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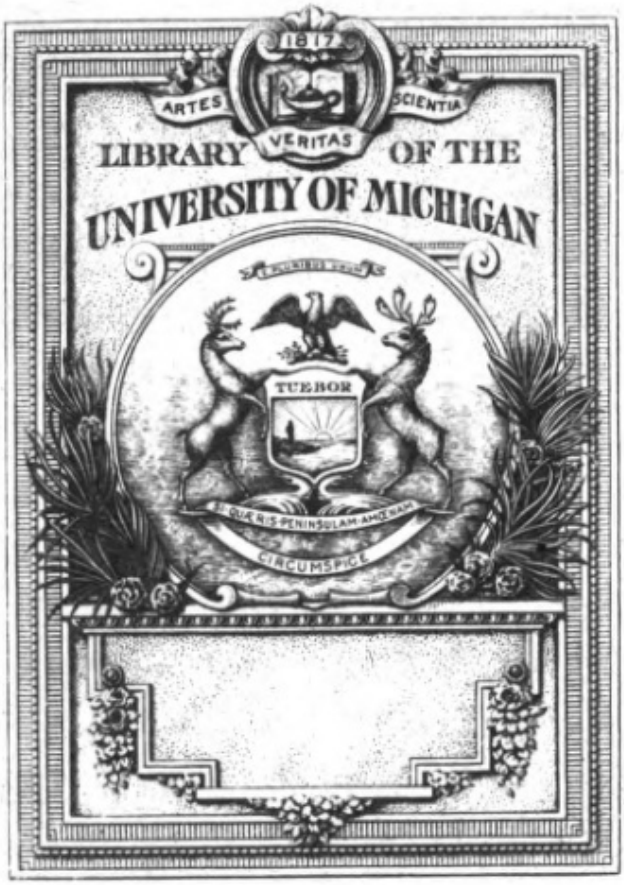

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SUDDEN SILENCE

The Case of the Murdered Band-Leader

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SUDDEN SILENCE

The Case of the Murdered Band-Leader

By

CORTLAND FITZSIMMONS

Author of "The Moving Finger," "The Whispering Window," "Crimson Ice," etc.

FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY

NEW YORK MCMXXXVIII

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To

RICHARD ENGLISH

WHO FIRST CONCEIVED THE IDEA
OF A MURDER IN A DANCE BAND

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SUDDEN SILENCE

I

By a clever ruse

Hal Harrison and his orchestra had left the hotel avoiding the mobs of curious people and autograph seekers who were as constant as the changing tide whenever he made a public appearance. But in spite of their trick and the vigilance of Maxie Blake, his business manager, the telegram, which was a prelude to adventure and the cause of much of the trouble which followed the murder, was delivered to Hal Harrison in person at the railroad station in Portland, Oregon.

Maxie was busy directing luggage-laden porters when he saw the messenger-boy approach Hal and deliver the message. Hal tossed the boy a quarter, ripped open the envelope, read it quickly, crumpled it angrily into a tight ball and jammed it into his coat pocket.

"Now what?" Maxie mumbled as he watched Harrison, expecting a tirade to break over his head at any moment. In his long experience with famous musicians, stars and great impresarios he had learned to expect and deal with temperament. In fact, anything

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which deviated slightly from the normal, no matter what it was, Maxie called temperament.

Hal Harrison had none of the traits of a bad-tempered prima donna. To his credit let it be said that his temper was quick rather than bad. Small things did annoy him and most of all he resented the incursions into his private life which had followed his sudden rise to fame, not only in the United States but, because of radio, all over the world. He was constantly besieged and beset by fanatics who wrote, wired and tried to see him personally. Except for sentimental women, most of the people who annoyed him had something they wanted to sell or some worthy cause which they hoped to promote with Harrison's money.

As Maxie waited for the angry storm which did not break, he dispatched the last load of luggage toward the train. As he hesitated a moment before approaching Hal, he saw him take the message from his pocket and reread it. Maxie moved forward doubtfully, not quite certain of the reception he would receive. Hal's eyes and the slight twist of his mouth indicated bitter resentment. When Maxie reached his side Hal turned and said with icy calm, "Let's get aboard," and moved down the long platform toward the car which had been reserved for himself and orchestra.

"Well, we fooled the crowds this time," Maxie

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remarked with satisfaction as he climbed into the car behind Hal and looked back at the few scattered groups of people who seemed totally unaware of the fact that the famous Hal Harrison was boarding the Cascade Limited on his way to San Francisco.

Hal mumbled a reply—a bad sign. Maxie was determined to make conversation, hoping in that way to make Hal forget the thing which was so obviously annoying him.

"That dummy bus idea of yours was great, Hal," he said flatteringly. "This is the first time we've been able to leave a town comfortably on this whole trip. I don't see why you didn't think of it before," he prattled on as they moved down the aisle of the car past chatting groups of musicians who were busily preparing for their night's ride.

Hal made no reply as he moved toward his drawing-room. The knotted wad of paper which his fingers rolled about in his pocket was occupying his thoughts. In the drawing-room, with the door closed behind them, he refused to speak. He paced up and down the narrow space, bumping into Maxie, who had given up his efforts at conversation and was vainly trying to stow Hal's personal luggage.

With the last piece of luggage beneath the seats, Maxie flattened himself against the side wall and demanded, "Why don't you spill it? There's no point in letting one telegram eat you up. What's in it?"

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He had reached a high point of annoyance with Hal and his gloomy silence.

Hal drew the ball of paper from his pocket and tossed it to Maxie, who caught it in mid-air. Maxie smoothed the crumpled wad and read:

IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE STAY AWAY FROM SAN FRANCISCO

Maxie's amazed whistle was long and loud. He reread the warning before he handed it back to Hal.

"Well?" Hal demanded.

"Nothing to worry about," Maxie said thoughtfully with an assurance he did not feel. "It was probably sent by some nut."

"Then it's the first of its kind."

"Why should anyone send you a telegram like that?" Maxie insisted. "It may be some guy who is jealous because his girl raves about you."

"I wish I thought so."

"Say, are you taking it seriously?" Maxie demanded. "I thought I was the gloomy one in this outfit."

"I don't like it," Hal replied.

"Neither do I, but hell, it's just one of those things. Why, it was sent by a piker!" Maxie said disparagingly. "There's less than ten words in the message. A man who counts his pennies over a thing like that isn't really serious."

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"It's a very exact message. 'If you value your life stay away from San Francisco,'" Hal quoted, counting the words on his fingers. "It just fits the case. No more words were needed."

"Yeah, but who do you know in San Francisco?" Maxie demanded.

"Chubby Carlton, Rex Kingford, Chick Stoner and Phil Martin," Hal replied.

"They might be a little jealous of your success as compared to theirs," Maxie admitted, "but they wouldn't want to murder you. Not even Phil Martin, who has always been a sore-head."

"He wouldn't have nerve enough, but Kingford might."

"What would he gain by it?" Maxie demanded. "Listen, you're tired. You shouldn't let a thing like this get under your skin."

"Would you like to receive a message like that?" Hal demanded. He opened the door leading into the main part of the car and looked down the aisle.

"Aw, somebody's trying to scare you, if anything!" Maxie deprecated.

"Scare me?" Hal demanded. The thought was a new one.

"Sure. To keep you away from San Francisco for some reason or other."

"As if I'd let a thing like that scare me!" Hal said, his mood changing.

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"Well, what are you gonna do about it?" Maxie asked.

"Do? We're going to finish our tour in San Francisco as advertised. What did you think I'd do, turn tail and let my public down?"

"Oh, I knew we'd go on," Maxie replied brightly. "I was just wondering what you'd do about the message. Forget it, will you?"

"That won't be so easy."

"But you don't have to run around San Francisco trying to find out who sent it."

"Then you noticed that it came from there?" Hal demanded.

"Sure, I noticed. I thought maybe it was sent from here."

"What made you think of that?"

"Because it was delivered here at the station when it should have been sent to the hotel."

"A person in San Francisco might do that," Hal reflected. "You don't suppose there's a leak in the orchestra, do you?"

"In the band?" Maxie was surprised. "Don't be silly!"

"If there is, I'd like to know it," Hal insisted. "We live too closely to have a squealer in our midst."

"Now, don't start trying to run the thing to earth," Maxie begged. "Haven't we had trouble enough?" he demanded as he tentatively fingered a bottle of

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aspirin tablets which he always carried in his coat pocket. Maxie was an aspirin addict. He took a pill on the slightest provocation, believing they helped to keep him calm.

"Are you trying to suggest, in your sly way, that we quit?" Hal asked with a smile.

"Quit?" Maxie repeated. "I'm no quitter. I like a fight as well as the next one," he said defensively. "Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Enough is enough. If we get into a jam in San Francisco, we'll lose out on your new contract. Higgins is a queer man. He'll stand for no nonsense."

"Let Higgins go fly a kite!"

"Now, you don't mean that," Maxie remonstrated. "You're not big enough, yet," he added quickly lest he offend Hal. "Every radio star in the country would like to get the Higgins spot and you know it. You can't afford to have Higgins let you down. It would give everybody the idea that you were slipping."

"Me slipping!" Hal scoffed. "I'm on the way up!"

"That's just the point," Maxie agreed. "You've got a long way to go if you're careful and you've got to be careful. You can't fool with a man like Higgins. He doesn't care who you are. He puts up the money. He runs his business and his hour the way he wants it run because of the purity of his product.

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We can't have anything go wrong now. As it is, we're cutting things too fine. We get into San Francisco tomorrow evening, play two nights and then fly back to New York. Suppose there's fog or bad flying weather, we'll be late, and if we are, Higgins will cancel the contract. You know he didn't want you to make this trip."

"And what has your sermon to do with the telegram which we were discussing?" Hal asked with an amused grin.

"I don't want you going around San Francisco sticking that telegram under people's noses and asking them if they sent it. Try to control your temper, will you?"

"You know it's only the small things which really make me mad," Hal replied.

"Yeah, I know it, but does anyone else when you fly off the handle?"

"Can't I live a life of my own? Can't I have any normal reactions? Do I have to submit to this sort of thing without taking action?" Hal demanded.

"You do when you're a 'dream man,'" Maxie answered with a slight smirk which curled the corners of his otherwise gloomy mouth.

"One more crack like that and I'll treat you to a display of my temper," Hal warned. The one thing that annoyed him more than anything else since his rise to fame was the appellation of "dream man"

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which a gay young reporter had used after Hal's first big public appearance. The name had stuck, other reporters had pounced upon it, and during Hal's early days of popularity over the air announcers had used it until Hal's protests became more than mere vehement utterances.

Maxie pulled back out of Hal's reach. "You're too free with your fists," he said with a wary eye on those hands which he had seen fly into action too often to suit him. "Fighting don't prove nothin'."

"It's the only langauge some people understand. I'm going to San Francisco and I'm not going to be mollycoddled by you, understand?" he demanded. "Thought I'd quit, did they?" He returned to the thought of the telegram.

"May I come in?" a cheerful voice asked from the doorway.

"You are in," Maxie replied sourly. "What do you want? Didn't we give you all the news you wanted up at the hotel?"

"Sure! sure! And don't ever let anyone tell you that Roger Brown doesn't appreciate a break. That's why I'm here. Those people waiting up at the hotel are going to be awful disappointed, Mr. Harrison."

"Why ain't you up there to write a story about their sorrowful faces when they learn that the great Hal Harrison slipped away from them?" Maxie asked.

"I'm gonna write that. Don't worry, Maxie old

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boy. That'll be in, but at the moment there's other fish to fry." He pulled some papers from his pocket and sorted them quickly as he talked. "We just had a dispatch from San Francisco. I wanted to get the lowdown on it before you left town." He handed Hal a slip of paper on which several lines of tape message had been pasted. "Take a look," he suggested to Maxie who was bending over Hal's shoulder to read.

PHIL MARTIN, POPULAR SAN FRANCISCO BAND LEADER AND ONE-TIME MEMBER OF HAL HARRISON'S ORCHESTRA TO BRING SUIT AGAINST HARRISON FOR ONE MILLION DOLLARS. DAVE FIELDS, MANAGER OF THE CRYSTAL GARDENS WHERE HARRISON IS TO APPEAR FEARS HARRISON WILL NOT KEEP HIS SAN FRANCISCO CONTRACT.

When Hal looked up from the message Brown asked eagerly, "Did I just overhear you say you wouldn't quit?"

"I'm not quitting. I'll be in San Francisco. This is the Cascade Limited, isn't it?"

"Sure, but you could arrange to get to Sacramento and go East from there."

"I'm not going East. I keep my contracts. It'll take more than Phil Martin to keep me out of San Francisco. If he's looking for trouble, he's going to get it this time. I'm getting sick of him and his suits.

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If he isn't careful, he'll be sorry he ever tried to cross me. I'll fix him!" he ended with grim determination.

"Is that a statement for the press or just blowing off steam among friends?" Brown asked with a grin.

"It's steam," Maxie said quickly, scowling at Hal.

"It's a statement," Hal contradicted, ignoring Maxie's hush-hush signals.

"No!" Maxie cried.

"Go ahead," Hal instructed Brown. "Get it in the morning papers, then Martin and all of San Francisco will know exactly how I feel."

"Don't print that!" Maxie continued to protest to the reporter.

Brown hesitated.

"Go ahead!" Hal repeated. "Spread it!"

Maxie had been fumbling with his bottle of aspirin tablets. He extracted one from the bottle and flipped it into his mouth. With a gulp he swallowed the dry pill. "You're crazy," he muttered. "Plain stark crazy!"

Further discussion of Hal's sanity was cut short by the cry of, "Board, all aboard!" which came faintly from the platform below.

"Thanks, Harrison," the reporter cried and scuttled for the door as the train began to roll.

Maxie flattened his nose gloomily against the pane and saw Brown racing across the station platform. "Now you've done it," he complained. "The fat's

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in the fire for sure. Why couldn't you have kept quiet? There's no point in making things worse than they are. They get bad fast enough!"

"How do I know that Martin hasn't been the cause of all the trouble we've been having en route?" Hal asked.

"How could Martin have done those things?" Maxie asked with disgust.

"You can frame anything these days if you know how to do it," Hal replied, "and you know it. That woman in Detroit who insisted I was the father of her unborn child could have been a plant of Martin's."

"I thought Higgins was through with us when that broke," Maxie laughed. "Was he burned!" His smile faded. "The woman was a nut, Martin had nothing to do with it."

"How about the pest who wanted an X-ray of my throat?"

"She was just another nut."

"And the riot in Chicago? Those frenzied women who tried to tear me limb from limb. Who started the riot? Some women or woman who was planted in the crowd, of course. Women never acted like that before. And what did the papers call them?" he demanded. "'Hungry Hearts Seeking Their Dream Man,'" he repeated with disgust. "I tell you Martin has been trying to queer me all along the

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line and now he threatens to bring suit hoping in that way to keep me out of San Francisco. He's afraid of being shown up. He doesn't want to sue," he ended positively.

"Don't be too sure of that," Maxie protested. "Martin's always had a yen for money, your money."

"Well, he won't get it! I'll see to that! Trying to queer my tour and spike my guns with Higgins!"

"You're just loco on the subject of Martin. You know very well he had nothing to do with the young débutante in Cleveland who threatened to commit suicide unless you married her on the spot. And," Maxie raced on as Hal tried to argue, "do you think Martin is behind Mrs. Llewellyn Paxton and her crazy idea that you must play for that goofy Benefit of hers?"

"She's a nut, but she's perfectly harmless," he dismissed Mrs. Paxton. "I'm not talking about silly women. Just the ones who have tried to hold up the trip," Hal explained.

"And what of Mrs. Paxton's daughter?" Maxie demanded.

"A nit-wit, just like her mother, only prettier, of course," Hal replied.

"You're wrong, definitely wrong." A voice startled them from the doorway. "She's prettier than her mother, I'll admit that, but she isn't like her mother, not a little bit. Mrs. Paxton is a flutterer, but the

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girl knows definitely what she is doing and gets it done. You don't suppose for a moment, do you, that the ingenious tricks pulled by those two women were the product of Mrs. Paxton's thoughts?"

It was Mary Dale who spoke. She was a blonde, slim and trim as a racing craft. Her soft husky voice and warm friendly eyes had made her the leader of the famous Dale Sisters Trio which had been associated with Hal from his early days. As Hal's popularity increased, the Dale Sisters became proportionately famous.

Hal smiled a welcome to her. "Come in," he invited.

"For a moment," she replied.

"Sit down," Maxie suggested. "You certainly polished off the Paxton women."

"I'd like to know the girl better," Mary said.

"Well, I wouldn't," Hal muttered. "She gets in my hair, and while we're on the subject," he gave Maxie a sharp look, "it's up to you to see that I'm not annoyed by either one of them again."

"I guess we've shaken them at last," Maxie said hopefully. "I didn't see them in Portland at all. They weren't at the station. They've probably given up."

"After having followed you across the country?" Mary cried. "Not if I know the type and I think I

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do. You'll hear from them again," she asserted positively.

"You learn about women from women," Hal told Maxie as he tried to stifle a yawn.

Mary jumped to her feet. "You're tired," she said. "I just dropped by before turning in to ask you how you liked the new number."

"It was fair," Hal replied. "It needs pepping up. You didn't seem to have your mind on your business tonight. We'll have a rehearsal in the morning."

Joe Stevens, Hal's pudgy arranger, poked his head in at the door and cried, "Listen to this, Hal." He began to hum a few lines.

Hal stopped him immediately, saying, "Joe, you're a musical pirate. That's not new! It's part of a Chopin waltz."

"Ha, ha!" a chorus of voices cried from the aisle. "We told you so!" Disgruntled, Joe Stevens turned from the door and shoved his way through the group.

Mary slipped away also, with a soft "good night" as they all wandered off to their berths. As Maxie closed the door something on the floor caught his eye. He had a mania for tidiness. He was constantly picking up after Hal, who carelessly dropped his things wherever they happened to fall. The boys laughed at Maxie but not even ridicule could change a lifelong habit of neatness. Bending forward, Maxie

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picked up the strip of paper. Perhaps it was the color of the paper or more likely it was the long string of letters which attracted his attention and was responsible for his reading the words which said:

KEEP HIM AWAY FROM SAN FRANCISCO

There was no doubt in Maxie's mind about the message and the HIM of the telegram, part of which he held in his hand. He closed the door and handed the slip to Hal.

"Then there is a leak in the band," Hal cried. "Who is it?"

Maxie shrugged.

"Where did you get this?"

Maxie explained.

"Who was at the door?" Hal demanded.

"Mary, Joe, Buck, Charlie, Scat Miller and Tony. Oh yes, Jerry was there too but he was in the back."

"Well, Mary and Joe are out. It must be one of the others. Keep your eyes and ears open. Don't let on that we suspect anything and we'll catch whoever it is, cold. I don't want anyone who's mixed up with Martin in my orchestra."

"And after the royal way you treat the boys too," Maxie muttered. "I don't see how one of them could do it."

"Never mind that. I'm not looking for gratitude

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but I do expect loyalty as long as I pay them a salary. Forget it! I'm turning in."

As they undressed, Maxie said thoughtfully, "I wish you hadn't spoken so openly to the reporter. It won't do no good."

"It's always a good idea, Maxie, to carry the fight to the other man's corner," Hal said with a grin. "Don't talk any more. I'm tired."

He spoke the truth. He was worn out. It was his first trip across the country with his famous Harmony Men. It had been a long series of one- and two-night stands playing to capacity houses, to say nothing of the curious public which dogged his steps wherever he went. Since his sudden rise to fame he had received thousands of requests for his photograph, but he had had no idea that in every village, hamlet and farm he was the phantom lover, the Prince Charming of the air. He knew that women liked him but until he made the trip he had no idea what their adoration could be like.

At heart Hal was an ordinary man with a fairly good singing voice. He had not planned to become a celebrity. When he left college he hoped to make some money, marry, settle down and raise a family. But fame, overtaking him unexpectedly, had spoiled his plans. At first he liked and enjoyed his popularity. Then it began to make his life involved. The money he made so quickly became a great responsi-

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bility in itself and necessitated his keeping a staff to look after his affairs.

As his fame increased, his private life vanished, taking his dreams with it. He became a public figure. No matter where he went he became the center of an eager, curious crowd. He once said to Maxie that he was heartily sick of seeing so many tonsils which were always on view as people gaped up at him, their mouths open.

There were times when he thought he would retire, he had enough money, but it wasn't as simple as that. There were about a hundred people who depended upon him for their livelihood. He knew he couldn't quit and leave them dangling in mid-air looking for work. As long as the public demanded his particular talents he felt he must carry on.

There were times when he was very lonely in the midst of the crowds which constantly surrounded him. There is no warmth or companionship in a mob of people. Maxie was always with him and Maxie was all right but Maxie was a business man thinking of box-office first, last and always. Hal wanted a home. He wanted real friends.

He had acquaintances, countless numbers of them, but they were just people who used him. He met hundreds of women, but they seemed to be interested in Hal Harrison the orchestra leader, the man with the dream voice rather than the Hal Harrison he

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knew still lived and waited behind the wall of publicity which had been built around him. Hal wanted some girl to love him for himself and not for what he had or represented.

Secretly, he was romantic enough to believe that some day, somewhere he would find the girl. His father had once said to him, "Son, when you find a woman who'll go through hell's fire for you, get married. If you'll take my advice, which I doubt, you'll wait. It's worth it. Your mother was like that."

Hal had waited. There were times when he thought he would go off alone somewhere and meet people as a plain ordinary man. He wanted to convince himself that he still had those qualities which make a person interesting to others because of what they are rather than what they do.

Before he fell asleep that night he thought of San Francisco, the romantic city of the West. All his life he had wanted to see the Golden Gate. It would take more than Phil Martin and a threat to keep him from realizing that dream.

Late the next afternoon before they pulled into Oakland, Maxie glumly handed Hal a copy of an early evening paper, saying, "Now, you've done it. Wait till Higgins sees that. He'll probably cancel our contract."

Hal smiled as he read the paper. It contained a rehash of the old quarrel between himself and Phil

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Martin and ended with Hal's threat greatly enlarged and elaborated.

"What are you crabbing about?" Hal asked with an amused grin. "You're always looking for publicity, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but not this kind. Remember now, no matter what happens I want you to hold your temper, no fights."

"I'm rested, Maxie. I'll be good," Hal promised.

"Even if he calls you a sissy?" Maxie insisted because he knew that was the one thing that infuriated Hal more than anything else.

"Well . . ." Hal temporized.

"You don't want us to go on relief, do you?" Maxie asked.

"I'll be a good boy, Maxie. Don't worry about me. I had a good sleep. I'm feeling fine and just across the bay is the Golden Gate and one of the most romantic cities in the world."

Maxie peered through the window. Across the bay the slanting rays of sun painted buildings and housetops in a bath of orange-gold. Behind the city the fog rolled in from the Pacific, trickled over the Twin Peaks, blocked out the sun and changed the golden light to drab gray.

"I don't like it," Maxie complained.

"But you haven't seen it. There are all sorts of

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things to do and see. I'm going to be very busy. I've always wanted to see Chinatown."

"I don't mean the city. I mean that fog-bank rolling in shutting out the sun. It's a warning. I wish we'd never come to this town. The minute I saw that cross-eyed girl this morning at breakfast I knew we were heading for trouble," he replied dolefully.

"Forget it!" Hal was all agog as he watched the changing skyline across the bay.

"Do you think I ought to tell the police?" Maxie asked.

"Tell them what?"

"About the threat, of course!"

"We've nothing to worry about," Hal assured him brightly. "We weren't wrecked coming down. We'll be in the midst of a crowd of people once we get off the train."

"Yeah, but he might try to do something to you. You never can tell."

"Not Phil! He's too smart! He'll pick a nice quiet time when he'll be perfectly safe, that is, if he does anything at all, which I doubt."

"I wouldn't be too sure of myself if I were you," Maxie advised gloomily as he turned to direct the porter with their luggage.

"A murder might liven things up a bit," Hal suggested.

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II

THERE HADN'T BEEN as much excitement in San Francisco since the opening of the bridges. Hal was impressed and pleased with his reception. Dave Fields, the manager of the Crystal Gardens, was in Oakland to meet him with some city officials.

When the ferry docked at the foot of Market Street, it took a determined police escort to get him safely from the boat to the waiting limousine. Not even the mobs in Detroit or St. Louis could compare with the horde of frenzied women eagerly waiting to catch a glimpse of him. While Hal was being delayed by the official reception Maxie and the band preceded him to the hotel.

From the Ferry Building to the Palace Hotel, Market Street was lined with curious crowds. Across the widest and busiest street Hal had ever seen, great banners swung from building to building. They read:

Tonight and Tomorrow Night
at the Crystal Gardens!
HAL HARRISON
and
HIS HARMONY MEN
In Person!

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The police escort with sirens screaming cleared the way. They passed signs, placards, posters and huge billboards from which Hal's picture smiled down at the packed throngs lining the curbs. It was a great reception and a grand show. Hal bowed and smiled, outwardly pleased. Inwardly, however, he sighed. Two nights in San Francisco and then he'd return to the comparative peace and quiet of New York. Only two more days of being a goldfish, he kept assuring himself as they neared the hotel.

The police and hotel staff did their best to keep back the surging, excited autograph seekers, but in spite of their efforts Hal lost his topcoat and hat before gaining the security of the elevator on the ground floor.

When the lift stopped at the fourth floor, he heard the tinkling notes of a piano. He knew what that meant. The members of the band had preceded him from the station. Maxie would be holding one of his usual publicity receptions for the members of the press.

He was right. His suite was a mass of musicians and reporters. Joe Stevens, the pudgy arranger, was pounding out a new orchestration to give the assemblage color. Maxie, glum as usual, was like a spectre at the feast as he scurried about pouring conviviality to the members of the press.

Hal's appearance was greeted by a shout and a toast

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proposed by Jimmie Farr, crack reporter on San Francisco's leading paper, the *Crescent*.

In the next ten minutes, Jimmie Farr managed to get Hal into a corner and asked him if he had any statement to make relative to Phil Martin.

"None," Hal replied.

"Phil Martin says if you're looking for trouble, you'll get it," Farr offered suggestively.

"I'm not looking for trouble," Hal replied quietly. "There is no reason why my two-night stand in San Francisco should cause any. I'll mind my business and if Martin keeps quiet, everything will be all right."

"Do you want to deny the statement published in the Portland paper?" Farr asked.

"No. Let that stand. I meant it. If you want to print something new say I'm looking forward to my stay in San Francisco and am happy to be here."

"How about that threatened suit of Martin's?" Farr asked.

"Just a bluff. Makes nice publicity," Hal replied.

"The old bologna, eh?" Farr grinned.

Hal's attention was diverted to a man who stepped up and called him by name. Always polite, Hal greeted the newcomer cordially. His quick temper flared the next minute, however, when he realized that the smooth stranger had just served him with a warrant in connection with Martin's suit.

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"Then, it wasn't a bluff, after all," Farr chuckled.

"He'll wish it was!" Hal stormed. "I'd like to have my hands on him right now!"

"Easy, easy!" Maxie cautioned, rushing up. "Remember your promise."

"Promise be damned! Clear these people out of here. I want to think!"

"I'll be seeing you!" Farr flung over his shoulder as he made for the door.

Maxie was an excellent manager. He knew when to do as he was told. He began moving the guests toward the door. In a few minutes the sitting-room was comparatively empty. With a sigh of relief Hal sank into an easy-chair. Joe Stevens was still pounding away at the piano. He paused for a moment, looked across at Hal and asked, "How do you like this?"

His fingers rippled over the keys as he vamped into a chorus.

Hal listened attentively for a moment, then shook his head wearily. "It's always been good, Joe. Verdi wrote it first. Try something that isn't quite as well known, for a change."

Joe crashed to an annoyed end.

Maxie offered Hal a telegram. "I knew it. You've gotta be more careful. Higgins is warning you to keep clear of unsavory publicity."

"Nice of Higgins! I'll be good," Hal promised

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with a grin as he returned the telegram. "Better have dinner sent up," he suggested.

"And you'd better be getting dressed. We haven't much time. Boy! We'll need the reserves to get you out of here!" He simmered with enthusiasm. Maxie never boiled about anything but his own ailments. "What a town! What a town! I wouldn't be surprised if we do seven grand tonight!"

"I thought you didn't like this town," Hal teased.

"I don't feel right about it, but business is business and we're here to make money. I have a feeling we're headed for trouble, the cross-eyed dame, the fog and all. Maybe, if you'll just keep your head, we won't have no trouble. Remember your promise," he cautioned as Hal rose from the chair, pulled off his coat, slung it on the couch and began to undress as he advanced toward a door. "This my room?" he asked.

Maxie nodded.

Hal's shirt was already off as he opened the door. For one unbelieving moment he paused, then recoiled as if stung. He blinked twice to be sure that his eyes had not played him a trick. Mary had been right, after all. There could be no doubt of it. Mrs. Llewellyn Paxton, glistening with diamonds, wearing a smart tailored suit, Paris hat, her mink coat thrown open, was standing in the middle of his bedroom floor. And to make matters worse she stood there in

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his very own pet fleece-lined bedroom slippers. His eyes held on those slippers a moment as a wave of anger and resentment flashed over him. Hal hated people to use his personal things. Boiling mad, his eyes flashed back to her face.

She gave him a placating smile. "Hello," she purred, "my feet were simply killing me!" She pointed down with a vague fluttering gesture before his wrath exploded.

"Get out of my slippers!" he bellowed. "And get out of this room!"

Mrs. Paxton reacted to the angry orders immediately. With a gasp of amazement she leaped clear of the slippers. They were elevens. She plumped to the floor. She winced with sudden pain, then turned on Hal, her anger nearly matching his. "Don't shout at me, young man!" she cried. "I won't move a step until you . . ."

"I'm not going to play for your Hands Across the Sea Benefit! For the hundredth time—No!" he shouted, thoroughly incensed.

Maxie came bustling to the door. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Didn't I tell you to keep that woman away from me! Get her out of here!" Hal bellowed. "Do something to earn your money!" He stepped back into the sitting-room and slammed the door with a

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bang, enclosing Maxie and Mrs. Paxton in his bedroom.

He leaned against the wall and groaned. Joe Stevens looked across at him from the piano and asked, "Woman?"

"Yes."

"Boy, you've got what it takes!" he said enviously.

"You can have it!" Hal said bitterly. "I can't even have privacy in my bedroom!"

Maxie opened the door, fanning himself with his hat. "Okay, Hal. The dame's gone."

"See anything of her nit-wit daughter?" Hal demanded.

Maxie denied the daughter's existence with a shake of his head.

"Are you sure?" Hal insisted.

"Positive. Get dressed, will ya?"

"I expect you to protect me from such things," Hal said as he strode across the room.

"I try. I didn't know she was in there. How could I? I can't do everything, be everywhere," Maxie complained.

"You sound like a woman," Hal scoffed.

"And you promised to hold your temper," Maxie retorted.

"What would you do if you found a woman you hated standing in your slippers?" Hal growled.

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"I know," Joe Stevens said with an amused chuckle. "He'd faint."

Hal paused at the door. "Call the manager and tell him he's got to get me out of here through some alley. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

"But dinner!" Maxie protested. "I've ordered it!"

"Cancel the order. We'll eat at the Gardens. You arrange to get me out of here. I can't stand the sight of another woman right now!" The bang of his door gave added emphasis to the statement.

Mrs. Paxton had begun her attentions in New York when she tried to persuade Hal that he should play for her Hands Across the Sea Benefit. Hal had refused then but Mrs. Paxton had not believed him. Her persistency was most annoying. She asked him again and again until he hated the very sight of her. The one thing Hal did not know about Mrs. Paxton was the fact that she had made a bet with some of her friends that she could get Hal Harrison to play for her Benefit and she wouldn't have to pay a cent for his services.

Hal fumed about Mrs. Paxton as he dressed. It was twenty minutes rather than ten before everything was arranged for Hal's exit from the hotel. One of the musicians was to wear Hal's familiar camel-hair coat. With collar turned up and hat brim pulled down over his face, the musician was to brave the crowds in the lobby and on the street. Hal, alone,

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was to go down in the service elevator and out through the alley to a waiting car.

When Hal and his double were ready, Maxie peered cautiously into the corridor. The musician stepped into the hall followed by Maxie and moved toward the elevators. When the lift door closed behind them Hal flashed down the corridor and popped into the waiting service elevator. The door closed promptly. The lift started with a jerk.

Hal gave a low moan when he saw that he was not alone with the operator. Mrs. Paxton's lovely daughter had him cornered! She was really a beautiful, glamorous girl but Hal was too provoked to see or think of anything but the fact that the Paxtons had outwitted him again.

Joan Paxton folded her arms and regarded him appraisingly as he tried to ignore her presence. A soft ermine wrap fell away from her smoothly rounded shoulders, revealing a slim body in a pale blue evening gown. A silver-slippered foot took a step toward Hal.

"Stay away from me!" he cried. Then, "Let me out of here!" he bellowed at the operator.

A dangerous glint appeared in the girl's eyes as she seized the lapels of his coat. "Afraid, eh? Well, you don't get out of here until I say so. We're riding up and down together, you and I until you promise to play for Mother's Benefit. Remember,

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I've followed you and her three thousand miles and have been forced to look at you and your banjo-eyed public until I'm sick to death of the sight of both of you."

He was impressed by her grim determination. He knew, and knew that she knew, that he could get out of the lift if he wanted to do so badly enough. He didn't want to get out for a moment at least. She had flecked him on the raw with her last remark. "Banjo-eyed, eh?" he repeated.

"That's what I said. And I've had enough of it. Now if you'll just give me your . . ."

"I said 'No' in New York. I repeated it in Buffalo, I shouted it in Chicago. I had you both arrested in Cleveland, and detained as a public nuisance in Salt Lake City. Do you know what I'm going to do here?" he demanded threateningly.

"Say 'Yes,'" she breathed hopefully, ignoring his serious manner.

"No!" he cried. "Do I have to put it in writing?"

The car reached the basement and started on another upward trip. "You've got to play at Mother's Benefit!" she repeated desperately. "We can't get married until after you've played for it."

He stepped back, alarmed. The girl was really mad. "Married!" he repeated.

The car bumped, stopped and started down. Hal grabbed the operator by the arm. "If you don't open

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that door when we reach the bottom, I'll have you fired. I'll have you boiled in oil, or better yet I'll take a good sock at you. You don't want to force me to marry a mad woman, do you?"

Joan glared at him. "You certainly hate yourself, don't you? Marry you! Why, I wouldn't marry you if . . ."

"If I were the last man on earth," he finished the quotation, dimly aware by this time that she was extraordinarily pretty as she stood facing him, eyes flashing.

"Well, I wouldn't! I don't like your looks! I don't like your band and I don't like your public! And I think your voice is terrible!" she added as an afterthought.

"I'm sorry," he said, concealing his secret amusement. "I didn't know you cared."

"The conceit of you!" she stormed. "I don't!"

The car bumped to a stop. The bewildered operator glanced at Joan.

"Let him out!" she ordered.

Hal stepped aside for her to leave the car first.

"Why can't you be reasonable?" she argued. Her mood changed to a softer note as she explained, "I didn't mean all the things I said about you. I suppose you're all right in your own way. I'm not after you, really. I want to get Mother settled. I can't

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do a thing while she's gallivanting all over the country."

"But you said those things. You must have thought them whether you meant them or not. They can't be taken back. You can't recall the spoken word."

"Very well, I'm sorry."

"I suppose you're excited and upset about the man back in New York. What you really want is for me to help you get married, is that it?" he asked.

"I don't want to get married," she denied.

"But you just said—" He stopped and faced her.

"I said there was a man in New York who wanted to marry me," she flashed back.

"That's understandable. Why don't you go back to New York and marry him?" he snapped.

"It's none of your business and you don't need to throw me a few back-handed compliments. The man in question happens to be another of Mother's ideas. She picked him out. As you may have guessed, my mother is a very determined person once she makes up her mind."

"I'll say she is," he replied grimly.

Joan giggled. His remark was so heartfelt. "I know how to handle Mother—and the man," she added. "She keeps urging, he keeps asking and I continue to say 'No' to both of them. They wait hopefully. You see, the reason I want to get this

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Benefit thing settled is this: I won't be able to travel, marry someone I love or have a moment's peace until your corny band has played for the Benefit."

To tell an orchestra leader that his band is corny is like waving a red flag at a bull. Her remark was most unfortunate. He had been softening toward her, feeling a little sorry for her, but his old anger flared.

"Corny?" he echoed indignantly. "I'll never play your Benefit. And that's final. You can die an old maid, for all I care." He jerked at a door which faced them at the end of the corridor.

"Of all the unreasonable, stubborn . . ." she cried.

He stepped through the door. She tried to follow him. He shoved her back gently, saying, "This is the end of the line." He let the door close between them. He sprinted down the alley.

Joan pounced out of the door and darted after him. She caught his flying coat-tails as he stepped on the running-board of the waiting car.

"Not so fast!" she cried.

"Let go of me!" he stormed.

"Do you take me with you or do I scream?" she challenged.

"Go ahead and scream," he said indifferently.

"You asked for it," she replied. "And wait till your public hears about you waylaying an innocent girl in a dark alley!"

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She took a deep breath. Her chest swelled. Her mouth opened but the threatened cry died unborn. Hal suddenly remembered that telegram from his sponsor, Higgins. His hand went over her mouth just in time. He pushed her into the car.

She sat back and watched the road as they were whisked along.

"You understand that I don't intend to have you tagging along behind me all evening," he said, exasperated by her sullen silence.

"I'm just as determined as my mother. You've got to give in."

"No!" he shouted and burrowed into the corner of the seat.

A mile from the Crystal Gardens they were caught in a traffic jam. For that night, at least, all San Francisco seemed Hal Harrison conscious. The roads were blocked with cars. Harried police tried to hold back the mobs and clear the traffic snarls at intersections.

After one very long wait, Hal leaned out of the car and called to a policeman. "I'm Hal Harrison. Can you get me through?"

"Yeah?" the policeman retorted. "Well, personally, I'm the Sultan of Siam and . . ." He stopped in mid-speech as he compared Hal's eager face peering out of the car with the same countenance which smiled down at him from a nearby poster tacked to

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a telegraph-pole. He blew his whistle shrilly and waved down the line of cars.

In a few minutes, with a motorcycle clearing the way, they crawled toward the Gardens. A brilliantly illuminated sign ran the full length of the world's largest dance palace, reading:

FOR TWO NIGHTS ONLY . . . HAL HARRISON IN PERSON!

As the car crept to the entrance of the jammed parking lot, two policemen boarded it, trying to ward off the people who ran up to flatten their noses against the windows. Hal glanced at the girl.

She said, "Beautiful spectacle, isn't it? There's something about the human nose when flattened that . . ."

"But have you ever noticed their tonsils," he asked, "or their adenoids? Much more interesting."

She made no effort to conceal her contempt for his gaping public.

A long line of eager customers snaked away from the box-office waiting their turn to buy tickets. It was a good-natured crowd shoving and jostling as it strove to hold its place.

"Look at your public," she scoffed as the crowd surged forward. A woman tripped and fell. She screamed in terror as it seemed inevitable that she would be crushed under the advancing feet. Quick hands yanked her upright.

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The car crawled to a stop at the roped entrance. Hal stepped out, followed by Joan. "I'll leave you here," he said.

Her reply was drowned in shouts of, "There he is!"

There was a great shout, a combination of ohs and ahs. Hal's face broke into a wide, prop smile. A schoolgirl ducked under the restraining rope and ran to his side, breathlessly asking for an autograph. Hastily he scribbled in her book, then started for the door. He bowed and smiled and waved his hand as he advanced toward the entrance.

Joan was at his heels. "That's right," she sneered, "eat it up!"

He glared at her for a split second, then dashed up the remaining steps as the rope strained under the heavy load of pushing, shoving humanity. Joan sped after him. "Do you play the Benefit?" she demanded.

"I do not!" He turned to the special policeman guarding the door and said, "There's ten dollars in it if you'll keep this woman out of my hair, She's just escaped from her keeper."

"Oh," cried Joan, "I could kill you for that."

Hal glanced at the policeman. "You see? She's absolutely violent."

The policeman's burly arm caught Joan as she tried to follow Hal through the door. "Be a good girl and go home or I'll have to run you in," he warned.

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"I won't go home!" she flared.

He took a good look at her ermine wrap and said, "If I see you and that white overcoat around here again, I'll lock you up for disturbing the peace. A nice girl like you ought to be ashamed!"

Joan was defeated for the moment and beat a hasty retreat. She had a plan but it would have to wait until her mother arrived.

At the entrance Hal was greeted effusively by Dave Fields, the husky owner of the dance palace. Fields' face broke into a broad grin as he pumped Hal's hand. "Welcome!" he cried, and then, "Have I fixed things for you?"

Hal looked over the gaily decorated entrance. "You've spread yourself, Dave. It looks fine. I see you've even decorated yourself. You shouldn't have done that." Fields' hand went to his discolored right eye. "What did you do, run into a door?" Hal teased.

"As a matter of fact, that's exactly what I did do, only nobody believes me," Fields replied as he fingered the sore spot under his eye.

"They never do," Hal agreed with a laugh.

Inside the hall, Hal was greeted with loud applause. Debs from Nob Hill were rubbing elbows with the girls from Woolworth's as Fields led him to the table which was reserved for him and the other band leaders of the city whom he had invited to be his guests. The hall was packed. Waiters wormed their

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way through the crowded aisles while bus boys rapidly set up an extra row of tables on the edge of the dance floor, a thing unheard of at Crystal Gardens.

"Where were you?" Maxie demanded. "I thought you had been kidnaped."

"Same thing," Hal explained briefly. "Where's my dinner? I'm hungry."

At a signal from Maxie, waiters began serving a simple meal. Fields left to superintend activities.

Hal was enjoying his steak when a voice burst upon his ear. "Now, Mr. Harrison, about my Benefit . . ."

Mrs. Paxton and Joan were standing beside him. Joan gave him a triumphant smile. With one comprehensive glance he knew how she had passed the policeman at the door. Instead of her ermine wrap, she wore Mrs. Paxton's mink. She had also twisted a scarf over her silky hair.

Hal ignored them and said tersely to Maxie, "Call the cops!"

"If you have me arrested again—" Mrs. Paxton began.

Maxie looked at her sadly. "Listen, lady. The jails in this town are terrible. Won't you please scram? We don't want no trouble, but you're asking for it. Is it the cops or . . ."

Mrs. Paxton sniffed, beckoned to a waiter and trailed off.

Hal's table began to fill before he had finished his

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dinner. Phil Martin, the Crystal Gardens' own maestro, sauntered up. For a moment the crowd hushed, waiting, hoping to see a row right then and there. Hal greeted Phil cordially and invited him to sit down. With a cocky, self-assured smile, Martin seated himself in full view of the audience. The others came quickly after that. Chubby Carlton, Rex Kingford, Chick Stoner and several lesser luminaries arrived. There was an air of tense expectancy about the group as they drank quietly.

Maxie tried his utmost to dispel the weighted atmosphere. "Remember your promise," he whispered to Hal as he passed beside him.

Hal nodded.

Rex Kingford, tall, thin and suave, had had his eye on Phil Martin's spot at the Gardens for a long time. Kingford knew he was a better band leader than Martin, but San Francisco and Dave Fields, the manager of the Gardens, had failed to recognize the fact. Kingford made no effort to conceal his interest in Martin and Hal. Martin, for all his debonair attitude, was nervous in the presence of the man he so widely imitated. To cover his feelings, he drank steadily.

Kingford looked over the hall with an appreciative eye and asked acidly, "Don't you wish you could pull 'em in like this, Phil?"

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"You'd be satisfied with my audiences," Martin retorted.

"Let's keep personalities out of this, Kingford," Hal suggested hastily.

"Might as well try to keep bees from honey," the cherub-faced Chubby Carlton chuckled.

Dave Fields hastened to the table. His face was beaming. He rubbed his big hands together with satisfaction as he stood and surveyed the packed house. "How do you like our place, Hal?" he asked and then turned to Maxie. "Didn't I tell you we'd pack them in?"

Dave Fields asked many questions but he never waited for an answer. His questions were punctuations in a monologue. With his habitual lack of tact, he threw his next question at Phil Martin. "When are you going to be as good as Harrison?" He chuckled as he winked at Maxie. "I hear the boys are calling you 'The Number Two Company.'"

"When you . . ." Martin started to reply but was interrupted by a round of clapping from the audience. The Harmony Men were trooping onto the bandstand across the hall.

As the applause died down, Hal said to Fields, "You've certainly got a friendly house here, Dave. It must be capacity."

Phil Martin looked up from his glass and said

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sourly, "It is. All my friends are out to get a load of you imitating me!"

"Cut it out!" Hal warned quietly.

"So you don't like it?" Martin sneered. "The truth hurts, does it?"

"Wait until you're sober," Hal advised.

"What are you afraid of?" Martin went on. "Was that statement in the paper just a lot of your usual hot air?"

"Cut it," Hal warned a second time, his voice edgy.

"Now, now," Maxie stepped into the gap, "remember where you are."

"I know where I am," Martin retorted. "And where I ought to be if it wasn't for that double-crossing. . . ."

"Easy, Phil." Dave Fields' deep voice growled a warning.

Maxie, sensing what was coming, took an aspirin and was gulping it down as Martin replied, "He fired me the minute he began to get the breaks and then he stole my style of singing. Why, even his band copies mine!" he cried.

Hal rose to his feet and shook off Maxie's restraining arm. Several reporters circled the table listening. "You know why you were fired from my band and you know why I've never mentioned the reason. Would you like me to break that silence?"

"Because you double-crossed me with . . ."

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"Don't say it!" Hal threatened.

"The purity boy doesn't want dirty publicity, does he?" Martin taunted.

"I gave you a beating when I fired you and if you say what you were going to say, I'll finish the job I started then. If you want it, just start something." Hal's eyes were flashing as he leaned over Martin.

Fields grabbed Hal by the arms. "Forget it! No fighting here. Do you want to ruin the show?" He tugged at Hal. "They're waiting for you. You'd better get going. We do a sustaining broadcast at eight-thirty."

He led Hal to the floor. Hal's drummer, on the watch for their entrance, rolled the drums. Dave advanced to the center of the floor. With hands upraised to command silence he shouted, "Ladies and Gentlemen! I give you the one and only Hal Harrison!"

There was a tremendous burst of applause as Hal, bowing, crossed to the bandstand.

"What an ovation!" Chick Stoner shouted to the other band leaders at the table.

Phil Martin's darkly handsome face was sulky. "What's he got that we haven't got?" he asked bitterly.

"Nerve and a couple of million dollars!" Chubby Carlton answered.

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"Are you going over to take your bow, Phil?" Rex Kingford asked.

"I suppose I'll have to do it or be called a sore-head," Martin grumbled. "I've half a mind to tell that crowd about the dirty . . ."

"You overestimate your mental capacity," Chubby Carlton taunted good-naturedly. "Why don't you tell the crowd? You wouldn't want these people to think you were a sore-head. Just tell them why you hate Harrison."

"You mind your own business!" Martin jumped to his feet snarling.

"Sit down, you fool!" Dave Fields ground into his ear as he pushed him back into his chair.

Martin grumbled to silence.

Across the hall the Harmony Men were ready. Hal, adjusting the microphone to his height, glanced at the control room where the announcer was introducing the program. Hal, while waiting, took his first comprehensive look at the Crystal Gardens. It was the largest razzle-dazzle resort he had ever seen, done in the latest style of modern architecture. The room was a great oblong. The special features included hanging balconies on all four sides with private de luxe accommodations, a dance floor equipped with indirect lighting, a receding roof which lifted gently and slid out of sight, a moving

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bandstand which rolled silently out onto the light-studded floor.

There was an expectant hush over the auditorium as Hal with baton lifted waited the sound engineer's okay. Suddenly the red bulb beside the microphone glowed. Hal's baton came down and the Harmony Men swung into their famous signature.

In a moment the floor was filled with gently swaying couples who seemed to be gliding on an inverted sky as they revolved over the light-studded floor. In two minutes, hundreds of couples were jammed into a slowly undulating mob at Hal's feet.

During the second number, Joan whirled up in the arms of an awe-struck youth and planted herself directly in front of Hal. She kept demanding, "When are you going to give in?" The young man stared at her as Hal shook his head grimly and looked off across the hall.

The crowd would not be satisfied. They demanded more and more at the end of each number. The demand for encores grew tiresome. In desperation Hal called his trio down, the famous Dale Sisters, headed by Mary. They sang the final chorus.

During the short intermissions between dance numbers, the bars were busy. Laughter and excited chatter rippled through the great building. At eleven o'clock, when the boys were badly in need of a rest, Hal announced a special number.

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"You must keep off the floor," he warned. "This is a show feature and your own maestro, Phil Martin, has promised to take a bow and sing a chorus for us."

As Phil Martin stepped to the floor, there was a good-natured cheer and a spattering of applause. Phil crossed directly to the stand. Hal stepped to one side, giving the stage center to Phil. With a nod from Hal, the music started. The house lights began to dim until only the exit signs glowed in the darkness. A baby-blue spot centered on the floor, picked up the members of the chorus, as the girls danced in, swaying in rhythm to the waltz tune. Then Phil Martin's voice, sweet and surprisingly clear, added a final touch to the caressing music. He had never sung as well.

Hal moved across the platform to the outer edge to give Phil the complete spot when the lights would come up. As he neared the edge of the platform he felt a tug on his trouser leg and Joan's voice demanded, "Are you going to say 'Yes'?"

"Quiet!" he whispered.

The next instant Joan had scrambled to the stand beside him. "Promise," she insisted.

"No!"

"Then I'll make a scene and they'll say you did it on purpose because Martin was singing so well," she threatened.

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"I don't like men who beat women," Hal growled in a heavy whisper, "but I'm beginning to understand why they do it. I'd like to take a sock at you right now."

Joan giggled. "Why don't you? It would be wonderful publicity."

"Pipe down, will you?" Hal cautioned as the Dale Sisters swung into the second chorus, their rich voices harmonizing with the rippling music. The chorus went on with their ballet routine. The Dale Sisters finished and moved away. Phil Martin took the next chorus alone, his voice rich, caressing and powerful until it stopped suddenly with a startled, gasping, throat-closing "Uggh!" Coming over the microphone it sounded like clotted surprise.

Always on the alert for the unexpected in connection with his orchestra, Hal sprang forward before the strange gurgle had died away. In the dim blue light coming from the spots on the floor he could see Martin's body beginning to sag. With outstretched arms, Hal caught Martin as he gave a final slump, swung him around toward his tenor sax, Scat Miller, and whispered, "Take care of him! I think he fainted."

Being a showman first, last and always, it was only a moment later that Hal's voice filled the crowded room with its haunting quality as he picked up the

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song that had died on Martin's lips. Women sighed and snuggled a little closer to their partners. Men returned the pressure of trembling fingers as Hal's voice drifted slowly away, lingering in memory only. With the last bars of the music the chorus vanished into the darkness. There was tremendous applause. The lights came on slowly, almost reluctantly, as the girls pranced back to take their bow to the unending applause. Hal beckoned to the Dale Sisters, who took a bow. Then he swung round hoping that Martin had recovered.

Martin was on Scat Miller's lap, head sagged forward, body careening tipsily. Hal motioned to Scat to get Martin on his feet. Scat tried. Martin's body stretched across his lap. Scat moved his hands, gave a startled cry and jumped from his seat. Martin's body slid to the floor, falling with a dull, echoing thud. Hal stepped back quickly, aghast at what he saw.

Mary Dale had moved down front. She covered her eyes and screamed. Her voice, amplified by the microphone, shrilled, echoing and reechoing through the hall.

The crowd jumped to its feet and surged forward.

Hal leaped into action before panic could spread. "Get him out!" he cried to two of his men. "The rest of you play. Now! Swing it out!"

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As the body was carried behind the stand, only those people in the vanguard of the onrushing mob could see the thin knife protruding from Martin's back.

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III

HAL KEPT THE BAND playing. The floor filled with dancers. Some of the people who had surged forward toward the stand after Mary's scream began to mix with the dancers; the others, eagerly morbid for further details, moved off after the body, which was being carried into Fields' luxurious office on the corridor at the rear of the building near the bandstand.

Fields dashed up, tossing the curious aside as he crammed his bulk through the door just ahead of Johnson, who was in charge of the special detail of police sent out to the Gardens to preserve order. Maxie rushed in just as the two musicians laid the body face down on the floor.

"What happened?" Johnson demanded.

"I don't know, but it looks like murder to me," one of the musicians replied, pointing at the knife handle protruding from Martin's back.

"What an escape!" Maxie exclaimed.

"Escape? He's dead, ain't he? What are you talking about?" Fields demanded.

"I meant Hal," Maxie replied, and took an aspirin. "That knife was meant for Harrison!"

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"What's that?" Johnson demanded.

"Don't ask questions! Do something!" Fields shouted. "Get the murderer! Do you want to ruin my business?"

"Who did it?" Johnson asked Maxie.

"I dunno nothing about it. Ask Harrison, he was out there," Maxie replied evasively.

"Go get him!" Johnson ordered.

"No! No!" Fields shouted. "He must keep playing or the crowd will wreck this place!"

Johnson began barking orders to several of his men who had managed to follow him to the room. "It's murder!" he cried. "Stop anyone who tries to leave the hall! Keep the band playing! Get a doctor! Call Inspector Burke at once!"

The officer who had been instructed to get a doctor used his head wisely and made his way toward Hal on the front of the bandstand.

Although Hal had attempted to conceal the murder, there had been some people near the stand who had actually seen the knife in Martin's back. The news ran through the building like wildfire, passing from group to group, from table to table. "Martin's been murdered! Martin's been murdered!" The words were passed along until they reached the crowd on the outside of the building. Several people hurried toward the exits, but were turned back by Johnson's men, who began blocking the doors.

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As the officer approached Hal he called, "We need a doctor! See if there is one in the house!"

Hal brought the number to a close and made a short announcement: "Is there a doctor in the house, please? If so, go to Fields' office on the side corridor. The waiters will show you the way. Hurry, please! Phil Martin has had a sudden heart attack. Will the balance of you keep dancing or return to your tables?"

There were some unbelieving jeers from the crowd, which were lost in the quick rush of the music as Hal returned to leading the band.

With callous indifference, most of the people continued to dance. There were, however, many who followed the policeman back to the area near the office and pressed against the rope which had been strung up to keep the crowds back.

The doctor was finishing his examination when Inspector Burke, gruff and blustery, arrived with assistants and a stenographer to make notes. Burke's series of questions were as sharp and rapid as the rattle of a machine-gun. In a few minutes, he had things moving rapidly.

His questions bore immediate results. He sent for Kingford, Stoner and Chubby Carlton. He dispatched two men to search Martin's apartment, telling them to hurry back. He refused to permit Maxie to leave the room. Mary Dale, her face white and

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strained, came in and sat in a big chair. Scat Miller, looking a little ill and whiter than ever, stood near the door. Dave Fields paced up and down in front of his desk, where Burke's assistant was busy taking notes. When the band leaders were brought in Burke snapped, "That's enough for a starter."

"We have three people who tried to get away from the building. What'll I do with them?" Johnson asked.

"I'll attend to them later," Burke answered. He turned to Fields and demanded, "Why was he murdered?"

"How do I know?" Fields answered with one of his habitual questions.

"You knew him pretty well, didn't you?" Burke snapped.

"Would I pay him six hundred a week, if I didn't?" Fields retorted.

"Come on, Fields, don't hedge!" Burke urged. "Tell me what you know and don't ask questions. That's my job."

"Do I know any more than the rest?" Fields replied. "Is it right for me to be saying things that may hurt innocent people?"

"What things? What people?" Burke barked.

"Anything, anybody," Fields grumbled.

"Did Martin have any enemies?"

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"Don't all band leaders have enemies?" Fields asked.

Burke tried to be patient. "What sort of enemies?" he insisted.

"Other band leaders, of course. Aren't they all jealous of each other?"

"You've got a nerve to say a thing like that," Chubby Carlton spoke up indignantly.

"Who are you?" Burke asked.

"Carlton, a band leader."

Burke swung back to Fields. "Come on, be specific," he ordered.

"It don't seem right, just the same," Fields protested.

"I'll be the judge of that. What did you mean when you said he had enemies?"

"Well, Kingford and Martin didn't get along, doesn't . . . ?"

Kingford interrupted to shout, "Is that so? You were always fighting with him yourself!"

"Oh, you were, were you?" Burke hammered at Fields.

"Sure, sure," Fields agreed. "That's right. Doesn't everybody have arguments with musicians? Ask Maxie here, he knows that." He pointed a finger at Maxie.

"Keep me out of it!" Maxie cried.

Fields' remark gave Johnson an idea. He stepped

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forward and whispered something in Burke's ear. Burke nodded and then went back to questioning Fields. "What did you argue and quarrel about?" he demanded.

"Music, numbers, floor show and all that sort of thing. Aren't all artists temperamental?"

"Was it temperament that gave you that black eye?" Kingford challenged.

Fields rubbed the discolored eye tenderly with his finger. The skin had. been broken and was crusting with blood. He winced as his finger touched the sore and cried, "Didn't I run into a door? Doesn't everybody know that?"

"I heard different. You had a row with Martin and he socked you," Kingford accused.

Fields spread his great hands under Burke's eyes. "Look! I could break Martin in pieces with my two hands. Would I let him sock me?"

"Did he try it?" Burke's question startled Fields, who replied, "It was a door, I tell you."

"Where were you at the time of the murder?" Burke went on.

"I was on the way to my office when I heard his voice break right in the middle of the song. I ran out front to see what had happened."

"Did anyone see you?" Burke asked.

"How do I know? Did I know there had been a murder? Was I thinking of an alibi? I was worry-

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ing about my business and the success of my show. I wanted to know what had happened."

"And you found out?" Burke suggested.

"Not then. Harrison was singing when I got round to the front. Everything seemed to be all right until the lights came on and I saw Martin on that fellow's lap." He pointed toward Scat Miller.

"But you didn't do anything about it, did you?" Burke insisted.

"No."

"Why not? Didn't you realize that there was something wrong with Martin?"

"Sure I realized that."

"Then why didn't you take some action?"

"A lot of reasons. Martin had been drinking heavily. He was sore. He and Harrison had had a fight."

"What about?"

"Everybody knows there was bad blood between them."

Maxie jumped to his feet and protested loudly, "You can't say things like that, Fields!"

"Sit down!" Burke barked at Maxie.

"Fields is right," Johnson offered. "There was something in the paper about a row between Harrison and Martin. Martin was going to sue Harrison for a million dollars and Harrison threatened him."

"It was newspaper stuff, publicity!" Maxie cried.

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"Quiet!" Burke growled.

"Shall I put him out?" Johnson asked.

"No. They give themselves away in a crowd like this," Burke answered. He turned to Fields. "What do you know about this feud between Martin and Harrison?"

"He can tell you more about it. He's Harrison's manager." Fields evaded the question by throwing it to Maxie.

"Tell me." Burke swung on Maxie.

"Martin has been sore at Harrison ever since he was fired from the Harmony Men," Maxie replied.

"But what about this suit for a million dollars?" Burke insisted.

"You see it's like this . . ." Maxie floundered for words. "Martin was a good band man but he didn't have the stuff to make a leader. He was never satisfied while he was with us and when Harrison caught him in something shady he fired him."

"What had Martin done?"

"I dunno. Harrison never told me."

"But what has all this to do with the suit for a million dollars?"

"I'm trying to tell you if you'll let me. Martin got his own orchestra together and finally located out here. He's been doing Harrison's stuff and he's been doing it so long now that he thinks he's the

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one who originated the idea. He's been claiming that Harrison copies him and it's just the other way around. That's what the suit was about, but it was only a bluff to try and scare Harrison, to keep him away from San Francisco. That's all."

"Harrison was served with papers tonight. It says so in the *Crescent*," Johnson cut in.

"Oh, it does, does it?" Burke said gleefully. "I guess we're getting hot!"

"But the knife was meant for Harrison!" Maxie cried. "They killed the wrong man."

"What are you talking about?" Burke demanded.

Maxie told him about the arrival of the telegram in Portland and the threat which it carried. Since Burke listened so attentively, Maxie told him about the slip of paper he found in the car corridor. "There's someone in the orchestra who is in league with Martin," he stated. "Harrison isn't afraid of the suit. He can stand on his own. It won't hurt him a bit but it would show Martin up for the imitator he really is. What does Harrison care about a lawsuit of that kind? Why should he kill a man over a suit he does not fear? On the other hand, Martin knew he would lose the suit and for that reason wanted Harrison out of the way. Don't you see it?" he ended eagerly.

"No, I don't," Burke replied.

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"Look! It was dark up there on the platform. The murderer wasn't sure which man was which. The knife intended for Harrison was plunged into Martin."

"Umm." Burke considered.

"It could happen that way," Johnson suggested.

"Sure it could," Fields added.

"Have you located the person in the orchestra who received the message which you think came from Martin?" Burke asked.

"No, and I've been watching them all carefully too."

"You say Harrison was up there at the time of the murder?"

"Yes. He just steps to one side when a guest star is singing because he has to take over as soon as the number is finished."

"Who was near Martin and Harrison at the time of the murder?"

Maxie hesitated to answer that question.

"The musicians," Johnson answered. "The men in the front row of the band were the nearest. That fellow was directly behind Martin. He was the one who was holding Martin's body when the lights came up." He pointed at Scat Miller.

"Why did you knife him?" Burke demanded of Miller.

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Scat, already pale, turned whiter and gulped.

"Come on!" Burke insisted.

"I didn't knife him. Harrison shoved the body toward me and told me to hold it. He said Martin had fainted. That's all I know."

"Didn't you try to do anything for Martin?"

"How could I in the dark? I just held him."

"Didn't you know it wasn't a faint? Couldn't you tell the man was dying?"

"I never saw anyone die. I didn't know. Martin was so still. I believed Harrison."

"Tried to steer me away from Harrison, did you?" Burke demanded of Maxie. "Where's this Harrison?" he bellowed.

"He's leading the band," Fields replied.

"Bring him in!" Burke ordered.

"But, Inspector," Fields pleaded, "if the band stops, this crowd will go wild on our hands. They know something's wrong. The band must keep playing!"

"Wait a minute!" Burke recalled the policeman who had opened the door letting in a burst of dance music. He turned to the others and asked, "Can any of you lead this band?"

Kingford, Stoner and Carlton jumped to their feet.

"I can," Kingford said eagerly.

"Sure he can," Chubby Carlton said. "He's always wanted to play here."

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"Which one are you?" Burke asked Kingford.

"Rex Kingford."

"You're the fellow who didn't get along with Martin, eh? Where were you when Martin was murdered?"

"I don't know when he was murdered," Kingford replied, refusing to fall into Burke's trap.

"You heard him gasp, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, where were you at that moment?"

"At the table with these men." He pointed hopefully toward the other band leaders.

"That right?" Burke asked.

There was a moment of hesitant silence.

"Was he with you or not?" Burke demanded.

Chick Stoner spoke. "He left the table the first time Martin sang. He may have come back but I don't know. You see, Inspector, the room was dark and I was watching the floor show."

"How about you?" Burke asked Chubby.

Substantially Carlton agreed with Stoner. If Kingford had a genuine alibi, it was ruined by the darkness of the room.

"You saw me, Dave," Kingford cried desperately.

"I don't remember," Dave Fields answered. "Do you think I was looking at you with all the things I had on my mind? I don't remember seeing you

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since you were at the table fighting with Martin."

That remark was of no help to Kingford.

"What were you fighting about?" Burke asked.

"It wasn't a fight," Kingford denied. "We were having an argument, that was all."

"They were always at each other's throat," Fields said maliciously as if he relished the opportunity of getting back at Kingford for his earlier remarks.

"You had a fight with Martin just before the murder. You left the table soon after he did and you can't prove an alibi. Where were you?" Burke insisted.

"I told you," Kingford cried. "I was at the table. They could say so if they wanted to," he accused.

Burke glanced at both Stoner and Carlton.

"I didn't see him," Stoner said.

"Neither did I," Carlton repeated.

"I'll keep you right here under my eye, Kingford. A man with a possible motive and no alibi is good material."

Kingford jumped to his feet and accused them all of trying to frame him. He was crazy, fighting mad.

"Don't get hysterical. Or do you call it temperament?" Burke sneered. "It won't help you any. Sit down and be quiet or I'll run you in right now."

Kingford, his rage spent, sank hopelessly into his chair.

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"Hey you, the fat one!" Burke pointed at Chubby Carlton. "Go take a whirl at that band. Take him out, Johnson, and bring Harrison in."

Carlton beamed. "Now you're gonna hear music," he promised as he followed Johnson through the door.

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IV

WHEN THEY REACHED the edge of the dance floor Johnson pushed into the crowd like an ice-breaker to cut a channel between the edge of the bandstand and the surging swaying crowd on the floor. Carlton wallowed in his wake, panting slightly from the exertion necessary to maintain his position. As they neared the center of the stand, the forward movement was somewhat retarded by the dense mass of couples.

Joan was standing directly in front of Hal talking up at him with venomous rapidity. Her feet planted firmly on the floor, slightly apart, her hands braced against the edge of the platform, she managed to withstand the buffeting onslaught of the human waves as they surged against her. Hal was doing his best to ignore her and her sharp speech.

"He would have the best-looking girl in the place standing at his feet," Carlton mumbled.

Johnson made no reply. He was too busy with his forward attack. He paused for a moment after he had dislodged the final couple who separated him from Joan and her position in front of the micro-

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phone. He listened to what Joan was saying, then sidled up to her and said curtly, "Step aside, sister."

Joan was startled. She looked like a guilty child caught stealing jam when she realized that Johnson was an officer. Hal's eyes widened but he went on with his conducting.

"We want you inside, Harrison," Johnson called over the sound of the music.

Hal nodded in understanding as Carlton climbed up.

"Come on," Johnson called.

With a glance at the crowded floor Hal suggested, "Let's go this way. It's easier." He pointed toward the side of the stand.

Johnson's arm shot out and clutched at Joan, who had tried to melt into the crowd. "Not so fast," he growled; "I want you too."

"Me?" she cried in surprise.

"Yes, you! Get up there!" Without ceremony he gave Joan a boost which shot her up to the edge of the stand.

"Can't I be arrested without having you tagging along?" Hal complained as he caught her hand to steady her.

The dancers pressed closer to the stand, their eyes glued on the couple as they were led off by Johnson.

This little scene had not escaped the sharp eye of Mrs. Paxton, who had been watching them. She

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left her table and raced down the side aisle, colliding with a waiter who was carrying a large tray of filled beer glasses. She gave the startled waiter an accusing look as his load toppled to the floor and like an avenging goddess passed on, Joan's ermine wrap billowing from her shoulders, the spilled beer a foamy wake.

Breathless she reached the roped-off enclosure and forced her way past a policeman just as the trio were entering Fields' office. "Wait for me!" she cried.

"You can't come in here, lady," Johnson denied.

"Then you can't take my daughter in there, either! Come, Joan!" she gasped, one hand on her heaving bosom as she fought for breath.

"Please, Mother, go away," Joan begged.

"I'll do nothing of the sort! The very idea! I never heard of such a thing!" She heaved between gasps.

"Let her in or lock her up," Hal suggested to Johnson.

"Who is she?" Johnson asked.

"The girl's mother. Just try to keep her quiet."

"Come in," Johnson said to Mrs. Paxton as he stepped to one side.

Mrs. Paxton fluttered through the door. At the sight of the body, which was at that moment being covered with a sheet preparatory to being carried away, Mrs. Paxton gave a little shriek, reeled and

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sank panting on the divan. "Isn't it simply awful?" she cried to the room at large. "But so . . ."

"Quiet!" Burke barked.

"But it *is* awful," Mrs. Paxton insisted, "and I don't care what you say!"

"Who are these women?" Burke snapped. "I sent you for Harrison, not his harem."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Mrs. Paxton cried. "I'm Mrs. Llewellyn Paxton and that's my daughter Joan."

"Why did you bring them in?" Burke demanded, trying to ignore Mrs. Paxton for a moment.

"The girl knows something about the murder," Johnson replied.

"She does not!" Mrs. Paxton denied, springing to her feet. "For if she did she'd have told me. She tells me everything. A girl should confide in her mother."

"Sit down!" Burke shouted.

Stoner, Mary and Hal were exchanging amused glances. Burke caught them at it. "It won't be so funny if I take you down to the station house," he growled. As the commotion died down he said, "Now, Johnson, tell me about the girl."

Johnson had been waiting for his chance to explain. He said, "As I moved up to the stand this girl was in front of the mike talking to Harrison. She didn't see me coming but he did and he scowled a warning at her."

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"Ha!" Hal interrupted.

Johnson went on: "You know how a person does when they want someone else to stop talking. She didn't catch on, for she paid no attention to him and she didn't stop. I heard her say, 'I hope they hang you for this murder!' "

"Why, Joan!" Mrs. Paxton breathed in horror. "You didn't! Not hung! Not before he plays for the Benefit! How could you say such a thing?"

"I ought to know what she said," Johnson protested annoyed. "I heard her."

"And I know my daughter!"

"And I know this. One more word out of you and out you go," Burke stormed at Mrs. Paxton. "What do you think this is, a pink tea? We're investigating a murder."

"Yes, I know," Mrs. Paxton agreed. "I'm so thrilled. Really . . ."

"Quiet," Joan whispered a warning.

Mary Dale reached forward and put a restraining hand on Mrs. Paxton's arm. Mrs. Paxton nodded sweetly in understanding.

Hal's eyes were full of slumbering resentment as he watched mother and daughter. Joan flashed him a pert smile as she faced Burke waiting for him to go on.

"What did you mean by your remark?" Burke demanded.

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"Nothing," Joan replied.

"Why did you say it?"

"I don't know. It just popped into my head," she replied.

"What made it pop into your head? Why did you connect Harrison with this murder? You must have had some reason."

"I did," Joan replied.

There was an astonished gasp from Hal.

"Just what was your reason?" Burke demanded.

"Well, you see . . ."

"What was it she said to him, Johnson? Repeat it, please."

"She said, 'I hope they hang you for this.'" Johnson quoted again.

"I thought you said 'this murder' before," Burke asked quickly.

"That's right," Johnson agreed.

Burke turned to Joan. "I can understand your saying, 'I hope they hang you,' but what I want to know is what made you add, 'for this murder'?" Burke insisted.

"We were quarreling," Joan answered. "I knew he'd be suspected, I suppose that's why I said it."

"What made you so sure that he'd be suspected?"

"Because of the things which were in the papers this morning and again tonight. I knew you'd suspect him the moment you remembered those things.

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And," she added quickly, "because he was refusing to do something that I very much wanted him to do."

"Were you asking him about the Benefit, darling?" Mrs. Paxton purred as if she knew the answer.

"No," Joan answered hesitantly. She turned to Burke. "I suppose you'd call it a lovers' quarrel." As she bent her head demurely, she missed Hal's sudden start. When she turned her glance to Burke's face once more her eyes were brimming. "You know how you say things you don't mean when you're angry with someone you like. You've heard husbands and wives, brothers and sisters saying awful things to each other. You have, haven't you, Inspector?"

He muttered something in recognition of the universal truth she had stated.

Joan smiled brightly. "You must believe me. It was just a jealous girl's bad temper."

Hal was dumfounded. He cried out, "Look here, Inspector . . ."

His speech was halted by a vicious kick on the shins slyly administered by Joan.

"I'm coming to you. Step aside," Burke ordered Joan. "What about this bad blood between you and Martin?"

"Just an old feud, Inspector. Professional jeal-

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