled a lever and a whole section slid back——"

"Yeah," O'Ryan guffawed. "I've read them kind of yarns too. Be your age, Johnny! We know enough now to make the pinch."

"Got to check every angle," Mack retorted gruffly.

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He turned to the butler. "Suppose there was such a door. Where would it lead to, Baines?"

"Into Mr Vail's bedroom, sir."

Mack said with obvious excitement, "Do you hear that, Terry! We're going to have a couple of men in tomorrow to shift these bookcases and sound the walls."

O'Ryan grinned. "Waste of time, but if it 'll make you any happier——" Patrolman McCarter returned to the study before he could complete the sentence. "Well, did you find any signs of a ladder being used?" O'Ryan wanted to know.

McCarter shook his head. "Not on this job, Chief. It 'd have to rest on a plot of grass under the window. The turf is pretty hard, but it's not frozen, and if a ladder had been used there 'd be sure to be a couple of dents."

"Any footprints on the turf?" Mack asked.

"No," McCarter answered, "but they probably wouldn't show—ground's too hard——"

"If a guy dropped from this window his prints 'd show all right," Mack declared grimly.

"Never thought of that," McCarter exclaimed, his round and ruddy face puckered. "It 'd be considerable of a drop."

"It would," Mack agreed.

"Well, the turf's as smooth as a baby's hind end," McCarter informed.

"Now, what about that purple parrot?" O'Ryan demanded.

McCarter grinned. "Phelan's still looking for it. Persistent, that guy is! But we've gone all over the street and the sidewalk with flashlights—every place it could 've been thrown from an upstairs window. So far not even one dinky piece of the thing has turned up."

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"Well, go on back and help Phelan look for it," O'Ryan directed. Followed closely by Baines, McCarter left the study. Mack wheeled on me abruptly:

"I want Miss Morse here for questioning."

"Here? In this room where her grandfather——"

"Yes, here," Mack growled. "Anything to say about it, Foster?"

I managed to curb the reply that sprang to my tongue.

"She told me only a short while ago that she intended to tell you the truth with no mental reservations. May I go down for her?"

"Yeh, if you don't take all night about it."

I found Sylvia abstractedly turning the pages of a magazine. She glanced up as I entered, a trembling ghost of a smile on her face.

"Barry, you look like the interne announcing that everything's ready in the operating room."

"It isn't that bad," I said consolingly. "You needn't talk to them at all if you don't want to."

"But I do want to. I want them to know the truth."

The truth? Yes, I thought so. But would Mack and O'Ryan? I wondered. It was plain enough to me that they were convinced that they had a case. And it looked like an almost airtight one, I was forced to admit. For no particular reason I thought of little Mr Westborough, and, oddly enough, the thought proved to be comforting.

Mack began in an almost jovial fashion as we entered the study, "Well, Miss Morse, feel like answering a question or two?"

She nodded, her eyes deliberately averted from the desk.

"All right," said Mack, "have a chair."

He was seated at Morse's desk, and the place he had

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prepared for Sylvia was directly in front of him. I hurriedly interposed.

"Miss Morse will sit here," I said, indicating the chair by the small typewriter desk, which was used by Morse's secretary in the daytime.

Her look was ample thanks. Poor Sylvia! Looking back at it now, it seems that there was so little I was able to do to make her lot easier.

There was a goosenecked lamp with a green shade upon the typewriter desk, and O'Ryan was fixing the shade so that the light would shine upon Sylvia's face. I twisted the shade the other way.

"The light is bothering Miss Morse's eyes, Captain O'Ryan."

He glared at me in discomfiture. "See here, Foster——"

"Let it go, Terry," Mack interrupted. Behind the big glass-topped desk he had assumed almost a judicial aspect—an effect slightly marred, however, by the cigar which was bobbing in the side of his mouth.

"Miss Morse, you told us you came to your room at twelve o'clock?"

"Yes," Sylvia confirmed. Her voice was steady, but her hands, crossed upon her lap, were trembling the barest trifle.

"Did you close the door from your room into the hall?"

"I think I did. I'm not quite sure."

"No?" Mack questioned sarcastically.

"I'm not sure of anything tonight," she admitted faintly.

Mack declaimed with easy assurance, "The door might have been open, then, Miss Morse?"

"It might have been," she agreed.

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"At that time did you hear the noise of a person moving? Either from the next room or from the hall?"

"No," she returned promptly.

"Then there was no one on this floor but yourself and your grandfather?"

I couldn't stand for that. "That's not a fair question. You've no right to ask what Miss Morse thought."

"Speak when you're spoken to," Mack snapped irritably. "This isn't a court, Foster, and I'd advise you to pipe down if you want to stick around. Well, Miss Morse, what about it?"

"How could I know whether anybody else was on the floor or not?" Sylvia asked.

"If anyone had been, you'd have heard him fast enough," Mack declared positively. "These floors creak to high heaven when a fellow takes a step. You couldn't miss a noise like that, Miss Morse. Not unless you wanted to."

She faltered, "I don't know whether I could or not."

"Don't know, eh? Well, you do know this. You were going in to ask your grandfather's consent to marry Foster."

She started—and I thought of a bird inadvertently blundering near a crouching cat.

"Do you admit that's true?" Mack demanded.

"Yes," she said softly. "It's true. But that doesn't have anything to do——"

"It has everything to do with it," Mack cut in peremptorily. "Your grandfather wouldn't allow you to marry anyone but Vail. He was going to disinherit you if——"

"I don't know how you——"

"Never mind how we found out. We did, and that's all that concerns you. Miss Morse, do you play much golf or tennis?"

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"A good deal of tennis." Her face was plainly puzzled. "Why?"

Mack blandly ignored her question. "I had you doped out as a tennis player. Good strong wrist muscles. Firm fingers. Fingers that can hold——"

I couldn't put up with any more of it. No man could.

"Miss Morse's tennis hasn't a thing to do with this. Please confine your questions to the actual matter in hand."

"Have it your way," Mack said with pretended joviality. He winked at O'Ryan, standing across the room. "Funny, Terry, that Miss Morse should spend nearly ten minutes just sitting at her dressing table."

O'Ryan returned the shuttlecock with a chuckle. "If it had been me, I'd have been right anxious to find out what granddaddy was going to say to me."

"You'd think she would," Mack grunted. "And instead she spent the entire time just fixing her face."

I motioned to Sylvia to make no comment upon this badinage, but she failed to see my signal. "A woman's way of procrastination, Lieutenant. You see I was frightfully nervous, and——"

Mack was across the room in one spring—the cat claiming its victim.

"You're lying, Sylvia Morse. We know you're lying. You went into your grandfather's room right after twelve o'clock, and you didn't dare tell him about Foster. You walked around the desk behind him and saw that knife. You reached out a hand for it—he didn't even look up. You grabbed it and—don't lie, Sylvia Morse! Lying isn't going to help you. I'm right, and you know it. Just look at your dress! His blood spattered on it when——"

"Dear me," interrupted Mr Westborough. "But in

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that event why is the *hem* of Miss Morse's gown stained and the hem alone?"

IX

MACK'S LAST STATEMENT had been pure rhetoric, it was at once evident. However, the detective was a big enough man to admit when he was in the wrong.

"You're right, Westborough. She must 've brushed against the edge somehow." Rising from the chair, he stooped to make an examination. "Yeh, there's a sort of smudge here."

"Therefore, it is necessary to consider the time factor," Westborough resumed. "Miss Morse, you will pardon my somewhat gruesome allusions? The blood did not reach the side of the desk instantly. The large pool must first have formed upon the top before the overflow was able to trickle down the side. A considerable interval—perhaps one as long as several minutes—is indicated. Is it reasonable to suppose that Miss Morse remains all this while behind her grandfather's chair?"

"Why not?" Mack asked grimly. "She had to fix his fingers around the knife handle."

"But I didn't!" Sylvia exclaimed piteously. "I didn't do anything of the kind."

I broke in angrily:

"Unfounded accusations before witnesses are slanderous if I know anything about the law. Miss Morse has grounds right now for an action."

"Nuts!" Mack ejaculated. "I don't bluff worth a damn, Foster. You've got to explain just how her dress did get bloodstained."

But Sylvia still insisted that she didn't remember going near the desk.

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"I saw him sitting there—saw that awful knife! Then it's all a complete blank until I met Barry—Mr Foster—in the hall."

"Quite understandable," breathed Mr Westborough. He was on our side; I no longer had any doubts of it. "Such an intense shock—I believe that any psychiatrist will confirm this—might well account for the hiatus in Miss Morse's memory."

Sylvia's head was poised high, and there was more than a trace of her grandfather in her voice.

"If I were lying to you, lying about anything, you understand, it would be easiest of all to lie about that. But I'm telling you the exact truth. I can't remember going near the desk. I can't even remember screaming."

"I wonder if you are telling the truth?" Mack said sternly.

"Try me," she urged. "Ask any question you want."

"No," I shouted. "I'm not going to let you take advantage of her. Mack, I'm telling you once and for all that Miss Morse cannot be compelled to incriminate herself."

"No?" Mack drawled. He was smiling—hatefully. "Even for a lawyer, Foster, you're all-fired anxious to cover up. You're not worrying over her nearly as much as you pretend. What you're really afraid of is that she'll incriminate you."

"That's a lie," Sylvia flashed. "Mr Foster couldn't have had anything to do with it. He was downstairs the entire time."

So I was forced to hide behind a girl's skirts! I didn't like it—no man would—but I didn't see anything I could say that wouldn't make the position even worse.

"Miss Morse can scarcely confirm my whereabouts." I was hoping that they'd be dumb enough to take that for a confession.

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They weren't.

"She doesn't need to," Mack said. "You're cleared if she says she didn't see you come out of this room."

"I didn't," Sylvia returned at once. "I'll sign a statement or swear it or do anything else that——"

"Nothing else is needed," Mack cut in, his eyes narrowing shrewdly. "Miss Morse, were you sitting in such a way that you'd have been sure to see Foster if he had come out?"

"Don't answer!" I cried. "Sylvia, don't an——"

But she had answered.

"Yes. I was seated almost directly facing the door. I couldn't have helped seeing him."

That did it! In spite of myself, I couldn't help yielding a grudging admiration to the cunning manner in which Mack had spun this web. For if Sylvia had been able to see me leaving the study certainly she would have been able to see anyone else performing the same act. *And there was no other way out than through her room.*

"That's all I wanted to know," Mack crowed jubilantly. "You could see *anyone* who came out of the study, Miss Morse. And no one did come out for the simple reason that no one was there. Miss Morse, you killed your grandfather."

I clutched at straws. "Perhaps Morse was killed earlier."

"I'll take Doc Hildreth's word on that any day against yours."

"I don't mean the doctor's wrong, but after all he does allow some leeway. He didn't say that Morse couldn't have been killed a few seconds or maybe a minute before Miss Morse reached her room."

"Where does that get you?" Mack snapped. "The killer's got to go some place, hasn't he? He can't dis-

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appear into thin air. You'd have spotted him if he went down the front stairs. If he ran down the back stairs he'd have gone into the kitchen where two independent witnesses were sitting. What's left? He isn't in the house—Phelan and McCarter didn't overlook a place where even a mouse could hide, they say. And the windows were locked from the inside."

"One window in this study wasn't locked," I reminded.

"Hell's bells!" Mack exclaimed. "Are you trying to tell me he turned into a bat and flew away?"

Phelan and McCarter entered the room at that moment. Phelan looked noticeably crestfallen.

"Chief, if that purple parrot was thrown from a window of this house, I'll eat the thing myself."

"Purple parrot?" Sylvia echoed. "You mean grandfather's?"

"We do," Mack said grimly. "Of course you don't know it's gone?"

"No," she answered, ignoring his tone. "Is it?"

"It is," Mack said firmly. "When did you see it last, Miss Morse?"

"I can't say definitely."

"When was the last time you were in here, Miss Morse?"

"You mean before I returned this evening with Mr Foster?"

Mack grunted affirmatively.

"This afternoon, somewhere around four. I came to put back a book."

"A book?" questioned Mr Westborough. "May I ask the name of it, Miss Morse?"

"The first volume of Browning's *Men and Women*."

"Indeed?" smiled Mr Westborough. "Dear me, I

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thought that only such old fogies as myself ever read Robert Browning."

"He isn't my favorite poet," Sylvia admitted. "However, there was a certain quotation running through my mind, and it seemed to be just the sort of thing that Browning would have written. I had to make sure."

"Indeed, yes," Mr Westborough beamed. "I have often experienced the identical sensation. Did you succeed in verifying your conjecture?"

"Oh yes. I already had half an idea where to look for it. You know the stanza that begins: ' 'Tis an awkward thing to play with souls'?"

" 'And matter enough to save one's own,' " Westborough finished.

Her glance was admiring. "You *do* know your Browning."

"Mr Browning and I have had some very pleasant hours together," the little man said with a pleased chuckle. "Your grandfather owned so many rare and valuable books, Miss Morse. Is it possible that this volume is a first edition?"

"I think it is."

The light of the genuine booklover was gleaming in his eyes. "May I have your permission to examine it, Miss Morse? Although I have lived nearly seventy years I have never been fortunate enough to see a first edition of *Men and Women*."

"It's in there," Sylvia said, pointing to one of the bookcases.

"The books are arranged alphabetically by authors?" Westborough inquired.

"Yes, except for the folio editions. They are segregated along the west wall in those bookcases with the deep shelves."

"Naturally those giant tomes would require specially

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built cases," Westborough agreed. "But *Men and Women* is not of their number, for I see that very work now." Lifting up the sliding glass door, he took out a volume bound in faded green cloth. His eyes traveled caressingly over the title page. "London: Chapman and Hall, 193, Piccadilly. 1855," he read aloud. "Yes, this is a first edition, Miss Morse, and it is in exceedingly fine condition." Regretfully, he restored it to the shelf. As he did so, I could see him give a slight start. "Is there by any chance an index to your grandfather's library, Miss Morse?"

"That olive-green cabinet on the desk. Grandfather made out every card in it himself."

Measuring about a foot square by a foot and a half deep, the cabinet contained four drawers, each of which held about a thousand cards. Mr Westborough jerked out a top drawer.

"They are indexed by titles, I see."

"And by authors, too, in the two lower drawers," Sylvia informed.

Mr Westborough had withdrawn two cards and was comparing them meticulously. "All of these cards, you say, are in Mr Morse's handwriting? It is rather odd that he should undertake such a tedious clerical chore."

"He didn't think it tedious," Sylvia said. Her eyes were moist. "Grandfather loved these books, Mr Westborough. No detail in connection with them was ever too much trouble for him."

"A true bibliophile indeed," Westborough declared. Replacing the cards he opened a lower drawer and withdrew two more. These also he returned to their proper position. "It is the same. Exactly the same."

"What's eating you?" Mack wanted to know.

"It is the merest triviality," said Mr Westborough. "Not worth mentioning, I assure you."

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