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McCARTY
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ISABEL OSTRANDER

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ASHES TO ASHES
THE CRIMSON BLOTTER
HOW MANY CARDS?
THE ISLAND OF INTRIGUE
SUSPENSE
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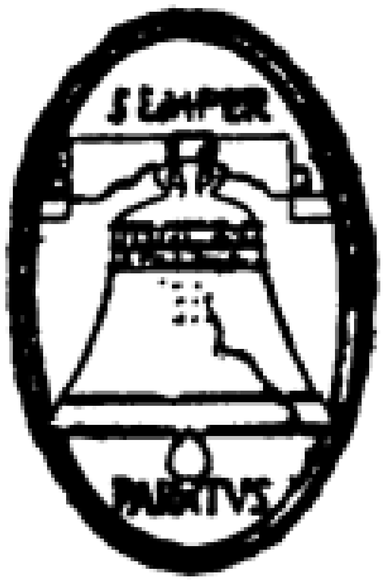
McCARTY INCOG.

BY

ISABEL OSTRANDER



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McCARTY INCOG.

CHAPTER I

THE WRECK

"THERE'S a storm brewing, Mac. I don't like the brassy look to the sky, I'm telling you, and I misdoubt that this old tub will get us to that Matta—whatever its heathen name is—before the devil and all breaks loose!" The lanky figure in oil-skins straightened beside the pounding motor of the weather-beaten dory and glanced wistfully back at the shore line of Cape Cod.

"Mattagansett? I'm surprised at you, Denny, that's chauffeured a fire engine these last two years through the heaviest traffic in the world, to be leery of this bit of a boat when you've the whole sea to yourself." Ex-Roundsman Timothy McCarty, far from his urban haunts, chewed contentedly on the unlighted cigar which protruded from beneath his close-cropped, sandy mustache and eased back in his narrow seat. "The water is more smooth than when we left Plimptonport."

"Too smooth, like there'd been oil poured on it!" Dennis Riordan retorted. "There's a hush to the air too, if you'll notice, as though it was waiting for something to

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drop. I've gone trout-fishing with you, though to stand all day with my feet in the water and black flies eating me alive for the sake of a couple of fresh sardines was not my idea of a vacation; but the next time I get a month's sick leave you'll not be cajoling me to the back of beyond for any more of this deep-sea stuff! Sick leave, did the Board call it? Leave to get sick, they should have said! I've a gone feeling coming on me now——"

"'Tis in your head, then, and there's not much missing." McCarty cast a complacently uncritical eye at the luridly glowing horizon. "That jolt you got when you hit the elevated pillar must have done more damage than the doctor claimed, for you've been a soured man since and there's no pleasing you. Didn't I give up my peaceful, quiet life——?"

"You did!" interrupted the other with bitterness. "If it's soured I am, I must be getting old like you!"

"Old, is it?" McCarty stared. "I can take on my weight any day with the best of them!"

"In fact, maybe, but not in spirit any more." The homely, lantern-jawed face set resolutely. "'Tis that that has me worried this last month or so, Mac. You've been leading a peaceful, quiet life all right but it's not like you, letting your tenants put it over on you and paying that robber tailor's bill without a kick! Are you going into politics that you're afraid to lose votes by opening the mouth on you? What is it?"

"Nothing whatever." The Ex-Roundsman clamped down on his cigar. "I'm tired of fighting the tenants over a busted boiler or a tile off the roof, and the tailor's

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bill wasn't worth bothering about. You've something more on your mind than that."

He stated it as a fact and Dennis nodded confirmatively.

"I have that. Let alone your decoying me up to this God-forsaken jumping-off place, you've been like a bear with a sore head. Time was when you'd not rest if a murder or burglary appeared in the papers before you'd got down to headquarters and talked it over with the Inspector and 'twas the breath of life to you till it was settled, to say nothing of the cases you horned in on long after you retired from the force and worked out when nobody else could. It's me that knows, for you dragged me through most of them with you.—She's knocking again!"

With a profane vocal accompaniment Dennis gave his attention for a moment to the cranky little engine and then went on: "In the last two months there've been three murders that were puzzling enough to have brought you up on your toes in the old days: the millionaire that was found doubled up in the telephone booth, and the girl's body in the stolen car and that minister on the top floor of a gambling house where he'd no business to be, alive or dead. And were you snooping around headquarters or looking into the evidence for yourself or telling me what you thought of them? You were not! You read the papers and smoked more than was good for you and took long walks by your lone and bit the head off anybody that as much as said 'murder' to you! If you'll give me the answer——?"

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"There's none. I'm tired of butting in, that's all." McCarty felt vainly for a match in the pockets beneath his slicker and then sat back once more. "The Department is full of keen young lads who know more than we old-timers ever did, and there's been so many new kinds of science invented to track down crooks that the methods good enough in my day are a joke. Every time I've stuck in my oar since I left the force I swore would be the last and now I mean it. I'm a respectable private citizen and I'm going to stay so. I misdoubt but next year I'll be taking up golf."

"Or croquet!" Dennis suggested with withering scorn. The engine was thumping and churning once more but its guardian was for the moment oblivious. "Private citizen, my eye! I might be retired on a pension for ten years but if I heard a noise in my sleep that sounded like a gong wouldn't I be reaching out for my pants before I drew my next breath? 'Tis second nature to us now, each in our own line, but I suppose you're kidding yourself that if a dead body was to come and lay down here at your feet you'd call the nearest bull and walk away?"

"There'd be none to call unless they were better swimmers than most." McCarty gazed again out over the vast stretch of sea and then added: "No, Denny, I'm done. I've proved that by minding my own business in the last few months, as you've just argued, and I'm at peace with the world. As long as there are men and women there'll be love, good or bad, and the desire for more than they can gain rightfully, and the fear of what

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they've done or what somebody's got on them, and when there's no other way out they'll turn to crime. Just so long, too, there'll be the law to hunt them down, but Timothy McCarty, by the grace of common sense, is through! I'll never touch another case."

"Then if it's not old age, 'tis matrimony!" exclaimed the other, aghast. "In all the years I've known you not a woman have you looked at twice, but there's no fool——!"

"There is not!" interrupted McCarty. "Well I know the rest of what you mean, my lad, and while night is coming on and you've been giving me the devil and all you've taken your hand off your number, for the engine has gone dead on you!"

It was true. The asthmatic motor was still and the slap-slap of the water against the sides of the dory was the only sound which broke the silence until Dennis lifted up his voice and anathematized all mechanical contrivances in general and the one before him in particular. He did it with such fluency and gusto that his companion, having found a match at last, sat puffing at his cigar and enjoying the unusual burst of oratory, until it was borne in upon him that the swaying motion of the boat was perceptibly increasing.

"Is it your hammering and tinkering or the language you're using that's rocking the boat, Denny?" he inquired at last. "Not that I mind, but the water that is coming over the sides might give that engine more of an excuse to lay down on you than it has already."

"There's always more motion when you're standing

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still in a tub like this than when it's going, if it ever does, steady!" Without looking up, Dennis added a poignant condemnatory sentence or two concerning the fisherman from whom they had hired the dory, and added: "If you're afraid of spoiling that elegant shine you got in Plimptonport, put the feet of you up on the seat. I'm going to get this thing started if it takes till morning."

"Always providing we're afloat by then." The oily sea had become choppy and the brassy twilight sky had taken on an angry, reddish tinge, but McCarty discreetly forbore drawing the attention of his companion to the change. "You don't think we've sprung a leak, by any chance?"

Dennis paused in his labors to wipe his brow and glanced about him. The next moment he had jumped to his feet.

"Holy Saints!" he cried. "We're in for it now! Will you take a look at that sky? 'Tis as though all Fives were sounding and the water is heaving like the breast of an angry woman! No wonder we have all the sea to ourselves, as you said awhile back; them that know the signs of the weather in these parts have beaten it for shore long since!"

"It does look like a bit of a squall," McCarty admitted judiciously. "If you can get that engine going again maybe we can put in somewhere before it breaks."

"Mac, if this was a racing machine and, me the most dare-devil driver that ever took a hairpin turn on two wheels, we'd never make Plimptonport or Matta-whozis in time; and the open water is better for us than the

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rocks that lies between the two of them." Dennis laid aside his tools and snuggled himself more tightly into his oil-skins. "The storm that's on us will make Noah's flood look like the sprinkle of a garden hose, but we'll ride it out if this scow holds together."

"It's funny there's no wind but just these little puffs." McCarty's tone held a trace of uneasiness as his companion's became philosophic. "Maybe you were right about it being a bit late in the afternoon to start out for Mattagansett, but if you were a cigar smoker like me, Denny, and could get nothing in Plimptonport but bits of hangman's rope——! Do you think that murdering fisherman rented us this outfit to get the insurance?"

Dennis did not reply. He had cupped one huge, outstanding ear with his hand and a tense, listening attitude had stiffened his awkward body. McCarty became aware of a dull, heavy droning sound that seemed to vibrate in the air about them like the subdued humming of mighty, distant machines.

Anxiety making him irritable, he demanded, "What's it you're hearing now? That's no roar of waves anywhere, for we're in the Sound, not on the ocean. It isn't thunder, off in the distance? For the love of Mike, say something!"

"It's not the roar of water I'm listening to, but the wind that's coming." Dennis glanced once more at the horizon and pointed. "Do you see that black, funnel-shaped cloud whirling 'round and 'round and spreading as it gets near? 'Tis that bringing it."

"Glory be!" exclaimed the ex-roundsman, awe-struck,

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as the sable menace rose over them blotting out the lurid glare, as if by magic, and darkening the waters. "You've dived into many a cellar that poured out black death at you, Denny, and I've followed more than one killer up an alley when I couldn't see my hand before my face, but this is the worst the two of us have ever struck! What are you doing now?"

"Making things as snug as I can before she hits us." Dennis was gathering up the tools and stowing them away as he spoke. "Lend me a hand till we tie this bit of tarpaulin down over the engine and get that pan out from under your seat. We may need it to scoop part of Nantucket Sound out of this private yacht of ours before the storm is over."

McCarty obeyed in silence. A certain grimness had replaced his outward perturbation, but all at once he lifted his head. The droning sound had changed to a muffled booming; the great funnel had spread until all the sky was covered; and then, with a sullen roar, the squall burst upon them.

"Grab that oar there and try to help me keep her headed up—straight up into that wall of water that's coming!" Dennis yelled above the bellowing wind. "It's our only chance! If she catches us broadside——!"

But straight up the wall of water they climbed to hang for a shuddering moment on its crest and then swoop down into the seething depths with a suction which drew them backward with incredible velocity nearer and nearer the shore line, invisible now in the swirling

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darkness, but dotted here and there along its low-lying strand with small, jutting points of rock. Dennis had spoken truly when he said that the open water, tumultuous as it had now become, would be better for them than a hit-or-miss wind-driven landing on the coast.

Landsmen though they were, they managed to breast roller after roller during the long hour that followed, although the wind drove them farther and farther inshore. But with a final strenuous effort McCarty's oar broke and he landed with an ignominious splash in the bottom of the dory. Battered by wind and spray, jostled and flung about like a mere manikin by the heaving waters beneath their craft, he scrambled back to his seat and, clinging there, howled through the maelstrom in the direction that his companion's gaunt, tenacious figure still loomed.

"Denny," he shrieked, "I can't help you now, lad! The oar's gone! You'll have to stick it out alone with that bit of a pole——!"

"Hold tight and save your breath!" Dennis bawled back. "Here comes another one!"

What happened immediately thereafter was never quite clear in McCarty's memory. Giant hands seemed to raise the dory, turning it in mid-air, his grasp was torn loose and he was hurled down, down into limitless depths of waters that dragged him onward with the rush and fury of malign forces which he had never combated before.

His heart was bursting, his lungs crushed with a

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weight through which searing agony darted, but he struck out blindly, instinctively—and then a hideous, smashing impact seemed to split his very skull and all consciousness was blotted out.

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CHAPTER II

THE CABIN ON THE DUNES

A CONTINUOUS rolling and rumbling as of multitudinous drums, jagged forks of white light followed by reverberating crashes which shook the universe and the wailing of a host of demons that rose to a shriek and died in shuddering moans! These were the first impressions of ex-roundsman McCarty and he drew his own conclusions. He had passed into the next world, there could be no doubt of that, but he had never thought of being in that division of it. True, he had given as little serious consideration to his ultimate chances as the average healthy, optimistic man of his type, but he had taken it for granted that he would get about as good a deal as the next one. And yet he must have somehow let himself in for purgatory!

He did not quail at the prospect, but rather an overmastering curiosity possessed him. So imperative was it, that instinctively he opened his eyes. Just as he did, that jagged white glare came again; and his lids closed with a grunt of mingled comprehension and physical pain.

He wasn't dead, after all. He was lying somewhere,

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in the midst of a thunder-storm, on a slimy rock half in and half out of water that dashed stinging spray over him and ground steel-pointed particles of sand into the very marrow of his being. He felt as bruised and battered as if one of the ward gangs had got him in the old days, and something had stove in the side of his head just over the ear; but he did not, for the moment, attempt to move or take more accurate account of casualties.

How in the name of all that was incredible had he, Timothy McCarty, come to be where he was, and what had happened to him? Why wasn't he home in his own comfortable, shabby, bachelor quarters over the antique shop in that quiet New York side-street? He'd resolutely kept from butting in on any of the cases of the Department lately and had wanted to get away from it all; there'd been some talk between him and Dennis of a vacation——!

McCarty sat up, suddenly regardless of his aching back and head and the precariousness of his slippery perch, and memory came back in an overwhelming tide. Denny—the fishing trip to Cape Cod—the random choice of that ramshackled clutter of shanties called Plimptonport—the equally casual meeting and bargain with the taciturn old fisherman for the use of his hut and his dory—the start for Mattagansett—the storm—and then chaos! They'd been swamped, shipwrecked, and he'd been flung upon the shore with his head against a rock that had knocked the senses out of him, but *where was Denny?* By the Blessed Saints, where was he?

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Lurching, slipping, reeling with the agony of his battered head and buffeted by the howling wind, McCarty managed to scramble to the strip of beach. He dashed his torn oil-skin sleeve across his eyes to rid them of a sudden, blinding moisture that was neither spray nor rain, while by the next revealing flash of lightning he gazed wildly about him at the deserted expanse of sand dunes and tumbling waters; and his voice rose above the warring elements in a cry which bore with it all the brotherly love of their lifetime of companionship and the anguish of dread of what might be.

"Denny! Denny! For the love of God answer me! 'Tis Mac that's calling! Where are you? Denny!"

He ran and fell and staggered to his feet again, only to fling himself onward in mad rushes to and fro which carried him, now waist-deep into the water, now half-way up the shelving side of a sand dune. But ever his hoarse shout was driven back into his throat and only the roar of the wind answered him.

At length he dropped exhausted upon the sodden beach and lay with the rain beating down upon him, while great sobs tore their way from his breast. Dennis Riordan was gone! Tumbling about somewhere out in that black waste of sea under the stormy night sky was the body of his friend, his pal who had followed him through every adventure, grave or gay, steeped in the quiet contentment of utter congeniality or fraught with hazard! Denny, his confidant since they had come green to the new country and each won his way into the department of service for which he was best fitted, maintaining a comradeship un-

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shakable through all the years that followed! Denny was gone!

How long he lay there McCarty did not know; but the roar of thunder and flash of lightning had abated and only the rain still fell in slanting sheets when at length he dragged himself once more to his feet and stumbled blindly forward, not realizing or caring in what direction he was headed, and indeed scarcely conscious of the impulse which urged him on. The blackness of a Stygian night enveloped him, and his brain, still dazed from the blow that had all but fractured his skull, could focus only upon the devastating fact of his grief. He clambered over hillocks and mounds of sand where coarse grasses brushed his knees and strange things crawled and scurried away at his approach. Once, great, wet-feathered wings flapped almost in his face and the plaintive, startled cry of a sea-bird rose eerily, and once his foot touched something hard and round, which scuttled off precipitately; but he was oblivious to all about him until, breasting the rise of a dune, he beheld a light!

It was a mere red glow, faint and flickering, but McCarty saw that it outlined a small window just ahead, and about it loomed the rude bulk of a cabin against the lesser black of the sky.

He thought that he shouted, but the sound that issued from his cracked lips, as he waved his arms and lurched drunkenly forward, was only an inarticulate mumble. The glow seemed to recede maddeningly before him as the sodden sand sucked back his unsteady

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feet and his wavering knees all but gave way; yet he kept doggedly on and at last reached the small, level space upon which the cabin stood.

He saw then that he was facing its side, for there was no opening in the weather-beaten wall save the single window in its center. It had evidently been boarded up and the glow emanated from an aperture through which a pole of some sort, with an iron hook on the end, had been thrust outward. There was something strange about that smoldering light, too; it did not beam from any lamp or candle within the range of McCarty's vision as he clung to the splintered ledge and peered within, but seemed, rather, to rise from the floor, and the outlines of a few rough, scattered pieces of furniture came to him through a dim, smoky haze.

Releasing his hold upon the ledge, he felt his way along the wall to the seaward corner and around it, past a second window—this one so securely boarded that only a faint glimmer stole through a chink here and there—and so he reached the door.

It seemed frail and sagging when he knocked upon it, but there was no answer to his summons even when he croaked out a peremptory hail and rattled the latch; and all at once the conviction penetrated his dulled senses that something was vitally wrong. Raising his fist, he drove again and again at the panels, but the door held until a mighty kick burst it from its corroded hinges and sent it toppling inward, the impetus carrying McCarty to his knees. In this position he remained for a moment, jarred anew in his weakened state, while his starting eyes

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took in the scene before him. The rush of wind which had entered when he burst the door cleared away the haze hanging thickly on the air of the low-raftered room. At once, the intruder was aware of a rude bunk in a corner at the back with a seaman's chest beside it, a rusted stove flanked by a cupboard and a heap of driftwood against the wall opposite the broken window, and a table with two overturned chairs on either side of it in the center of the cabin. Between it and the doorway, so close that one of her shoes almost touched his knee, lay the body of a woman.

McCarty's eyes met her brown ones, set in a fixed stare, but wrenched themselves away and traveled past the gaping wound in her side to the great, bloodstained iron hook half hidden in the shadows under the table, yet upon which the glow flickered redly. Then in the draught it suddenly flared up, and he saw the darting flame in a tiny pile of shavings just beneath the broken window.

In a flash he had leaped to his feet, dashed around the corner of the table and trampled out the creeping menace. It died in an angry sputter of hissing smoke. And it was only when utter darkness descended and he staggered back weakly for support, as his spurt of false strength failed, that he realized the situation. He was alone in an isolated cabin on an unknown part of the coast with the body of a strange woman, strangely murdered, lying within reach of his hand!

It would have taken a greater psychologist than he keen analyst of human nature as he had proved himself

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to have told why it was that at that moment Timothy McCarty, injured and storm-spent and grieved to the heart of him by the loss of his best friend, became without volition once again the "Mac" of the old department days and forced his dazed brain and bruised body to the task which confronted him.

A light; that was the first thing. He must have a light in order to examine the scene and photograph it upon his memory, and then, somehow, from somewhere he must summon whoever was in charge of the law's keeping in this desolate waste. His mind traveled back with lightning speed to that moment in the dory just after the engine failed when he had finally found a match for his cigar in one of his pockets. Had it been the last one? Frantically he tore open his slicker and searched, and a grim chuckle of exultation escaped him as his fingers closed upon a small tin box of wax vespers which must have remained forgotten in the pocket of his old sweater since his last fishing trip. It rattled reassuringly as he drew it forth. If only the tiny receptacle had proved watertight during his plunge overboard and his mad drive inshore!

The first taper bent as he tried to ignite it on the corrugated bottom of the little box and he dropped it at his feet, but the second flared up like a miniature candle and, shielding its flame from the draught between door and window, McCarty straightened and turned slowly. Upon the table against which he had leaned for support stood a bent and rusted lantern of antiquated make, and he lifted and shook it experimentally. The slosh and

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gurgle from within told him that it must be at least half full, and he lighted it and set it back carefully upon the space ringed in the dust of the table top from which he had taken it. The uneven wick spluttered and sent up a tongue of flame from which curled a malodorous spiral of turgid black smoke, but McCarty turned it down to a sickly glow that cast weird shadows overhead and into the cluttered corners of the cabin.

The draught was still a menace, however, and crossing to the door he thrust it back as securely as he was able into its sagging casing. It was odd that the hinges should have given way before his onslaught rather than the latch, for the latter appeared equally corroded and time-worn, and neither lock nor bolt augmented it on the inside; yet although it moved up and down squeakily when he jerked it, the door itself remained immovable in the jamb on that side, as if held fast from without by invisible hands.

He could not pause to examine it further, for the still figure upon the floor required his immediate attention, and turning, he knelt in a dry space on the rough boards beside the body. The woman must have been in her early thirties and pretty, for the great, brown eyes which stared so fixedly below straight, finely-etched brows were fringed with long, dark, curling lashes and the nose was small and straight; in the smooth cheeks and full, sensuous, parted lips a trace of color seemed yet to linger, although the flesh was cold and already taking on a waxen rigidity of contour.

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There was evidence in plenty besides the overturned chairs that she had not sold her life cheaply. Although the left hand, swollen and slightly mottled, lay relaxed at her side, the fingers of the other were still curved about a broken, bloodstained ax-handle; her black gown of some soft filmy stuff was torn and the buttons ripped off the heavy, rough tweed coat which covered it, while her luxuriant masses of chestnut hair, lustrous as in life, rippled in disheveled waves to the very knees of the prostrate form, a tattered brown veil trailing from it.

McCarty did not note the incongruity between the gown and cloak nor the second similar detail: that the slim, daintily arched ankles were encased in black silk of cobweb thinness but the low shoes, although small and perfectly fitting, were of the sport variety in tan leather, heavy and thick-soled with flat heels and broad toes. The strangeness of the woman's presence there at all in the lonely, deserted fisherman's hut, much less the violence and atrocity of the mode of her death outweighed for the time being all minor considerations; and he rose somewhat giddily to his feet, righted the chair on the farther side of the table and sat down to think the matter out.

It was easy enough to divine the source of the tiny, smoldering blaze that he had stamped out on entering, for the shavings in which it had been started were freshly whittled from the topmost plank of the pile of driftwood by the stove. They shone with a yellow, viscid fluid which trailed from them to form a telltale

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pool near the body itself, mingling with the sinister, congealed stain that had spread from the gaping wound in the side of the woman's breast.

McCarty recalled, too, the heavy smudge of smoke that had filled the cabin in spite of the broken window through which the rain had beaten, and dimly his numbed faculties began to reason out the situation. The woman's murderer had set fire to the cabin with kerosene-soaked shavings and departed, trusting that the raging storm would lead the countryside to believe the place had been struck by lightning. But somehow that long pole had been jarred from among those others, uptilted high against the wall in the corner, and had crashed forward, its hook driving through the old boards which covered the window and letting in the rain to battle with the incipient blaze.

Had it not been for that, the little shack and its grim secret must have gone up in flames together; but one element had held the other in check until McCarty arrived to decide the issue. How long could it have been since the murderer's departure? How long had hissing flame and driving rain fought for supremacy while that motionless figure looked on with staring, indifferent eyes? If he could only gather his scattered wits together and think clearly! What could be the matter with him, anyhow? He'd had many a worse rap on the skull in the old days on the force than that bit of a rock could have given him when he landed against it, and yet he felt queer and dizzy and sick, and everything began to jumble together in his mind.

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For the first time McCarty put his hand up to his aching head, and then withdrew it quickly as he encountered something sticky and moist. He was sitting hunched over, staring at the clotted brown stain upon his thick fingers, when the door was suddenly burst open for the second time and a gaunt, elderly man in oil-skins, with starting eyes and waggling gray chin whiskers, pointed an ancient revolver at him and demanded:

"Put up your hands! Ain't no chance for ye, desp'rit as ye be! Ye're under arrest!"

"What's that you say?" McCarty stared at him, uncomprehending. Many a time had he heard that last curt sentence, but it had issued from his own lips! Was this old blatherskite of a hick talking to him?

"Up with your hands, I tell ye! Great Jehoshaphat, there's blood on 'em right now! I ben a-watchin' ye through that thar winder an' I warn ye, ef ye make a move I'll shoot holes clear through ye!" The stranger's voice fairly squeaked with excitement, and the hand which held the revolver was shaking. "Ye killed this here poor critter, did ye?"

McCarty had obeyed the injunction mechanically; but the last question roused him from his lethargy.

"Me?" He checked an insane desire to laugh. Ex-Roundsman McCarty, late of the Finest, to be accused of murder! "Say, who in hell are you, anyway?"

"I'm the Constubble of Spindrift Cove, an' ye'll come right along to the lockup peaceable or deader'n a door-nail! Who be you an' this feemale ye killed an' how did ye git here?"

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How did he get there? The experiences of the afternoon rushed over him once more in an overwhelming flood, blotting out the cabin with its tragic occupant and the absurd, menacing figure before him. The storm, the wreck—and Denny! Denny, out there! What did anything matter now?

"I've nothing to say," McCarty replied dully. "I'm—incog!"

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CHAPTER III

SUSPECTS

A STREAK of sunshine like a tiny, pointing finger came through a crevice in the iron-shuttered window and traveled over the chair, on which stood a tin basin and dipper of water, to the bandaged head of the man who lay on the cot beneath a crazy-quilt cover. Straight to one of his closed eyes it crept, and he stirred uneasily, muttering something beneath his breath.

The finger did not move, however, but seemed boring in and at last, after vainly moving from side to side on the thin pillow, McCarty opened his eyes and turned to avoid the light and close them again, stifling a groan as his stiffened muscles protested at the effort. He had been awake for an hour or more, awake when the fat, middle-aged little doctor had waddled in to apply fresh bandages to his head, escorted by the angular, chin-whiskered constable. He was still fully conscious when the latter returned alone to stand gazing at him uncertainly for awhile, shaking his head, and then finally to depart with an officious rattle of keys and bolts on the door; but he had given no sign.

He didn't want to be questioned and gaped at; he

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didn't want to think. With the passing of Denny life held nothing more for him than a dreary round of lonely, empty days waiting for old age to claim its own. The scene in the cabin during the previous night was like a dream; little did it matter to him where the woman came from or who murdered her! Let them have him up at the inquest, and held for the Grand Jury, and tried and convicted for all he cared! He'd not open his mouth, though. Inspector Druet and the boys at headquarters should never have it on Ex-Roundsman McCarty that he had to go out to the sand hills and cranberry bogs to be arrested, accused of murder! That much he owed to the "Mac" of the old days. The rest didn't make any difference.

He wished, though, that it wasn't so infernally hot and that the fool who was tapping away somewhere near with a metallic clink as though he were mending a tin roof, likely, would stop altogether or else change the regular beat of his little hammer. Twelve strokes, the space of a breath, and then twelve more, over and over as though they were rapping on his very skull. Twelve—twelve! It was like the old fire alarm signal for the police call. Denny had taught him all the signals in idle times back in the engine house. . . . Why couldn't he stop thinking?

McCarty kicked at the patchwork coverlet and sighed profoundly. He supposed that old grasshopper of a constable would return presently, when he'd done boasting at the post-office, maybe, about his thrilling capture of the night before. There hadn't been much to it, in

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McCarty's opinion, from the moment when the futility of everything swept over him. He had listened in a stubborn, indifferent silence to the flood of questions squeaked at him in that cracked voice and had submitted tamely enough to being handcuffed—he!—and half-dragged, half-jostled over miles of slithering sand dunes to a plank walk with a row of little cottages and shanties on either side; shanties in which lights sprang up quickly enough in response to the hoarse shouts of his captor.

A straggling retinue of half-clad, leathery-looking men, most of them seemingly old, had trailed along in their wake with lanterns as they proceeded up the crooked street. When they halted before the stone cottage, only slightly larger than the other in which he was now incarcerated, quite a little crowd had gathered.

McCarty didn't remember much about the rest. The constable had told his tale with endless repetitions and there had been a lot of excitement and loud talking but nobody had offered him any violence, although he wouldn't have cared particularly if they had. Finally they had taken him inside and bound up his head and given him a drink of water and offered him food—from which he had turned in loathing—and put him to bed, but it was all a confused jumble in his thoughts.

If only that confounded tinkering would stop! The number of strokes had changed now, though, thanks be! They had shortened by half. Six, and then six; six and six. That was the borough signal for Manhattan and the Bronx in the Fire Code. Why couldn't he stop listening to it, stop counting them! There—the fool

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was off again at his first tune, twelve taps and twelve, then six again and six——!

All at once McCarty's heart seemed to stop beating and the blood pounded in his ears at the mad thought that had come to him. It couldn't be, of course. He was going crazy! Dennis was drowned, his body washing around somewhere out there in the deceitful waters of Nantucket Sound. He couldn't be alive and near, it couldn't be *he* that was tapping, sending out the old signals——

With a mighty heave McCarty sat up in his cot and glanced about wildly. Crazy or no, it was no spirit that was making that tinkling, insistent sound and it would do no harm to try an answer. But how could he with his handcuffed wrists and bare feet and not a thing in the room——? Then his eyes fell upon the chair beside him and awkwardly, with the left hand perforce following and impeding the right, he emptied the water from the dipper into the tin basin and then rapped gently with it upon the latter's rim.

One—two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight—nine—ten—eleven—twelve. It was the call for the fire patrol, the single twelve, and the only signal which occurred to him, in his frenzy of half-incredulous hope, that might convey his message.

There was a tense moment of utter silence, for the other tapping had ceased, and then it came again, nine strokes and then nine—the simultaneous call!

No celestial music could have been sweeter to mortal ears. McCarty sank weakly back with a tear rolling

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down his cheek, but the next moment he had started up, for the tapping had recommenced.

"One—two—three——" He counted to sixteen strokes. In the stillness that followed a grin grew and broadened on his face and his shoulders shook in a soundless chuckle. It was the first joke that ever Dennis had made in his life, bless the soul of him, for it was the call for boat tenders! Boat "tenders" they had been indeed on the previous afternoon, and a precious mess had they made of it!

Then a fresh thought struck him and the grin disappeared. Denny was alive, even though it seemed like a miracle, but he couldn't be on the outside signaling in! Why was he under arrest too? Could it be in connection with the murder? The code in its application to their present needs was limited, but quickly McCarty seized the dipper once more and rapped five times upon the basin, repeating the message twice again in even succession. It was the Fifth Alarm; it would at least let Denny know that they were in a serious predicament if he didn't realize it already, and warn him to be on his guard.

Almost instantly his signal was repeated to him and this time he could tell that the tapping came from somewhere on the other side of the partition wall. Dennis knew they were in danger, he had understood! There was silence then for a space, for Denny was evidently waiting and McCarty was thinking hard. Had the other been injured? How could he convey the question? Only one way occurred to him. He tapped out thirteen

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measured strokes and stopped. It was the signal of an accident to apparatus.

A longer pause ensued as if Dennis found it difficult to reply. Then at length came the answer: Four—four—four. The ambulance call!

A cold sweat broke out on McCarty's forehead and once more his heart seemed to stop. But the reassuring thought came to him that his companion in distress could not be badly hurt or he would have been taken elsewhere for better attention, even under heavy guard, if by any wild guess on the part of the constable he had been accused of complicity in the murder; moreover, he had kept up that steady tapping for a solid hour at least before McCarty had understood and responded, and no mortal man could have stuck to that if he were in great pain.

But how in the name of the blessed saints who preserved him had Dennis got ashore? He was no swimmer, as McCarty remembered from an experience at a certain annual outing a few years before, and the veriest human fish could not have guided his own passage through those tumultuous waters of last night. Why hadn't Denny heard and answered his frantic calls from the beach? And if later he had chanced to be anywhere near that cabin, why hadn't he made his presence known? He could have seen McCarty through that broken window as well as the constable had done and it wasn't like him——?

His crowding, perplexed thoughts were broken in upon

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by a renewed, insistent tapping, but he had not time to count the strokes before a louder sound came from the hall outside; the heavy, shambling footsteps of the constable, which he had come to recognize.

Tightening his hold upon the handle of the dipper, McCarty cut in on the other message by rapping sharply against the basin eleven times and then, after a moment's interval, eleven times more. He had barely finished when the bolts were shot back and the constable jumped like a rheumatic jack-in-the-box into the room.

"Hey, what in time's the matter with ye?" he demanded. "Teched in the head er somethin', the way you're bangin' things around?"

McCarty scowled at him, wondering if his message had got through. He had been obliged to rap hastily and the meaning of it would have been a complicated one at best for the plodding mind of Dennis to grasp. It was the signal to reduce or shut down pressure on high pressure service if the telephone service were disabled. Would Denny be able to translate that as a simple warning to shut up, to break off communication? Then he realized in profound disgust at his own density that if a light, metallic tapping could be heard voices would carry, and his scowl changed to a bland smile, much to the bewilderment of his jailer.

"Good morning, Sheriff!" he called cheerily. "I just wanted a little more water. I guess I must have been pretty well dazed from banging my head against the rocks when I was washed ashore last night in the storm

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to have blundered into the bit of a house there where the poor lady, heaven rest her, lay dead. What happened to her?"

"So that's the story ye thought up while ye ben layin' here, is it?" His visitor snickered. "I be the constubble, not the sheriff, but even he ain't a-goin' to ask that question when he gits here! Reckon the hull Cove knows what killed her an' whose hand held the weapon! But ye better eat these here doughnuts an' drink this coffee Mis' Griscom sent in to ye, an' then git into your boots. Ef ye've made up your mind to talk I want witnesses!"

"What have I got to do with it?" McCarty raised his voice. "I'm obliged to Mrs. Griscom, whoever she may be, for my breakfast, but I'll be more obliged to you if you'll tell me what I'm here for?"

"Holt your hosses!" the constable advised grimly. "Doc Allen—he's the cor'ner—he'll tell ye ef ye can't guess! They ain't a mite o' use in ye a-tryin' to lie out o' it 'cause I caught ye red-handed, but we'll hear what ye've got to say! I'll be back for ye in ten minutes."

McCarty gulped down the crisp doughnuts and scalding coffee hastily, for sudden sounds of wordy strife had come from the other side of the wall and he feared what Dennis might say or do. The situation in which he was himself placed had all at once dawned upon him, and he did not want his devoted, blundering companion mixed up in it. Moreover, a resolution was taking shape and form in his mind. Despite his protestations of the previous day, with his knowledge of Denny's

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safety the fascination of the mystery had gripped him, the old fever of the chase had returned once more, and, although he remained incognito, he meant to get in the game.

"You knock-kneed old sand-flea!" Dennis' tones arose in wrathful scorn. "I'll have you know that if you're trying to make out that the lad in there——!"

"So ye know him, do ye?" The constable's high-pitched, nasal voice broke in triumphantly. "I 'spicioned as much an' that's why I jailed ye! Amasa Hite may think this here case'll wait for him to take his own time gittin' over from Barnstubble, but I reckon we'll hev it all cl'ared up afore he sets foot in the Cove! They was two o'ye in this, then!"

McCarty arose precipitately, although he reeled from sudden weakness and his head throbbed anew. Where were those confounded boots of his, anyway, and how was he to get them on with his wrists manacled? He had meant to acquaint Dennis with what had happened in that cabin on the night before but not to summon a loyal, hot-headed champion to his own personal defense. Bright dots danced before his eyes and he was groping about blindly when he heard Dennis reply in the quiet accents he knew to be most dangerous:

"Yes. There are two of us. I don't know just what charge it is you're trying to frame up, you hick bull, but whatever it is, it goes double and takes me in too, and sorry you'll be that ever you saw this day! The man you've picked on——!"

"Constable!" yelled McCarty desperately, as he grabbed

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the dipper once more and sounded a furious warning. "Constable, if you don't come and help me on with my boots I'll break jail and start looking for you!"

A door slammed and bolts rattled somewhere. The heavy feet shambled along the corridor hurriedly, but they were intercepted; and McCarty heard the hearty though lowered tones of the doctor who had bandaged his head. He could not distinguish the words but a sort of argument appeared to be taking place, and at its conclusion the constable entered once more. He was shaking his head and tugging furiously at the tuft of sparse gray whiskers which stood out so stubbornly on his chin, but the gleam of triumph in his eyes had given place to a shade of uneasiness.

"Be you ready?" he asked. "Cor'ner's waitin'. Feelin' kindo' meechin' yit, eh? Lemme git a-holt o' them thar boots ye ben raisin' Cain about. Now, come on!"

He shoved McCarty ahead of him out into a short corridor and to a wide room flooded with sunshine at its end, which had evidently been at some former time a kitchen, for a huge, old fireplace at the side had been bricked up, a sink with an iron pump stood in one corner and cupboards had been built in about the walls. They were disused now, however, and the room was furnished only with a table and some plain chairs.

The fat, little doctor, with his absurd, pendulous cheeks, beak-shaped nose and small, bright eyes, looked up from some papers upon which he had been writing and nodded pleasantly.

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"Feeling better now? Sit him down here, Eb—— That was a nasty cut you had on your head."

"Yes, sir," McCarty replied as he dropped into the chair indicated, for he was still dizzy. "I must have got it on a rock or something when I was thrown overboard last night."

"Hain't I ben tellin' ye, Doc?" the constable shrilled, but the other stopped him with a gesture.

"I'm the coroner here in Spindrift Cove, and of course you don't have to talk till the inquest if you've a mind not to," he announced. "Constable Bartlett says you refused to say anything when he found you with a dead woman in a shack on the shore last night, but now that you've had time to kind of get your mind settled to think things over you must see that it'd be better for you to tell us who you are and how you come to get there, and just what happened."

"I don't know that last any more than you, Doctor," responded McCarty frankly, but for the moment he ignored the first question. "The woman was laying dead on the floor and the place looked like there'd been a struggle going on, but nobody else was there when I saw a light and broke into the cabin only a little while before the constable showed up. I'd been wrecked further along the beach somewhere."

"From what ship?" asked the coroner quickly.

"'Twas the *Lucy*—something, just a bit of a fishing boat with a bum engine in it that my friend and I had rented from an old geezer in a place called Plimpton-

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port, not three hours before the storm, and started for Mattagansett in."

"Plimptonport, hey?" Constable Bartlett broke in. "It don't take no three hours to git to Mattagansett in a mutter-boat——!"

"The engine went dead on us and we drifted around not knowing where in the world we were till near night when that cloud came up and the devil and all was let loose," McCarty explained. "My friend was thrown out the same as me when the boat went over and I guess he was pretty well banged up, too, for when I got my wits back and found myself on the sand I hunted and hollered for him in the night and the storm for hours, it seemed like, but he didn't answer. He must have been picked up—— Surely you've had news of him, Doctor?"

During his detailed explanation he had been watching the faces of the two men shrewdly, and as he turned to the stout, seated figure he saw a significant glance pass between them.

"What did you say his name was?" the coroner countered, but the irrepressible constable saved McCarty from the necessity of an immediate reply.

"Who was the feller let ye the mutter-boat, thar to Plimptonport?"

"I don't know his name, didn't ask him. He rented us an old shanty down on the sand, and he was going to rig us up whatever tackle we needed for a couple of weeks' fishing." McCarty was still studying his inquisitors furtively. "He looked like a codfish himself, with the big mouth and pop eyes of him, and hands that

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worked for all the world as though they were flippers!"

The constable gave a quick start, then yanked more violently at his whiskers than ever, and the shadow of doubt deepened in his eyes as they met those of the coroner once more. Then he set his spare shoulders obstinately.

"Was the woman with ye then or did ye meet her here to the Cove? I don't keer how ye got here, reecollect I come on ye thar in the cabin with her blood onto your hands, thar been't no way o' gittin' out o' that!" He brought his gnarled fist down on the table in exasperation. "By Jehoshaphat, it was murder, an' I'm a-goin' to prove ye done it!"

The coroner shook his head disapprovingly, but before he could speak there came a sudden commotion in the hall and a stocky, thick-set man in a short, rough coat and faded, corduroy trousers, tucked into high boots, burst precipitately through the doorway. His light, protruding eyes and huge mouth gave him a ludicrous resemblance to a codfish which was further emphasized by the aimless, flapping gesture of his splay hands as he halted at sight of the rural officials.

"'Mornin', Doc Allen. I heerd tell o' the doin's last night an' that my dory——! That be one o' 'em, now!" The newcomer had all at once recognized McCarty. "Thar be one o' the two city strangers who hired my *Lucy Jane* an' lost her. I want ev'ry last dollar she was wuth!"

In spite of the belligerent attitude of the speaker McCarty could have fallen upon him and embraced him, for the recognition had been mutual. It was, indeed,

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the "old geezer" from whom they had hired the dory! But for his fortuitous arrival, it might not have been easy for either himself or Denny to prove the fact of their having been cast away on the shore; yet to McCarty's pain-dulled mind it did not alter his own situation. He had no witness to swear that the woman was already dead when he broke in the cabin.

"You positively identify this man, Capt'n Pickens?" A deeper note of authority had come into the coroner's tones. "Who else was with him in Plimptonport?"

"Just another stranger, taller an' long-sparred. Fergit their names——"

"Was there a woman with them?" Doctor Allen interrupted quickly.

"No. Seen 'em from the time they git off the New Bedford train at the deepo, Doc, an' they was alone." Captain Pickens shook his head and his pale eyes seemed to stick out still farther as he added: "Heerd they was murder done to some strange woman over here to the Cove last night an' they was mixed up in it some ways, but they set out by themselves in my *Lucy Jane* an' wrecked her, an' by crickey, I mean to git the pay for her before the sheriff comes to haul 'em over to Barnstubble! Some say Noah Griscom picked up t'other one——?"

"What time did they start from Plimptonport in the *Lucy Jane?*" the coroner broke in once more.

"Long 'bout five-thutty, nigh as I can figger. I went right hum to supper, an' thar warn't no sign o' the squall comin' then, but them lubbers cud 'a rid it out ef they'd

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knowed a dory from a ottermobile! One on 'em's a-goin' to pay——!"

"Half past five." Doctor Allen nodded slowly at the constable. "That jibes with what this man says, Eb, and what the other told you. Better have him in and Capt'n Griscom, too. He stood by and picked him up at nine o'clock, he says, when the dory turned turtle.

The constable started for the door but on the threshold, he turned.

"I'll git 'em, jus's ye say, Doc, but we're wastin' a mighty lot o' time. It don't make a mite o' difference whether they started from Plimptonport or not, nor what time they was wrecked. The woman was killed in that shack an' thar be the murd'rer!"

He pointed a bony finger at McCarty, but the latter had suddenly grasped the drift of the coroner's questions and a great weight was lifted from his mind even before the latter's reply.

"No, Eb. I told you from the time I heard what Capt'n Griscom had to say I was afraid we were porting helm too soon. If this man here was swept ashore when the dory went over at nine, he couldn't have done it, for the woman's body shows she must have been dead even then!"

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CHAPTER IV

ALLIES

"YE got to prove that, Doc!" the constable cried furiously. "That dory could hev been upsot a-puppose, or in tryin' to land him thar, an' he could hev hurried to the shack to meet the woman an' kill her! T'other one's confessed, I tell ye! He as much as told me right to my face that they was both on 'em in it together! Wait till I fetch him an' you'll see, by glory!"

He stamped off down the corridor and McCarty turned to the coroner.

"Was he hurt bad?—my friend, I mean? 'Tis grand news that he was picked up alive, Doctor, but I'm fearful maybe worse happened to him than to me! 'Twas a wicked storm, the night!"

"We just call that a blow, 'round these parts!" Captain Pickens interposed, sniffing contemptuously.

"Your friend has a badly sprained shoulder and bruised side but no ribs are broken," the doctor responded. "He was still suffering from shock, though, the last time I tried to talk to him; he would only say he was Dennis Riordan, and then keep calling for someone else."

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"Who was it?" McCarty's face was a study.

"Someone he called just 'Mac'; that was all we could make out of it. He never said the rest of the name, only 'Mac,' over and over."

McCarty drew a deep breath.

"The old son-of-a-gun!" he exclaimed. "It's my friend Denny all right, and 'twas me he was calling for! Mac is my name, sir, Mac—Doe." He had bethought himself in time.

To his surprised gratification, Captain Pickens spoke up and added verification.

"I opine that's the truth, Doc. I reecollect the other one's name was 'Riordan,' for I hain't never heerd tell of it afore round the Cape, an' this was 'Mack' somethin'-or-other. But how about the *Lucy Jane?*"

McCarty had scarcely heard the latter portion of the speech. As long as Denny remained discreet his incognito was preserved and he could still keep to the letter the vow he had made to himself, yet take one last hand in the game. He would not be butting into the work of headquarters out in this wilderness, and the lads on the force would never know that he had once more emerged from his retirement. But, as *Mac Doe,* there was no reason why, when he was himself definitely cleared of all suspicion, he could not do a little investigating on his own account as to how the woman in the cabin had come by her death; and the very call of it was in his blood.

The coroner had spoken to him but McCarty was oblivious, for the door next that of his late cell had

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opened and a familiar figure came with a series of leaps down the corridor to precipitate itself upon him.

"Mac, by all the saints! And me thinking it was lost you were, the whole of last night! The heart was gone out of me entirely and I could have wished that the captain had not come along in his boat and picked me up at all!"

His voice broke and there was a suspicious huskiness in McCarty's own tones as the latter replied:

"The both of us were saved, Denny, thanks be, though 'twas little help I got—barring from the doctor, here, that fixed up my head,—and a hard welcome! Wait till you hear!"

There was a covert warning in the last sentence but Dennis' emotions were in the ascendency.

"While I soushed up and down in the trough of the black water grappling for you with irons that brought up nothing, lad, and I thought of all we'd been through together and that it was the end——!" He choked and then added vehemently: "I was wishing the old guy that rented us the damned *Lucy Jane* had gone to the bottom himself before he ever——!"

"Oh, ye was, was ye?" Captain Pickens roared, stepping forward. "Well, I hain't, but I come to c'lect damages for her, an' here I be! I could hev sold her for sixty dollars only last week——"

"Dog-robber!" Dennis gave vent to the feelings surging within him in righteous indignation against the owner of the lost dory. "A wrecker would have charged you more than that to take the old tub down the bay and

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sink it, and cheap at the price! We ought to have you jailed for renting out such a derelict!"

"Ye better git yerselves out o' jail first, hain't ye?" The captain flapped his arms in derision. "I don't say that you be murd'rers an' I don't put it past ye, neither, but I calc'late to git the sixty dollars——"

"Murd'rers?" Dennis advanced a step threateningly but winced at a painful reminder from his sprained shoulder, and McCarty laid soothing though handcuffed hands upon his arm.

"Let be, Denny, lad. We'll give the old skinflint his sixty and get rid of him, for we've more important business with Doctor Allen, here, I'm thinking." He felt helplessly toward his pockets, conscious that the coroner who had not spoken since Dennis' appearance was scrutinizing them both shrewdly. "How the devil am I to get at my money?"

"Here ye be!" The constable stepped forward from the doorway and presented McCarty with his own wallet, watch, and odds and ends tied in his handkerchief. "That's what ye had when I s'arched ye last night."

"Count it, Mac," Dennis advised. "Don't let them put anything more over on us than they have!"

McCarty took several bills from the flat, folded wad and held them out to Captain Pickens, whose wide mouth was avidly agape.

"Much obleeged!" He tucked the money down carefully into his boot. "Ef ye want them bags ye left over to my cabin, ye kin send for 'em from the Barnstubble jail!—— 'Mornin', Doc."

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"Shut the door, Eb," the coroner said as the owner of the late *Lucy Jane* lurched at his rolling gait down the corridor. "Sit down, Mister Riordan, on this side of the table. Every minute of your time is accounted for from the hour you left Plimptonport yesterday afternoon until now. What time was that, by the way?"

"A little after five," Dennis replied bewilderedly. "I know, for my watch was fast and I had to ask Mac, here.—— What's up, now?"

McCarty had glanced inadvertently at the watch which the constable had put into his hands, and he uttered a low exclamation. It had been twisted and crushed almost beyond semblance of shape, but the bent hands pointed to ten minutes past nine. Silently he leaned forward and laid it on the table before the coroner.

"Did you see this, Eb?" the latter demanded. "Ten after nine; just ten minutes after Capt'n Griscom saw the *Lucy Jane* go over! That must've been when he was dashed up against a rock on shore."

Constable Bartlett clawed his whiskers again.

"A man c'd set his watch for any time he was a-mind to and then smash it to make it look's ef it'd be'n stopped then," he declared, although his high-pitched tones lacked conviction. "Ye be sot on y'r idee, Doc, but ef you sh'd be a mite wrong about the time the woman was killed——?"

"She'd been dead at least five hours when I examined the body, and Capt'n Griscom don't lie. If he says he saw the dory go over at nine——" The doctor paused. "Where is he, Eb? Why didn't you bring him here?"

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"He'd gone out in his own dory; won't be hum till supper-time, Mis' Griscom says. But about that body in the cabin——"

"Look here!" Dennis interrupted. "What's all this talk about a dead woman and what has the time to do with it and why are we here? Answer me that! I was more dead than alive myself what with the worry about Mac and all last night when you locked me up and I didn't get the right of it. Is this your notion of the third degree? What's the doctor got to do with it?"

"Doctor Allen is the coroner, Dennis!" McCarty shot him a desperately warning glance. "I found the body of a woman murdered with a boat-hook, it looked like, and the constable, here, found me and because there was nobody else around I'm charged with it, as far as I can make out, and you're held with being an accessory before the fact——"

"By the keys of Saint Peter!" Dennis gasped, and then to his companion's consternation he gave unmistakable signs of ill-suppressed mirth. "You, Mac! It had to be you that would find it! People could live on a sand-dump like this forever and run across nothing more exciting than a dead crab, maybe, but you get shipwrecked and washed up in the midst of a murder case!"

"Funny, hain't it?" the constable remarked dryly. "'Peared kind o' that way to me, too, an' that's why I nabbed y'r friend. He wasn't laughin', though, when he set thar starin' at the blood on his hands last night!"

"Oh, for the love of heaven!" McCarty exclaimed, exasperated beyond measure. "The blood was from the

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cut on my own head, that had opened again in the heat of the cabin.—I suppose I got right up after lamming my head on that rock and walked miles over those sand hills straight through the dark and the storm to a cabin I didn't know was there, till I'd got within twenty feet of it! Then maybe I went in and fought with a woman that never I'd laid eyes on before, and killed her, and set fire to the shanty, and beat it after fastening up the door some way behind me!—'Tis likely I'd come back again and kick in the door and put out the fire and then light the lantern and sit down at my ease to wait for you!—How long have you been on the force?"

"I be'n constubble o' Spindrift Cove for thutty year!" Eb Bartlett responded, stung by the scorn in McCarty's tone. "I'd hev be'n sheriff o' Barnstubble County long ago ef Amasa Hite's brother-in-law didn't own nigh onto half of it!"

"And you sit yawping here after wasting a whole night while the guy that croaked that woman is on his way?" McCarty demanded. He had not noted that Denny's mirth had subsided and that he sat shocked into silence, nor that the little twinkling eyes of the coroner were fixed brightly upon him. All the disgust of the roundsman of other days at the blundering of a green rookie rang in his tones. "You give me a pain!"

The constable shook a long, threatening finger under his nose.

"Y'r insultin' the law!" he shrilled, but the coroner checked him.

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"Wait a minute, Eb." He turned to McCarty. "How did you find the cabin at all?"

"Didn't I see the glow of the fire and haze of smoke through the broken window of it, sir?" There was unutterable weariness in McCarty's tone. "Didn't I stamp it out after I'd kicked in the door and saw what was there, and when I'd lighted the lantern to have a look at the body myself before going for help, weren't the fresh shavings and drip of the kerosene trailed all over the floor?"

"Well, then, if we're wasting time, Mister Doe, and I calculate we are, suppose we shorten it by having you tell us just what you do know of this matter from the beginning?" Doctor Allen sat back in his chair and his triple chins sagged to the freshly laundered white tie.

"'Mister——!'" Dennis came out of his trance and his jaw dropped. Then, under a withering glare from his companion, he recovered himself and spoke quickly: "Sure, Mr. Doe doesn't know a bit more about it than me, Doctor!"

"Am I telling it or you, Denny?" McCarty glared once more and then turned back to the coroner. "The first I knew after I crashed into the rock was laying there half in and half out of the water with the thunder and lightning splitting the night all around me, and thinking I was in the next world, sir."

"'Thunder and lightning?'" repeated the coroner with a quick glance towards Constable Bartlett who had been listening in sullen silence. "That didn't start till

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past ten o'clock, long after the squall was over.—Go on."

Rapidly, but with a precision that overlooked no detail, McCarty told his story as though once again he were making a report to the Inspector, and when he had finished with the description of his own discovery and arrest, the three other men sat for a moment without speaking. Then the constable heaved a mighty sigh.

"Wal, I calc'late I was wrong, Doc. Mebbe I'm a fool, but I ain't too big a one to admit it, leastways to anybody but the sheriff! 'Peered like a sure case to me but the evidence has kind o' petered out.—What say?"

He rose, jingling his keys tentatively, and at a slow, decisive nod from the coroner he unlocked the old-fashioned handcuffs of his two prisoners.

"Thanks, Constable," said McCarty. "'Tis small wonder you thought it was me that did it, finding me with the body and all! If the wits hadn't been knocked clean out of me by that slam I got against the rock, I'd have grabbed the lantern and gone for help the minute I saw what had happened instead of sitting down like a great boob to try to think it out for myself! What time was it you found me there?"

"'Round half past twelve." The constable had seated himself once more, and there was a weary, dispirited droop to his sagging shoulders.

"Well, I was still dazed-like, as I say, so I can't be just accurate, but I couldn't have been there more than fifteen or twenty minutes before you came. If the dory was wrecked at nine and the thunder-storm didn't come up till after ten, I must have been unconscious for over

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an hour and then taken two more to give up hunting for Denny and stumble to where that shanty stands." McCarty shrugged. "That's nothing to do with it, though. We're out of it now, but I suppose we're held for the inquest?"

The coroner nodded.

"Just to appear, that's all, as witnesses. You're free till then. I'm calling it for the day after to-morrow, so you won't lose much time from your fishing; unless this has kind o' spoiled your vacation for you and you figger on giving it up and going straight back to New York."

"How did you know we come from there?" Dennis' eyes widened.

"The new Bedford local gets in at Plimptonport at four o'clock." Doctor Allen chuckled. "You two don't come from anywheres Down East, that's easy to tell, and I calculated that if you had taken the night boat up from New York Sunday you'd just about have had time for a look around New Bedford and to ask about fishing points along the south shore of the Cape."

"'Time!'" Dennis repeated bitterly. "We'd hours on our hands and yet Mac could not remember about his cigars till we got to Plimptonport! That's all he could think of, then, after he'd found out there wasn't a decent smoke in the place; he gave me no chance to look up a better boat, or bargain proper with that old codger for the rent of his shack and his rotten tub! Nothing would do but we must find what was the nearest town that sold real tobacco and get there if we had to swim. That's why we started so late in the afternoon."

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McCarty had wondered why the two local officials seemed still inclined to talk rather than set about their delayed investigation and he was on the point of dismissing it from his thoughts, in disgust at the way the whole affair was being conducted. But now he detected that some deeper motive underlay this apparently aimless attention to Denny's garrulity, for the coroner's geniality seemed all at once a trifle strained as he asked with another chuckle:

"Why didn't you tell Captain Griscom this, and where you were bound for when he picked you up?"

"Because I could not pronounce the heathen name of the place and I can't yet!" confessed Dennis. "It comes to me now that 'twas Matta-something, but I could think of nothing last night except that Mac, here, was lost."

The constable cleared his throat.

"Be you two kin to each other?"

"No. Just old friends." McCarty thought it best to take a hand once more in the conversation. "Since Denny sold out his shop and I retired from my own business we've taken many a little trip together, the both of us being bachelors, but we never started one with a night in jail before!—Is there a hotel or boarding-place in Spindrift Cove where we can stay till after the inquest?"

"I calc'late mebbe Mis' Griscom'll 'commodate ye. We don't git no travelin' men here an' not enough summer boarders come to make it wuth while f'r Ike to build up the huttel again after it burned down." A dull, hopeless look had come into the constable's faded eyes, such

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as McCarty had often seen in the eyes of men on the force when they had come to an apathetic acceptance of defeat. "Ye'll hev to speak quick, though; this here inquest'll bring a hull passel o' folks from all over the Cape an' even down from Boston—an' the verdict'll be the same as it was in the last case eight year ago! 'Unknown!' "

"It's too bad." McCarty glanced blandly at Dennis and then away in haste, for the latter's eyes had been fixed upon him with a light of dawning comprehension mingled with such eager expectancy that it all but disconcerted him. Denny was on to his reason for remaining incognito! He was ready and waiting for the old partnership to be renewed! "After the experience we had yesterday, what with the storm and all, I'm thinking we've had enough of the water for a day or two and that murder is mighty interesting, especially since it was me first found the woman. I'd like to have poked around a bit with Denny here and had a look into it just out of curiosity and I know you wouldn't have minded, nor the coroner either, but now that the sheriff's coming I don't suppose he'll give us a chance. There's a rare story to be read from the signs in that cabin and from the poor creature's body, too, if one had the eyes to see them!"

"Seems to me that you summed it all up pretty neatly yourself, Mister Doe," the coroner observed. "Eb and I went all over every inch of it after we got the body up to my house and we didn't find out anything more than what you've said. Somebody fought with the woman

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and killed her and set fire to the cabin and got away. That's all there is to it yet."

McCarty suppressed a groan.

"Haven't you discovered anything about either of them?" he demanded.

"No, but it's bound to come out who the woman is." Doctor Allen's tone was one of easy assumption, and he clasped his hands comfortably over his rotund stomach as he tilted back his chair. "Strangers ain't so plentiful around here that she wouldn't have been noticed and she couldn't have come far in those clothes."

A vivid flash of memory McCarty visualized the body as it had lain before him and for the first time the incongruity of its apparel was borne in upon him.

"Why did she come in such a hurry, or secretly, or else after changing her mind at the last minute?" he asked. "How did she get there—fly? I don't know the lay of that cabin, but 'twas not over the sands she walked! The one that killed her lives either within a stone's throw or miles away, not in between, and something else happened in or around that place right after they made their getaway and an hour or more before I reached there. They weren't either of them used to hard labor, not of a practical kind——"

"Holt y'r hosses, Mister!" the constable gasped. He had risen to his feet, and the coroner was leaning forward, his beady eyes shining and flabby cheeks puffing out with each quickened breath. "Ye never see all that, half-stunned as ye be! That old cabin's on Mr. Thompson's waterfront 'way off from everything with nothin'

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but sand an' salt marshes all 'round it an' it hain't be'n lived in since Zenas Newcombe was lost in the big storm last year. He was thar when Mr. Thompson bought the place an' he let him stay on rent free though old Zenas had otter be'n sent to the poor farm long before. How c'd ye tell the murd'rer lived nigh or far, or that the woman come in a hurry, or that they wasn't used to work? It must've be'n that crack ye got on the head made ye think up all them things!"

"I could prove them to you in five minutes if I saw the body and the inside of the cabin again," McCarty suggested craftily. "It was all there as plain as the nose on your face, and a lot more besides."

"Prove it to us and I'll see that the sheriff leaves you alone to look around as much as you've a mind to!" Doctor Allen rose on his short, stubby legs with an air of decision. "I've got my own investigation to make independent of his and though Eb's got to take his orders from Amasa Hite soon's he gets here there's no love lost between them, as mebbe you've guessed. We'd like to show Barnstable folks that the Cove doesn't need their help just once, wouldn't we, Eb?"

"Ye can bet we would!" the constable assented, his dulled eyes beginning to glisten, but he tugged somewhat skeptically at his beard. "Thar be'n no mortal eye c'd see all that, let alone that anythin' *else* had happened 'round that cabin after the murd'rer left! What kind o' a thing was it, Mister?"

"Something that shook it to its foundations, if it's got any," McCarty responded briefly. "Of course if

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Denny and me should happen to find out anything more that mightn't have struck you we'll come to you or the coroner with it, since you're good enough to let us snoop around, but nobody else must get on to it, understand? To the rest of the town we'll just be those two boob fishermen that got wrecked out of Plimptonport and have nothing better to do while they wait for the inquest than mix themselves up in other people's business. It's true enough, at that, but if people thought that outsiders like us were trying to butt into the real investigation they wouldn't give us a tumble. Get me?"

"Come along." Doctor Allen picked up his hat from the table and started for the door. "We'll stop at Capt'n Griscom's first so's you can arrange with Mis' Griscom about your board and then I'll take you over to my office. It's in a wing off my house and I've got the body there. Afterwards we can go on down to old Zena's cabin."

He waddled out into the entry and the constable strode after him, but Dennis drew McCarty back for a moment.

"I knew you couldn't keep out of it!" he exulted under his breath. "You'd not keep out of a job long, Mac, if you had to come to the back of beyond to find it!"

"There's more in it than you think, Denny. Why were they suspicious of us even after they took the bracelets off, wanting to know where we came from and all about us, and whether we both had the same story about starting from Plimptonport to Mattagansett last night for tobacco?" McCarty replied in a hurried whisper. "'Twas not about the murder, but there's

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something else doing. In a quiet little fishing village like this they're all up before it's light in the morning and in bed by dark. If that old cabin is away off from everything and deserted besides, why was the constable prowling around it at midnight?"

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CHAPTER V

THE COMING OF YOUNG HATHERLY

IN the wide, old-fashioned entry of the converted jail McCarty and Dennis, hurrying after the two rural officials, found them in conversation with a tall individual of picturesque appearance. He was a man of about forty in a rough, tweed pedestrian suit, with a short, well-trimmed Van Dyke beard, and a cap pushed far back upon brown hair turning gray at the temples. A handsome, meerschaum pipe was between his teeth and a great setter crouched at his feet.

"Here's Mr. Thompson now," the coroner announced, and, indicating McCarty, he added: "This is the man we have been detaining here because he was found trespassing on your property last night, Mr. Thompson, but we found that we'd made a mistake. Mr. Doe and his friend here, Mr. Riordan, were upset in that squall offshore."

Thompson nodded pleasantly to the two.

"I was talking to Captain Griscom a little while ago and he told me. You were both fortunate in escaping so easily." He smiled and then his face grew grave. "Someone else who trespassed on my place earlier than

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you met a frightful end, I understand. I am inexpressibly shocked! It doesn't seem possible that such a tragedy should have occurred so near my house without my having heard something—a scream, or——!"

He broke off with a fastidious shudder which did not seem out of place despite his rugged appearance, and began to pull at the setter's silky ears with his long, slender, nervous fingers.

"You live near that shack, then, sir?" McCarty asked respectfully. "It's a wonder I didn't find your house when I was floundering around on those sand hills in the storm."

"Oh, the dunes are on the farther side of the cabin, the direction from which you came if you were swept up on the beach approximately near where Captain Griscom thinks," replied Thompson. "I live right on the shore, too, but nearer the village street, although the house stands much further back.—I shall see that a good, strong light is always left burning in one of the south windows after this, and as soon as your investigation is over, Doctor Allen, I mean to raze that cabin to the ground. I intended to do it after poor old Zenas was drowned, but I left it because it added a picturesque touch to the Point. It is a horror now! I have a morbid feeling of responsibility because the affair happened on property belonging to me and I stopped by to assure you that I'll be glad to do anything I can to further your investigation, and yours also, of course, Constable. Look in on me at any time."

He nodded once more to McCarty and Dennis and de-

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scending from the porch strolled off down the street with the setter at his heels.

"Mr. Thompson's not a native here, is he?" McCarty asked the constable. "I think you said he bought his place recently?"

"Two year ago; old Endicott homestead, it was, an' a fine substantial place till he begun puttin' gimcracks on it. Called it 'restorin'' it!" Constable Bartlett snorted. "Them artist fellers with their short pants and their fancy pipes are all a little teched, I calc'late, but Thompson's all right, ef he be a mite soft."

They had crossed the narrow porch and descended to the sidewalk of rough planks. McCarty paused for a minute to glance about him. A charred area beside the jail indicated where the hotel had stood at the corner of a neglected and weed-grown public square or common which formed the inland end of the little street, although a rutted cart-track traversed it to the broad white highway beyond. Across from the site of the burned hotel stood a fair-sized general store with a quaint white meeting-house beside it, and from there down to the blue waters of the Sound, dancing in the bright sunlight of mid-morning, tiny cottages, neatly painted or weather-beaten, but each brave with its patch of old-fashioned garden flowers, elbowed one another for space in a double line.

A few very old men lounged about and a dog or two sprawled listlessly, snapping at flies, but the village for the most part basked, deserted and still. It seemed impossible to believe that violence and crime had entered

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here only a few hours before and that people were going about their daily tasks, the women indoors and the men at sea, with no further concern in the matter.

But with their appearance, green shutters at the windows of cottages on both sides of the way were clicking as they turned and here and there a housewife appeared, ostentatiously shaking a broom or emptying a bucket. McCarty smiled to himself; one human element at least, was not lacking.

"Did ever you see such a dead-alive hole?" It was Dennis at his elbow. "The womenfolks are giving us desperate suspects the once-over, but there's nothing else stirring. That fellow Thompson is a city-bred man, all right. I wonder how he ever stuck it out down here for two years!"

"That's Mis' Griscom's over the way with the pineys growin' in the front yard." The constable pointed to a neat yellow cottage a few doors below the meeting-house. "Goin' thar first, Doc?"

"Yes." The coroner led the way and at their approach a stout, placid-faced woman came out upon the porch. "'Morning, Mis' Griscom. Have you room for a couple of friends of mine to stop for a day or two? They've been boarding with Eb Bartlett since last night but it didn't suit them and they decided to make a change."

"Don't blame them a mite!" She laughed and tiny wrinkles crinkled about her eyes, which were as brightly blue as a girl's. "Noah told Eb he was makin' a mistake and I'm real glad he's found it out for himself so soon. 'Course I've got plenty o' room but I'll have to put 'em

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in together, 'cause thar's folks comin' from Barnstubble that'll expect to stay with us too."

"That'll be all right, I guess." Doctor Allen introduced them and McCarty remarked:

"It's you we've to thank for our breakfast, I'm thinking, ma'am. It was good of you to send it over and my friend Denny and I sure appreciated it."

"It wasn't nothin' but just doughnuts an' coffee." She spoke deprecatingly, but her eyes were beaming. "So you be the 'Mac' that your friend was near crazy about last night? I'm so glad it was you, after all, that come up on the shore! My man says it was nigh heartbreakin', the way he was callin' an' watchin' by the light o' the lanterns to see what the grapplin' irons would bring up, an' he wouldn't give up hope till they was all wore out! We—that's an old story to us down here on the Cape an' most o' us go through it one time or another but it don't always turn out thataway.—Millie!"

She had turned to the open doorway behind her as though to conceal some unwelcome emotion. Just then a tall, slender, young woman in a pink gingham dress, with the same deep-blue, serene eyes, appeared from the rear of the house.

"Yes, Aunt Charity."

"Git the front spare bedroom ready, child. I'll 'tend to the other two. This here is Mr. Doe who—who was with Mr. Riordan in that dory——"

"Oh!" The girl caught her breath in a little gasp. "We—we all hoped you might turn out to be the friend

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he thought was lost!—Mr. Doe, what was she like, that woman there in the cabin?"

She asked the question abruptly almost as if it were forced from her against her will, and McCarty eyed her with newly alert interest.

"Millie ain't naterally inquisitive, but it seems s'ef she can't git that poor critter out o' her mind." Mrs. Griscom spoke apologetically. "I calc'late it's because nothin' like this ever happened right at the doorstep a-fore, so to speak."

"Well, ma'am, I was kind of dazed and I didn't rightly get a look at her," McCarty replied, watching the girl's face. "She was dark and pretty, though not so young as you, if you'll excuse me. I guess by her clothes she came from the city, somewhere."

Millie's wild-rose color seemed to fade a little.

"'Dark and pretty, and from the city,'" she repeated as if to herself, then added quickly: "It's dreadful, isn't it? Nobody knows where she came from or who she was or anything, do they?"

"Not yet, ma'am." It was evident that these good folk had none of them shared the constable's earlier suspicions of himself, and if that was an indication of the general attitude of the village it would be a simple matter to make friends. "I guess they'll know pretty soon, though."

"I—I hope so." Once more there came that little catch in her breath as she turned to her aunt, who had been concluding negotiations for board with Dennis. "I'll

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go and get the spare bedroom ready right away, Aunt Charity."

She nodded and went into the house, but as McCarty, after a final word with Mrs. Griscom, followed the others across the street to a little white cottage nearly opposite, he resolved to keep an eye on the girl. There had been something more than morbid curiosity in her questioning, and his replies, vague as they were, had seemed to trouble her, but impersonally. If she had any notion as to who the dead woman might be, it had not yet deepened into actual suspicion.

Doctor Allen mounted the steps of the porch and pushed open the door leading into the wide, cool hall.

"She's in here." He indicated a door at the right. "Now, Mr. Doe, will you show us how you could tell all that you did about her?"

The dead woman was lying on a long table in the darkened room with her hands decently composed over the torn breast, and Dennis, accustomed as he was to these excursions into criminal investigation with McCarty, shuddered and muttered an exclamation beneath his breath as the doctor drew down the cloth which covered the still form.

"You said she went thar in a hurry, or secretly, or else just through changing her mind quick about somethin'." Even the constable's nasal voice had lowered. "Did ye opine that from her looks or what else you see in the cabin?"

"From her clothes," McCarty responded. "I'm not much up on women's style but when they wear a fancy

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black lace dress like that it's usually in the evening and they put a light kind of a cape or something over it if they're going out, not a heavy, rough coat that's fit for traveling or outdoor sports; that is, not unless they dress for the evening first and then cover it up with a coat that will hide it or maybe that they'll need for where they're going."

"You mean——?" The coroner paused.

"That if the woman wanted to slip away from wherever she was so as to keep an appointment and not have the people there know she'd been gone, taking the time into consideration, she might have dressed for dinner and then put on the coat and the veil and the rough, stout shoes knowing she would have heavy going getting to that shack, if that's where she was headed at first, and yet take them off in a minute when she got back and no one the wiser. If she'd decided not to go and then changed her mind when it was too late to change her clothes the same would apply, and if she'd gone in a hurry she would have grabbed up the first things handy that would be thick and warm enough."

"Seems likely," the constable remarked thoughtfully. "But what made you think she didn't walk over the sand to get to that cabin, when there's nothin' else all 'round it?"

"Look at her shoes, man!" McCarty pointed. "They're made for walking in all weather and to shed dampness, so the rain wouldn't hurt them, but nothing sticks like wet sand, especially in that ridge between the sole and the upper. There's no way to get rid of it

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