

Bereave It or Not

By Thorne Lee



I struck him down in some kind of super-human, subconscious frenzy.

The most thankless task of Detective Daventry's career was the case of the mystified murderer. For because his victim was unknown and unmourned, the only gratitude due to Daventry would be a pat on the back from the Grim Reaper.

THE piece of cane was about two feet in length, splintered at one end. Blood had soaked into the whitish, ragged edge of wood; it reminded Daventry of a broken bone protruding through raw flesh.

"The sum of the evidence, Jim. That and a key ring. Five keys in all. From the corpse." Daventry tossed the keys and the stub of cane on the polished walnut desk.

Inspector Eldred poked at the evidence

with a short, fat finger. "Well, as I see it, he beat the poor devil in the face until the cane finally broke in half. Then he got scared and ran off with the top half, leaving this for us, the dumb bunny!"

Daventry lowered his tall frame into a chair and hooked his heels on the desk. "Nice deduction. Jim. Who told you?"

"I did." The voice came from a corner back of Daventry. A big man filled the corner. His hair was thick, dusty brown.

There was a kind of mongrel warmth in the blue eyes. The friendly shrug of his shoulders was like the wag of a dog's tail.

"Hi, Brown," Daventry said. "Find anything?"

"Naw. The trail ended at a lamp post about fifty feet from that little house which stands off by itself. You might say the prints were ob-literated."

A grin creased the hard brown of Daventry's cheeks. "You might say it, but you never could spell it, Tod. Did the prints vanish into that little house?"

"Just a minute, Phil!" Inspector Eldred snapped. He was a small, severe, ordinary man who did not like too much independence in subordinates. "About this key ring. How come the keys were left on the body and nothing else? And get your ugly feet off my desk!"

Daventry didn't move. "Just practicing for when I get your job, Jim. And the keys were overlooked because the guy kept 'em in a funny place. Up here at the top of his pants in this little watch pocket under the belt. If you were going through a man's pockets, you'd never think of that spot—"

"D'you think he went through his pockets? Was it robbery, Phil?"

"Robbery!" Daventry had trouble with the corners of his mouth. "Is it necessary to beat a man's face to a pulp to rob him? No, I think that the murderer did not want his victim to be recognized or identified in any way."

"Why?"

Daventry spread his hands. "What d'you expect at my salary, Sherlock Holmes?"

Eldred didn't laugh. "Aren't you men moving a little slow? The murder was committed Saturday night. All you have on Monday morning is a key ring and a hunk of cane!"

"Sunday is my day off, Jim."

Eldred bit the end off a cigar as if it

were Daventry's head. "When you work for me you clean up murders quick!"

A buzzer sounded at Eldred's elbow. He flipped a metal switch. The secretary's voice came through, soprano and nasal:

"A man to see you, Inspector."

"Tell him to—"

"He says he killed a man, and he wants to—"

"Killed a man?" Eldred snorted. "Haven't I told you to send those manslaughter cases to Dooley?"

"It's not like manslaughter, Inspector. Captain Wade sent him over. He says he killed a man with a cane!"

"A cane!" The cigar tumbled out of Eldred's mouth. "Well for—what are you waiting for? Shoot him in here!"

Eldred's black eyes blinked at his men. "Did I say we clean up murders quick?"

Daventry scowled. "Don't count on it, Jim. Murder is a long, long business,"

ENTERING, the newcomer was tall and gaunt with a stooped question-mark of a body. The natural position of the chin was just inches short of the hollow chest. He was like a man who had leaned over a fence for years, staring at the ground. His black hair was thin, grey at the temples.

He wore an oxford grey suit, frayed slightly at the cuffs and elbows. His long white fingers clutched a stump of brown cane, clotted with red and knobbed with a cylinder of gold. An icy glaze sealed the horror in his eyes. Here was a man, thought Daventry, who had looked on fear, had fought it, and had not escaped. He edged forward with little shuffling jerks as though his next move might be either to throw himself helplessly on his knees or to bolt wildly from the room.

"My name—is—William Fitzjames." The voice was a hoarse rattle in his throat. A uniformed sergeant moved in behind

him and closed the door.

“Sit down, Fitzjames,” Eldred said smoothly. “This is Lieutenant Daventry, Lieutenant Brown.”

Daventry glided out of his chair, swung it neatly behind the visitor, and scooped him toward the desk.

The inspector accepted the extended piece of cane from the visitor. He fitted the ragged points neatly with the broken stub on his desk. “Talk about making ends meet!” he gloated, but his pleasure ended suddenly in a tight snarl of the lips. “Why did you do it, Fitzjames?”

“I killed a man,” the visitor breathed.

“We are aware of that. Why did you do it?”

The expression was glassy. “I don’t know.”

“Really?” The inspector nodded at his lieutenants as if to say, “Well, here comes a new song-and-dance!”

“I don’t know how to tell it. The whole thing sounds so fantastic—”

Mmmhhh.” Eldred could evoke a sneer without moving his lips.

“It started on the street car.”

“Indeed. What street car?”

The man seemed to grope backward into his mind.

“I think he could do better without your help, Jim,” Daventry drawled.

Eldred frowned and huddled deep into his chair. “I’m waiting!” he snapped.

The story came in fragments at first, wrung out of the lips and out of something deeper than the lips. Then it seemed to disentangle itself from the emotions and to tumble forth faster and faster until at last it fairly emptied out of him, as though he hoped by the violence of his outburst to eject the total substance of terror:

“I always ride the same car. . . . Same seat. . . . The ‘G’ car on Brewster. At Seventh Street. Five-forty every night. . . . I’m like that. I mean—I always do the

same things . . . at the same times. What people call ‘being in a rut.’ I’m like that. . .

“It started with the eyes. . . . I mean there was a man who always rides—always rode the same car. I hardly noticed him, except that he was a short man with black hair and a black mustache. He always wore the same black hat and topcoat, and the coat had a kind of silk lapel. . . . You don’t see coats like that any more . . . very often. . . .

“One day—I don’t know what day exactly—it was different. I mean there was *something* different. I thought it was the eyes. The way they looked at me. I *felt* them first. I really mean I felt them. That’s what I mean the thing sounds fantastic. How can you *feel* a man’s eyes?

“I did feel them, though. Anyway, I turned one day and there they were way back in the end of the car. They were looking right at me, and at nothing else. Nothing else whatsoever. . . .

“Now, ordinarily you wouldn’t think about a thing like that, but he had never done it before that I ever noticed. I did get to thinking about it. I thought about it so much that I caught him doing it the next night. How can I tell you how strange it was? A man has a right to stare at anybody if he wants to, hasn’t he? But I tell you his eyes never once let go of me on that long, long ride to Glenarm. Never, never once did they let go of me!

“The eyes were not all. He began creeping up on me. Oh, not really creeping. This was more horrible because he wasn’t really doing anything he shouldn’t. He just kept moving closer on the street car. I mean each night he would be one seat closer, or two seats, or three. Always closer. . . .

“Now, I had known for a long time that this man got on the car at the same corner I did, because when you have to

stand and wait you tend to notice the people around you. But it wasn't until this—this queer sensation started that I noticed he *got off* at my corner too. . . . That wasn't a change of his habits, though, because when I got to thinking about it, I remembered that he always had gotten off at my corner.

“HOW can I tell you that I was afraid of him? How can I tell you that I never did anything about it, because there was nothing to do! Could I walk back and tell him to stop staring at me? Is it against the law to stare? Could I ask the conductor why that man kept moving forward in the street car? I tried to do that. It was like spitting dry leaves out of my mouth. Even the taste of the idea was bad.

“Could I change my own seat and get behind him and stare at him? I could have, but that would have been giving in to the idea. They say you shouldn't pamper a *fixation* in your mind. If you have a phobia, you should squelch it, stamp it down. . . . I stamped it, but it wouldn't go out. It was a burning light!

“And the street car was nothing compared to walking home, because he was creeping up on me on the sidewalk too. Each night I could hear his footsteps a little louder behind me. It was worse because the evenings were getting dark early. There was just the ghost of twilight with us on that lonely walk. Not a house, but that long row two blocks north of us and the tiny light from my own place six blocks ahead.

“I don't really know when the thought of murder came to me. I think it was the night before the—before the last. It started with the beat of his footsteps behind me. I got to analyzing them, trying to study the temper of the man by the—by the tempo of his footbeats. . . . Is that crazy? Am I really—

“I mean, people stamp when they're angry, don't they? They dance when they're happy, don't they? Well, couldn't there be something in every footbeat that echoes the rhythm of a man's heart? If a man had murder in his soul, couldn't it sound through his very bones and drum its suppressed fury on the earth?

“Oh, I'm talking wild! I'm talking like I was thinking that last night. Because he was close to me, closer than he had ever been, so close that the sound of his steps was merged into the pattern of my own. He was like a shadow attached to my heels growing, growing into a monster.

“You see, he had always turned aside, toward those houses at the north, when he was two blocks from my house. I made up my mind that if he ever went past that turning-off place, it was going to be the end. . . . The end of what? . . . Oh, I had it all worked out. It was going to be murder, and it was going to be me!

“Now, what can you do when your logic goes to pieces? To whom can you confide a thing like that? Why would anyone want to murder me? I'm not wealthy. I never carry over twenty dollars on my person. I've been a bookkeeper all my life. Bookkeepers just aren't wealthy. They don't even look wealthy! But on the other hand why would anybody want to dog my footsteps like that?

“There was something so—so *systematic* about it. I tell you it couldn't have been just chance, because chance doesn't run so perfect. Chance isn't a steel monster wound up to take bigger and bigger and bigger steps until it runs you down!

“And he did run me down! *I say he did run me down!* That last night he was so close—he was not five yards behind me. He didn't turn at his corner. *I tell you he didn't turn aside!* I know, because I walked past the corner—I was almost

running—and my ears listened for the sound that I was afraid to hear. And there were no steps, but his foot kicked a stone and it came jumping and skipping along past my feet.

“I whirled around, because I knew this was the end of it. I tried to say, ‘Stand back there! What do you want of me?’ But I couldn’t get anything out. My tongue was dead.

“I did feel my cane go up above my head. Yes, I did feel it. I remember. But I didn’t feel it come down! On his face! I tell you I didn’t feel it come down! How can you believe I didn’t feel anything but the blood and the mess and the broken cane? I couldn’t see it. I couldn’t see a thing. I felt it first, and then I had to strike a match to see. Night had come over me on the outside just like it did inside.

“When the light flared up there was murder just as I had seen it in my mind. But it hadn’t come down on me, it had come *out* of me. I must have gone panicky, crazy, and lost my head. *I lost my head completely! I thought a man was going to kill me and I killed him instead!*”

CHAPTER II

WILLIAM FITZJAMES stared down at the white flesh on his palms. His long jaws worked savagely to keep from chattering. “The thing itself is a total blank to me. I swear I struck him down in some kind of superhuman subconscious frenzy!”

Eldred’s face was hard, unfriendly. “‘Subhuman’ is the word, I’d say. A subhuman frenzy!”

Fitzjames wrung his slender hands. “I know. It was awful! I swear I don’t know what came over me. I’m not a killer. I hate death. I hate the sight of blood. I’m not a killer, believe me!”

“That,” Eldred intoned, “will be for a jury to decide.”

The inspector threw a glance at his lieutenants. “There’s one little thing about your—ah—confession that puzzles me, Mr. Fitzjames. Daventry and Brown here tell me that they had already traced the murder trail to your home a few hours before you presented yourself at headquarters. Now! The murder was committed on Saturday night. Today is Monday. What happened to Sunday, Fitzjames?”

Eldred’s fat palm slammed on his desk. Fitzjames jumped in his chair. His mouth hung open. A trickle of saliva oozed from one corner and ran down his cheek. His thin chest deflated, heaving wind from the lungs.

“I was bewildered, I tell you! I couldn’t believe it of myself. How can a man bring himself to confess a murder when he has no murder in his heart? Inspector, it took the longest day and the two longest nights of my life to get me here!”

“I think you have some more long nights ahead of you, Fitzjames! Lock him up, Sergeant. We’ll talk some more later, Fitzjames.”

The uniformed sergeant snapped out of his corner. William Fitzjames stood up. His frail body sagged at the knees. The sergeant caught him beneath the armpits and ushered him to a door. Fitzjames went out with a low animal whimper in his throat.

Eldred swiveled toward his lieutenants, black eyes gleaming. “There’s a rabbit for you! Get him cornered and he jumps right into your lap! What d’you think of him, boys?”

Tod Brown shifted his solid bulk uneasily, foot to foot. The round blue eyes blinked. “I think he’s too good to be true.”

Daventry wrestled a chair between his legs. His lean face was uncertain. “I want to know who the body is, Jim. Does it

make sense to you that a man goes around with nothing in his pockets but a set of keys? If Fitzjames beat him like that, where's the dead man's identification?"

Eldred guffawed. "Are you kidding? Fitzjames got rid of the identification when he killed the guy of course. You talk like you believe that yarn of his!"

Daventry stabbed a pipe stem between his set teeth. "I do believe it."

The inspector stared. "You're nuts!"

Daventry shrugged. "I'm nuts."

Eldred swore. "Why of all the—if I ever saw a fake attempt to plead temporary insanity, this is it! Fitzjames could see our men all day yesterday right from his front window. This morning he saw Brown trace the murder trail almost to his house. He knew his goose was on the fire. He figured out this 'everything went blank' business in order to slide out of a first degree murder charge—"

"Did you say fake, Eldred? Do you call that performance we just saw a fake? Look, the man is a bookkeeper. A man can be a bookkeeper or he can be an actor, but he can't be both—not in my book. Not that fine an actor. If that confession was a fake, it was good enough to win an Academy award!"

"We have only his own word that he's a bookkeeper—"

"We can check that quick enough. Also, I want to know who is the body."

"You're going to find that out, kiddo, as soon as I have the boys work on this Fitzjames a little."

Daventry scowled. "Count me out on this round. I'll be at Danny's across the street."

An hour later Tod Brown aroused Daventry from a mug of beer. "Eldred's sending me over to Fitzjames' office, Phil. He wants you to take the lady in the case."

Daventry's dark brows shot up. "Lady?"

"Yeah. There's a dame. A Mrs. Mildred Fitzjames, Eldred says. Go out and get her story, he says. On the double!"

"Tell Eldred I'll go on the double when he pays me time-and-a-half!"

MRS. FITZJAMES was a surprise. Daventry gulped down his amazement, eyeing her from trim toes to soft, white throat. This was something altogether too young, too swell for a withered old galoot like that guy down at headquarters. He'd looked for someone about fifty, turning grey. This woman couldn't possibly be over thirty-five—black-haired, bright-eyed, trim figure in black satin—

She had been crying. She was defiant now. "Have a chair, Lieutenant. I suppose you've come about—about *him*," she said.

Daventry sat awkwardly on the tiny rocking-chair. "You know all about it, don't you? I suppose he told you everything?"

The brown eyes flashed. "I know only one thing, Lieutenant. I know he did not commit cold-blooded murder. That's impossible! If you knew him—"

Daventry smiled, trying to work the hardness out of his face. "I think I do know him. I think I'm on his side. But first thing we've got to find the identity of the dead man. You can help us there. Can you think of any enemies—"

"He had no enemies."

Daventry nodded. "Okay. I'll take your word for that. Friends, then? Business associates. We need a list of them."

"He had no friends."

Daventry pulled out his pipe and rapped it on his palm. "That's odd."

"I'm afraid we're not very sociable people right now, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Daventry. Phil Daventry. Call me Phil if you like. I'm on your side."

"Thank you." Her smile was

wonderful.

Daventry threw up his hands, grinning. "He must have known a few people."

"Only the men in his office, and they were few enough. I don't know them myself. I'm sure they can tell you more—"

"We have a man on that," Daventry interrupted, musing. "Let's try another angle. Did he ever speak to you about this man who followed him?"

"Oh yes. Several times."

She went into detail. Daventry noted that her story tabbed perfectly with the one told by Fitzjames.

"And he had never known that man anywhere except on the street car?" Daventry concluded.

"Definitely not. I'm sure."

Daventry sucked the dead pipe. "This is going to be a tough nut until we can pin a name on the—the other man. Motive counts in a murder case. Sane men just don't go around beating each other up without reason. I'm giving you our viewpoint, of course."

"You speak of 'sane men,' Mr.—Lieutenant—"

"Call me Phil. That'll help."

"Phil." She seemed to like the name. "You heard his story. Do you think he was—insane?"

"If his story is true, he certainly had some kind of mental lapse. I suppose the shock of killing a man could cause a temporary amnesia. Whether a jury would accept abnormal fear as insanity, I can't tell you. Had he ever displayed any signs—I mean, has he—well, you know what I mean!"

"Signs of insanity? Mr. Fitzjames? Never!"

"Anything in the family?"

"Oh, absolutely not."

"That won't help his case any," Daventry admitted. He stood up, wandered toward the door. "I don't want to pester

you. There's just one more thing I have to ask."

Her eyes followed him. "Yes?"

"What do you really believe?"

The eyes flamed. She leaped up and ran to him across the room. She gripped his lapels and her breath was hot against his lips. "I don't believe he ever killed a man or ever will. Not on purpose. Oh, we need someone to help us! Who can we get to help us?"

"I'll help you if I can," he said. His voice was oddly hoarse.

She searched his dark eyes. "I believe you will. Thank you—Phil."

"Yeah," he grunted, flushing.

Outside Daventry pulled himself up with a shudder. "Sister, you do something to me!" he confessed silently.

ON HIS way to the inspector's office, Daventry stopped in at Fitzjames' cell. The man was in a state of near collapse, hunched, brooding over his long hands.

"I've been out to your house," Daventry said.

"Mildred!" The sunken face was an ugly sight. "How is she taking it?"

"She's okay, that lady!" Daventry breathed fervently. "Don't worry about her. She couldn't help much, though. Maybe you can do better."

"I'd do anything to straighten this out! To straighten myself out!" The hands pawing at the face again.

Suddenly the head came up. "There's one thing I forgot to tell the inspector. I wore a topcoat that night. It had the streaks of my bloody fingers on it, so I hid it inside an old tire easing in my garage."

Daventry frowned. "That was acting like a criminal, Fitzjames. Your story was not the story of a criminal."

"I know. But a man doesn't think straight when he finds the blood of murder

on his hands—”

“Let’s clear up one thing: You’re ready to swear you never saw that man except on that street car?”

“I’ll swear it! He was just a face to me until—until the day I felt him looking at me. Those eyes—”

“Yeah. Those eyes,” Daventry muttered. “I’ve had eyes hit me in the back of the head, myself. The question is what he wanted of you, to stare like that. Let me ask you something, Fitzjames. The weak spot in your whole story is the killing itself. Think back on it a minute. Don’t you remember anything after you lifted the cane?”

“That’s right. That is the weak spot, isn’t it? I went blank with fright, I guess. I’ve been sitting here trying, trying to remember that moment. I thought once I’d got hold of something, but I can’t seem to hang on to it—”

Hesitation. Fitzjames inhaled deeply.

“Well, let’s have it!” the detective snapped.

“Well, I remember lifting the cane. I remember saying, ‘What do you want of me?’ Well, at first I couldn’t remember that he answered me at all. He just kept coming. But now it seems to me that he did say something. I’ve tried to get hold of his words. Something like this, ‘There is nothing wrong. You’re not afraid of me, are you? There is nothing wrong. You’re not afraid—’ I seem to get those words over and over. That’s why it doesn’t make sense. My mind operates like a broken record, repeating and repeating. Mostly I remember that face, that black hair, those dark brown eyes, coming closer and closer!”

Fitzjames shut out the sight with his hands. Daventry studied him, chewing his pipe. Suddenly the detective’s jaw dropped. He leaped across the cell, caught the prisoner by the shoulders, shook him:

“Say that over again! Tell it to me again! Will you say that over again, man?”

Fitzjames raised his head, blinked. He slowly repeated his statement, almost word for word. At the end Daventry released the thin shoulders, spun on his heel. In the doorway he barked, “Hang on, brother! I’m going places!”

CHAPTER III

DAVENTRY poked his head through the private door of Inspector Eldred. “Jim, I think I’ve got a new angle on that Fitzjames business—”

“Come in, Phil.” Eldred swung away from his desk, folded his hands across the sag of his waist. “I’ve just been talking to your pal, Brown, here. Fitzjames is in the bag. I’ve got bigger meat for you two—”

“I don’t want bigger meat. I want Fitzjames!” Daventry strolled in, nodded at Brown, and perched on the desk.

Eldred beamed. “We don’t always get what we want around here.”

“I get what I want!”

“Look, Phil, you’re the best man I’ve got but you’re not that good.”

“I’m good enough that you can’t railroad a man to the chair over my reclining body! You’re just trying to chalk up another conviction. You’re just selling this Fitzjames short, Eldred, and you’re not going to get away with it!”

“Phil, you’ve blown your top!” Eldred roared. “A guy like you falling for a yarn like that! Don’t make me get tough, Phil.”

“When I’m sold a bill of goods, you can get as tough as you like, Eldred. I’ve got my bill of goods. Do I work for you or for myself?”

“You don’t work for me on the Fitzjames case.

Daventry shrugged. His right hand slid under his lapel and came out with a badge. He flipped it into Eldred’s lap. “See if you

can find a better 4-F than me!”

Tod Brown caught up with Daventry in the sandwich grill across the street. “You don’t think twice, do you, Phil?” he remarked, easing his bulk onto a stool.

Daventry gulped a hamburger. “Once is enough this time.”

“What have you got on Fitzjames that’s so hot?”

“A pair of brown, eyes.”

Brown whistled. “Oh, ho! So you fell for that dame too?”

Daventry frowned for a moment, then grinned. “Have you seen her?”

“Yeah. Little special detail. I was there right behind you. Now I’m way ahead of you!”

“I suppose you’ve got a date with her tonight?”

“No, but I plan to work on it.”

“Work fast then, Brownie. I’m on my way there now.”

“Just mention my name at the door.” Brown grinned and dropped a big hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Anything I can help you with, Phil? I won’t be too busy tomorrow.”

Daventry stood up and tossed a quarter on the counter. “Yeah. One thing. Get me that key ring from the corpse. See you tomorrow.”

AT FIVE-FORTY Daventry leaned against a store window watching a huddle of persons move from the curb and wedge itself into a street car. He moved suddenly, like a released catapult, and hit the platform on the heels of the last passenger.

The conductor was a sullen individual with little information to offer. He recalled Fitzjames’ cane and a man with a black mustache but that was all.

Daventry worked from passenger to passenger, asking questions, as the car clattered on its way to the suburbs. He

reached the last seat without result. Morosely he lighted his pipe. Perhaps his word descriptions of Fitzjames and the dead man were not accurate enough.

He pulled out a card and sketched a likeness of William Fitzjames, tall, stooped, leaning heavily on the cane. Then he flipped a page and did the same for the dead man. The topcoat and hat he had seen; the face had to be drawn from Fitzjames’ brief description. There had been nothing left but the eyes on the face of that battered corpse. Even the mustache was mangled into the flesh.

He was touching up the shiny coat lapels, when a long finger shot over his wrist and touched the sheet. “I remember that!” a voice whispered: “I remember those funny lapels.”

Daventry eyed the blond boy in the seat beside him. Skinny. About high school age. He had boarded the car a few stations after Daventry. “What about the lapels?” he snapped.

“I should have remembered when you were asking me,” the youth apologized. “I remember now. The lapels were all shiny, like silk. You don’t see coats like that much anymore.”

“Remember anything else?”

“Yeah.” The blue eyes squinted. “I should remember that guy! He gave me an awful scare once.”

Daventry pounced on that. “Gave you a scare?”

“Yeah. It was just a week or so ago. I work after school and I usually catch this car home. But, two or three nights I had to work late and I caught the next car after this one. Well, by golly, for about a week or so no matter which car I took, this guy with the lapels was always on the same car! It was really scary, by golly!”

Daventry’s voice dropped to a hiss. “What time is the next car after this one?”

“They run fifteen minutes, apart.”

“And this man rode *both* cars?”

“I don’t say he rode *both* cars. That wouldn’t hardly be possible. I say that he always rode the same car I did, no matter which car it was. First I thought he was following me, but that couldn’t have been, because he was already on the car when I got on!”

Daventry felt like shouting. Instead he asked the boy’s name and noted it in his book. “I’m a detective, son.” The blue eyes bulged. “You may have helped to save a man’s life. Anyway, you’ve saved me lot of grey hairs. Thanks.”

The car was almost empty when Daventry got off at Glenarm Avenue. He noted the rapidly rising darkness. It crept like a low smudge over the rooftops.

In imitation of William Fitzjames he marched into the gloom toward that rendezvous with murder. He could almost sense those stalking footsteps behind him.

He counted off blocks as he went. Seven, six, five, four, three. His feet struck little obstacles—stones, cans, bits of glass. He strode on past the murder corner, listened for the beat of footsteps, imagined the scuffle of a stone at his feet. He turned, raised his arm.

“What do you want of me?” Daventry said. For an instant he paused, then he swung down his arm as though to strike a man’s face. He swung again. He dropped on his knees on hard cement and struck again and again at the nothing that lay there, in a weird mockery of murder.

DAVENTRY had to get off his knees. The cement was hurting them. He wondered how a man could squat there for long painful moments and yet not remember the ache in his knees.

He sat down, recalling Fitzjames’ story. There was something wrong with the scene, he felt, something that did not quite fit. He went through the motions

anyway, felt of a bloody, imaginary body with his hands. He fumbled in his pocket for a match.

A match! But why did he need a match? It was not yet dark. He could still see objects as far as twenty feet away. *It was not yet dark!*

The detective leaped to his feet. This was the doggondest crime he had ever tackled! The deeper a man got the more fantastic became the facts.

Daventry glanced at his wrist watch. Six-thirty. He hesitated and then continued toward the Fitzjames home.

There was a light in the Fitzjames kitchen. He slipped along the hedge to the garage. To his surprise the garage door was wide open. He stepped in. A thin beam from his pencil flashlight pierced the darkness. At his feet lay the casing of a tire. The red tube was pulled halfway out of the tire. It reminded him of a huge, exposed red vein.

Daventry closed the garage, stepped up on the back porch, and peered into the kitchen. Mildred Fitzjames was on hands and knees on the floor. Beyond her lay the guilty topcoat. It was an ordinary dark coat, except for a thin black band around the upper left arm. Across its surface were two long dull streaks, five-fingered, the marks of two bloody hands.

Daventry rapped sharply. The door quickly creaked open. The woman peered at him through the screen before unlatching it.

“It’s you!” she murmured. “I’m so glad it’s you! Come here! I want to show you something!”

She seized his hand with warm fingers, pulled him into the kitchen. She pointed dramatically at the topcoat. “Look! Look, Lieutenant! He said he wiped his fingers on his coat. There are the marks of the fingers, but where are the spots? Where are the splashes, Lieutenant? Could you

beat a man to a bloody pulp without getting a single splash of blood upon yourself? Could you possibly do that, Lieutenant?"

Daventry stared. His eyes glinted. His fingers raced up the woman's arms to her shoulders, squeezed the soft white flesh. His words didn't quite fit the situation. "Have you had dinner?" he demanded.

"I couldn't eat," she said simply.

"You can eat with me! We're going out—to celebrate!"

CHAPTER IV

THAT night was the longest in Detective Lieutenant Phil Daventry's life. The first half of it went fast enough—too fast. Just a matter of gulping food, murmuring a few words, and staring at a lovely vision. But that last half, when he was home in bed, tossing—

He couldn't decide what it was about Mildred Fitzjames, the crinkly eyes, or the way her long black hair was shaped to the delicate contours of her face, or the smile that lurked on her lips even when she was hurt or angry. Whatever it was, it kept hitting Daventry like a solid blow in the chest, and he couldn't hit back. Daventry, Phil Daventry, the social lone wolf losing his head. Yes, losing his head. Fitzjames wasn't the only man who had lost his head.

How had a gal like that Mildred gotten hooked up with an old gent like Fitzjames? He hadn't dared to ask her. What business was it of Phil Daventry? Don't be a fool, Daventry! You can't put your heart into saving a man from a murder charge when you've gone overboard for that man's wife!

Not until dawn began to settle like dust against the bedroom windows had Daventry settled the matter in his mind. He would be a fool, but he would still be

Daventry. He rolled over and went to sleep.

Tod Brown joined his friend for breakfast next morning in a tiny two-passenger booth. "Coffee and doughnuts," he ordered.

"Make that ham and eggs," Daventry corrected. "On me. We have a lot to do today if you can break those dismal chains that bind you—"

Brown winked a round, mild eye. "Don't worry about Eldred. He thinks I'm working on the Frazier stabbing—"

"Great!" Daventry sank firm white teeth into a thick slab of ham. He chewed with a swift, silent motion of the jaw muscles—the easy way he did everything. "Did you get those keys from the dead man?"

"Can do!" Brown boasted. "Swiped 'em from Eldred's desk long enough to get 'doops' made."

Daventry looked them over and then scribbled three names on a white card. "These are the kinds of locks we'll be looking for, Tod. The others are not door keys."

AT EIGHT-THIRTY Daventry was ushering Brown toward a street car. "Get off at Glenarm and walk six blocks west. Turn north there for two blocks and work the whole area. It should go fast. The only stops will be houses with the right kind of locks. If the guy went that way every night, he must have lived somewhere in that section."

Leaving Brown, Daventry made some rapid calculations. There would be certain limitations to his own search. A man taking the Brewster car at Seventh must work in a certain very restricted area of the business district. His office must be on or within half a block of Seventh Street itself. Workingmen consistently take the short cuts. If he worked nearer Eighth Street he

would take the car at Eighth, etcetra. That narrowed the hunt to a block-wide swathe running west from Brewster.

East of Brewster was the factory district. Men wearing silk-lapelled topcoats did not *walk* in and out of that area.

The swathe would not run over six or seven blocks west, because twelve blocks west was the Lakeshore car which went to Glenarm as directly and quickly as the Brewster car. Anyone on the far side of Main would take the Lakeshore line.

All Daventry had to search, then, was an area one block wide, six blocks long, and averaging twelve stories high!

The detective moved with amazing speed, working his long, tough legs to their limit. Some buildings he could check with a brief glance, because it was obvious that every door in the building had the same kind of lock. In three hours he had covered the entire campaign, floor by floor, building by building. The result was a list of twenty door locks each of which corresponded by name to one of three keys in Daventry's coat pocket.

Each item on the list included a room number and an address, and in some cases a name taken from the lettering on a door. The names were the most helpful.

At twelve-five o'clock Daventry closed in. Most of the offices would be empty or semi-empty during the lunch hour. Rasping keys and twisting door handles might not be noticed.

Luck seemed to be playing with him. He found the lock on the fifth try at exactly twelve-fifteen o'clock. He slid in the key noiselessly at the instant that his right hand turned the doorknob. The lock slowly gave with the twist of the key.

He poked in his head, swept the room in a glance, stepped in and locked the door behind him. This was it! The name on the door was *Bloom Detective Agency*.

DAVENTRY was sometimes known to his detective friends as "The Phantom of the File Room." The way he could go through a file of papers was nothing short of supernatural. In exactly one half-hour he had torn the Bloom Agency completely apart and put it back together again. At twelve forty-five he picked up the agency telephone and dialed a number listed on Bloom's phone pad under the initials, E.S.

A faint voice that might have been man's or woman's answered the call.

"Hello. Who is this?" Daventry clipped.

A snicker at the other end grew to a tremendous guffaw. "For crying out loud!" a male voice exploded. "That sounds like you, Phil!"

"Brown! Is that you, Tod! . . . Well, I'll be damned! Talk about making ends meet! . . . What have you got down there?"

"The works," Brown reported. "Guy by the name of Ernest Stein. Has a little upstairs apartment on Harvard Street. Hasn't been around since the day of the murder. Had already given the landlady a month's paid notice; so she wasn't surprised about his absence. I gave her a little word picture of the corpse—dimensions, weight, coat, silk lapels, black hair, blue eyes, black hat—you know! I threw in Fitzjames' description of the face and that clinched it. I'm sure Stein is the dead man, Phil!"

"Great!" Daventry snapped. "Now I want you to pick up Mildred Fitzjames and meet me at the Town House Bar at four o'clock sharp. I've got some angles to clean up meanwhile. Oh, one other thing, Tod. Ask the landlady if anyone phoned there Monday inquiring for Stein."

Daventry kept his date on the dot. He found Brown and Mildred in a dark rear booth. A drink was already waiting for him. He sat down by Mildred, facing

Brown. Enthusiasm twinkled in the corners of his dark eyes and hard mouth. The effect was contagious. Mildred's tightly drawn face brightened.

"This one's cracking faster than I figured. I have a half-hour to explain and then we go to work," Daventry said. He squeezed Mildred's arm. "Listen carefully, Mildred. I have a job for you. A key from the dead man's pocket fits the office of one K. Bloom, Detective. I've turned that office inside out, and here are the facts I've found:

"First, Bloom's secretary was named Ernest Stein. According to the newspapers a man resembling Stein was murdered by William Fitzjames last Saturday night. Bloom either did not recognize the description of his secretary, or did recognize it but failed to report to the police.

"In Bloom's correspondence I found a letter addressed to an employment agency, dated Monday, stating that his secretary had carried out a threat to quit and requesting a new secretary. If the letter is not a fake, then Bloom made up his mind in a single working day that his secretary had walked out on him. Did he call Stein's home on Monday, Brown?"

"Somebody called, the landlady said."

"That checks well for Bloom. Almost too well. Now, here's another thing. I couldn't find any incriminating facts in Bloom's office, but I noted that his files only went back to 1941. So I looked up Hogan, who used to be in the private detective business. He remembered Bloom. But Hogan insisted that Bloom had been in the business for years.

"Question, then why did Bloom's files only go back to 1941? I asked Hogan, and he admitted he hadn't seen Bloom since the winter of 1940. At that time Bloom was working on a blackmail case in Capitol City. I asked for names. Hogan

finally came up with one—Dr. Runecker! Does that strike a note, Tod?"

Brown licked thick lips. "Runecker? Runecker? Wasn't he a homicide case over at Capitol City?"

Daventry's black eyes glowed. "Not homicide, Tod. Suicide. That was the coroner's final report. I checked it with the *Daily Post* library.

"But here's the thing, Tod. I remember a little about the case. Runecker was found smashed-up in his car at the bottom of a cliff. There were rumors that Runecker had been a first-class blackmailer, but some big money stopped the blackmail investigation cold. Probably a lot of nice people wanted to keep their names out of the mess. Anyway, they settled for suicide. Dr. Runecker's secretary identified the body. The secretary's name was—*Enoch Steen*. Do you get it, Tod?"

Brown blinked, then snapped his fingers. "Maybe I do. Enoch Steen—Ernest Stein?"

Daventry chuckled. "It's possible. That similarity of initials seems to be a human weakness—"

"But if K. Bloom's secretary was the same guy as Dr. Runecker's secretary, then K. Bloom himself might be—"

"That's right! K. Bloom might be! I've found out that Bloom was always a man of very few personal connections, and previous to 1941 he had no secretary! Now, those are the facts. Here's where you come in, Mildred—"

The woman seized on Daventry's excitement with burning eyes. "Yes, I want to help you!"

Daventry patted her shoulder. "I'm sending you to this Bloom Detective Agency, Mildred. A real detective would scare him too much. I want you to tell Bloom that you have undertaken an investigation on your own and have discovered the identity of the man William

Fitzjames struck down last Saturday night. Tell Bloom that you know the dead man was his secretary. Act just a little suspicious of Bloom, but don't overdo it. Tell him you're trying to find some connection between the dead man and William Fitzjames. Don't tell him how you got your facts.

"Watch him, Mildred. That's all. Just record in your mind everything he says and does. Bring that back to me here along with a description of the man himself!"

Daventry stood up and pulled Mildred to her feet. Her lips trembled. "I—I—"

"You can handle it. We depend on you."

She looked away from his piercing eyes, at her hands, her feet. "Yes—yes, I can handle it."

He handed her a slip of paper. "Here's the address."

The two detectives watched her to the door of the bar. She faltered once, turned, waved, and vanished.

"All by herself, Phil?" Brown queried.

"You'll be three minutes behind her, Tod. Get close enough to Bloom's door to overhear any funny business. Duck out of sight when Mildred comes out. Then tag Bloom and find out where he lives. A private detective will be sharp, Tod. Be on your toes!"

DAVENTRY spent the time slowly drinking beer and thinking. The case was beginning to take shape now. Facts grooved together. There was only one odd piece to the puzzle, William Fitzjames.

The detective's long body sulked deeper and deeper into the cushions of the booth. He felt stupid. He knew he was looking the truth right in the eyes and still could not recognize it.

A hand finally came out of the mist and touched his shoulder. He started, spilling beer on his shirt. He expected to

see the sweet smile of Mildred Fitzjames. Instead a wrinkled scowl in the person of Tod Brown hovered close to his face. Brown slid into the booth, riding his elbows on the table.

"You're supposed to be tagging Bloom!" Daventry snapped.

Brown reddened. "He lost me, Phil. Pulled a beautiful fake with a taxi into a black sedan parked across the street. I spotted the license, though. I made sure he didn't really know he was tailed. The fake was just a precaution on his part."

"Okay. Forget it. Where's Mildred?"

Brown wiped fat cheeks with his palms. "Pretty sold on that dame, aren't you, Phil?"

Daventry's eyes tightened. "What about it?"

Brown pinched his nose, looked away. "She's in on the game, Phil."

"What!"

"I know how you feel, boy. It hit me the same way. I'm telling you she walked out of that office arm in arm with K. Bloom himself and lookin' up at him like he was the only guy in the world!"

Daventry slumped almost out of sight behind the table. If there was any emotion, it was lost behind the thin slits of his eyes and mouth. His hand wrapped around the point of his chin. "I don't get it," he breathed.

"You'd have got it if you'd been there, seein' the way she looked up into his eyes. If ever a dame—"

The hand wiped away from Daventry's jaw, slammed savagely on the table. An empty glass rolled on its side. "I do get it!" Daventry roared. Stools swiveled. Faces peered at him. He crouched in his seat like a coiled cat. "I got to know, Tod. How can I know for sure?"

"Are you crazy?" Brown exploded.

"Crazy! Yes, that's what it would be!" Daventry ground the words through his

teeth. "What'll I do? How'll I find out, Tod, right now?" he begged.

He answered himself, leaping up. "Come on! I know where to go!"

"I know where you oughta go," Brown muttered, tossing a bill on the table as Daventry dragged him for the door.

CHAPTER V

THERE was a phone booth in the drug store on the corner. Daventry dived into it. Brown wedged in behind him, a nickel materializing on his palm. "Phil, I wish you would explain what this is—"

"Shut up!"

Daventry dialed with stiffening, knotted fingers. His teeth were clenched, the lips white. "Hello! *Daily Post*? . . . Give me the morgue. . . The morgue. The filing room! Pete Wils—Hello!—Hello, Pete? . . . Pete, this is Phil Daventry of Homicide . . . Yeah. Pete, I want you to do something for me—fast! Now get these facts straight: I want you to look up the Dr. Runecker suicide story from Capitol City. Sometime in 1940 . . . That's right, Dr. Runecker. Just one thing I want to know, Pete. What kind of a doctor was Runecker? . . . Got it? What kind . . . Right!"

Daventry waited, mopping his cheeks with a sweaty palm. Panic was drumming in his ears, torturing his throat. Damn the Fitzjames family! He had never had a case do this to him before. Brown blinked at him, not understanding.

It seemed to take the man hours. The early dark was already seeping in from the street.

"Hello! Pete, did you get it? . . . Yeah? . . . Yeah. A psychiatrist? . . . You're sure of that? A psychiatrist? . . . Yeah. That's all. Thanks, Pete."

Daventry's voice dwindled away to a whisper. His shoulders sagged. He hung

the receiver with a groping, uncertain motion. "I'm sick," he muttered. "Now I know."

"What do you know, Phil?"

"I can't think, Tod. Where could we find them? Where would they go from his office? Where would he take her? I've got to think and I can't!"

"If you'd tell me what's eating you, Phil—"

Daventry's eyes came up to Brown's, pleading. He licked his lips. "If you wanted to be alone with her—all alone, Tod—where would you take her?"

"Not to my place," Brown grumbled. "My landlady wouldn't like it!"

"No, not to his place. That would be too dangerous."

"Shucks, I'd take her home and start from there. The old man being in jail—"

"Brown! That's it! Of course he'd go to her place—way out, no houses around—Oh, Brownie, come on!" Daventry shot out of the booth in a crouch like a sprinter leaving his blocks.

His instructions to the taxi driver were hoarse, voiceless words out of a dead throat. The cab slammed them against the cushions, shrieking away on slick rubber. They shot through a yellow light in first gear.

"What's up?" Brown demanded.

"Murder maybe. Or worse!" Daventry groaned.

Daventry wasn't thinking ahead; he was only able to think up to each successive green light. Green was the light of life, and red was for blood. The red must not come down on them or it would flood the world. Yellow, yellow, yellow. The cab seemed to punch a button every time it hit the mid-stripe of a block and then came a half-block of screaming, sliding, treacherous speed, racing with the yellow, whistling under the red, and reaching out for another green.

Time sat with him like a phantom, pointing out each delay with a long black finger, chuckling, poking his ribs. Daventry felt himself growing old by seconds that were as long as years. How could one woman do this to a man?

IT WAS a long ride to Glenarm. Darkness was settling fast. Brown had to bark the directions. Daventry couldn't loosen the stiff tongue wedged against his teeth.

At last the lights slowly dwindled like scattered sparks of a dying fire. "How close we want to get to the house?" Brown muttered.

"Block away!" Daventry managed to get out. "Mustn't warn him. Got to catch him in the act, damn it!"

"Turn here!" Brown hissed suddenly. The cab braked, swerved. Tires shrilled. A lamppost and black trees sprang toward them. With a fearsome wail the tires gripped pavement. The cab lurched wildly, then pulled away to the left. A single clutching branch of tree slapped viciously against the glass.

"Whose gonna be the corpses in this case?" Brown growled.

Right side of the cab was a pit of blackness pierced by a single pinpoint of light.

"Stop here!"

A final drunken lurch and wheels churned into gravel. A hand jarred Daventry's shoulder. "Okay, Phil."

That was the release. Daventry stiffened, clawed at the door handle, leaped outward into soft sand. He ran, floundering in the stuff, leaping the black gnome shrubs that crouched to tackle him. He remembered to call over his shoulder, "Take the back door, Tod! Let me go first!"

Twice he sprawled flat, burying up to his wrists in sand. Once his mouth ground

into the stuff, gagging him, but he was up again like a springing cat, spitting. A muddy clot formed at his panting lips and drooled down his chin. Heaving breath sucked bits of it into his throat. He choked, coughed, sputtered, but ran on faster.

He tried to get hold of himself, focus his mind on the action to come. He must see the scene as it was laid and yet give no warning.

The house loomed up now. He slowed his pace, coming down softly and lithely with each long step, skirting the house in a wide circle. He shut his lips and let the wind pound inside of him, sob in his throat.

The pinpoint of light was a mere slit in a curtain. Shades were drawn. Other gleaming slits showed at the edges of them. Doors would be locked of course.

He couldn't attempt to peer into those slits. He couldn't pause to break in a door. The entrance would have to be accomplished in a single, startling attack.

He recalled the front room of the house, the arrangement of the furniture. The large parlor window was not a single glass but a framework of six separate glass panels. The frame was frail enough. A man's weight would smash through it easily. Beyond the window was a blank space of carpet six feet deep—no furniture to shatter a man's bones.

He could hear Brown's heavy steps thudding behind the house. That was the signal.

The porch was low, unrailed. He made a rounded, frontal approach to it, measuring with his eyes, trotting across the grass. Ten feet from the porch his toes dug into sod, shooting his body forward. The third step caught the edge of the porch, the fourth lifted his body into the air, knees doubled against the chest, twisting. Flying through space he noticed strange, incongruous things—ragged

seams in the curtain, a crack in one of the glass panels, a tiny flag with a single star in a corner of the frame—

He hit the window backwards with feet and hips. Glass and wood exploded deafeningly around him.

He landed in a skidding backslide on toes and hands, collapsing heavily. The splintered window showered down on top of him. His hands flung his body up at the waist, crouching, spinning on the toes. His eyes took in the whole room in a single gulp:

The body on the couch was stiff, trance-like. The face was a blank white mask.

Above the woman on the couch bent the figure of a man, short, dark-eyed. His black hair hung in a long, sweaty mat down one cheek. His breath formed little bubbles of foam at the lips.

The two men joined in the middle of the room, crashed heavily, rolled on the crackling glass. The glass powdered under their combined weight. Bits of it wormed through their clothing, needling the flesh.

Daventry ignored the slivers biting into wrists and knees. He engulfed the body beneath him in a tight body lock. A savage face thrust up close to his, deep eyes searched into his own.

“Go ahead!” Daventry snarled. “Roll those big brown eyes, Doctor Runecker. You’re finished!”

DAVENTRY—Inspector Daventry it would be, in a few weeks—thought he could get away from the Fitzjames case, at the little Pacific resort, but it followed him. His first night down for dinner in the Cliffview dining room he spotted the face of William Fitzjames at a table over by the big plate glass window. Only the back of Mildred’s head was visible, but that was a cold shock. He tried

to duck, but Fitzjames was on his feet, beckoning.

A waiter found a third chair for Daventry. He sat facing out upon blue ocean.

Mildred’s face was the way he wanted to remember it, not that ghastly thing he had seen lying on that couch.

“What coincidence can this be?” Daventry muttered in greeting.

Mildred’s hand was crawling across the tablecloth toward his own. His fingers trembled. “Why did you run off so soon?” she demanded. “We had so much to thank you for, Phil.”

“That’s my business, to straighten people out—or to hang them,” he said.

William Fitzjames gripped Phil’s shoulder. He was changed, no longer a trembling jelly of a man. He seemed to have grown in stature, expanded. “You might straighten me out on a few more things, Mr. Daventry,” he said. “I’ve never quite understood the connection between Dr. Runecker and the Bloom Detective Agency.”

“Oh, that,” Daventry said. “That part was simple enough. It started three years ago. Dr. Runecker used his little psychiatry practice as a front for the sweetest blackmail racket I’ve ever heard of. People who came to him were the kind of people who make big fools of themselves. After delving into their secret lives the doctor turned the facts against them. His so-called secretary, Enoch Steen, actually handled the blackmail.

“Finally one of the doctor’s clients became suspicious and hired the Bloom Detective Agency to investigate. Bloom probably made the mistake of confronting Runecker with enough facts to ruin him. Bloom was nailed for murder on the spot. He was overpowered by Runecker, driven over a cliff in Runecker’s car, and

identified by Runecker's secretary as the doctor himself.

"That little trick gave Runecker a chance to slip out of a spot that was fast becoming too hot for him and to assume a new identity. He simply moved to this city and became K. Bloom, Detective, after discovering that Bloom had no close contacts or relatives. He moved the Bloom offices and actually operated a bona-fide detective bureau, working the blackmail as a sideline. He was smooth and smart and expert, that Runecker.

"And the doctor's secretary then became the detective's secretary?" Mildred put in.

"Yes, after the Runecker suicide had died down. Enoch Steen became Ernest Stein. He was never a 'front' man though; he worked behind the scenes, handling the dirty work as well as the book work. But Stein finally made the same mistake that Detective Bloom had made; he began to put the pressure on a dangerous man. He probably blackmailed Runecker for a higher percentage and that was simply asking for murder."

Davenport studied the long, mild face of William Fitzjames, the quick, nervous movements of the man. "Stein was a lot like you, Mr. Fitzjames. That's why he was so good at the blackmail angle. No one could possibly suspect him. He was a man of very neat, punctual habits. Always rode the same street car and that sort of thing.

"As soon as Bloom—that is, Runecker—had his murder plot in mind he began to study Stein's routine, probably followed him home a few times. He soon spotted you, Mr. Fitzjames, as the man on whom to perpetrate his plot. Your habits were as exact as Stein's.

"When the time came, Runecker got Stein to change his work schedule by a few minutes so that he would have to take

a later street car home. *Then Runecker took Stein's place on your street car.* From the first day that you felt those eyes working on your scalp, the man with the black mustache was not Stein but Runecker himself disguised as Stein! He must have been a wizard of disguise as he was of many things.

"It was Runecker who followed on your heels that Saturday night. It was Runecker whose eyes met yours when you raised your cane. You vaguely recalled some words that he spoke to you. That part of your memory was right enough. 'There is nothing wrong,' he said. 'Nothing to be afraid of.' Over and over he said it.

"That's where your part of the murder ended, Fitzjames. That's where Runecker calmed your mind and took over. He overpowered you, dragged you into the bushes, and waited for the real Stein to come along. He beat Stein to death with your cane, then led you back to the body, placed the cane in your hand and released you.

"It was a clever plot. Runecker had used his power once before for a murder. Successful murderers grow overconfident. They think they can repeat. Runecker was too sure of himself all along the line. He didn't figure how fast a good detective can work!"

WILLIAM FITZJAMES raised a thin, protesting hand. "Too fast! Just a little too fast for me, Mr. Davenport. You say that Bloom—Dr. Runecker—overpowered me that night. How do you mean, 'overpowered'?"

Davenport blinked. "Huh? Didn't the Inspector—didn't that fool Eldred tell you about Runecker?"

Fitzjames flushed. "I guess he did. I was so excited about being released that I only heard half of it."

"Why, that was the whole thing—that

power of Runecker's. That's how he searched the secret minds of his clients for blackmail. That's how he blotted out your mind for an instant—an instant that was really a full fifteen minutes! That's how he undertook to explore Mildred's mind, to find out if she really knew anything about his part in the murder.

"You must have frightened him, Mildred, when you went to his office. You must not have played your part exactly right—"

Mildred laughed. "I suppose not. I'm not an actress."

"I was scared to death when I finally hit on the truth. I thought Runecker meant to kill you somehow with his strange powers—or possibly even to drive you crazy. I almost turned grey in those last few minutes."

"Really?" The woman's eyes widened. "Did it really mean that much?"

Daventry ignored her extended, trembling hand and scowled at William Fitzjames. "There is much potential good in the science of psychiatry, Fitzjames, and a lot of psychiatrists can do amazing things with hypnotism. But there is also much potential evil in hypnotism when it gets into the hands of clever charlatans and criminals. *Hypnotism, Fitzjames.* Dr. Runecker did wonders with it—vicious, inhuman wonders!

"You lost your head all right, Fitzjames, but not the way you thought. Runecker took possession of your head for a while that night. As soon as his soft words had soothed your fear, his eyes really went to work on you, took control of you. Runecker could not make you murder Ernest Stein though. Even in the subconscious a man's moral standards are intact. But he could keep you in a blank hypnotic trance while he murdered Stein himself!

"When it was done, he ordered you to wait a few minutes for his getaway, then to kneel down beside the body of Stein and break the cane upon the ground. The crack of the cane was your release. He had already planted the thought of murder in your mind through those long days of psychological torture. From that thought it was only a tiny step to belief in your own guilt!

"It would have worked, Fitzjames. I swear it would have worked, but for those keys that Runecker overlook in his hurry and a tiny clue that was supplied by you."

"By me?" Fitzjames was tense, staring, as if Daventry himself had woven an hypnotic spell.

Daventry grinned, breaking the spell. "Sure. You said the guy you attacked with your cane had big brown eyes. Runecker's eyes were brown. *But I already knew that the eyes of the corpse were blue, Mr. Fitzjames, pale blue!*"

THE dinner party broke up with a kind of embarrassed lingering, a limp, uncertain shaking of hands. Daventry wondered why they had come all the way down here for this.

"We can't possibly thank you for what you've done," Mildred Fitzjames was saying. Her round, wet eyes seemed for an instant to tell of a way she would like to thank him.

Daventry wiped the thought from his mind, gingerly, as he might have wiped mud from his shoes. He ended up gruffly, "Let's forget it, shall we?" and turned his back.

He went into a trance of his own then, walking away. No case had ever left a dull taste in his mouth like this one. It was a full five minutes, out on the hotel terrace, before Mildred's last words seeped through to him:

“We’re all through with the city, packed up. We’re going on a long vacation, Phil. Good-by!” she had said, and then, “Come along, Father.”

Father? . . . Father?

Daventry suddenly bolted into the hotel, raced through the lobby in long, boyish leaps. The last time he ran like this he was going to a circus. He split an elderly couple in half, spinning the old gentleman on his cane. He sent an ash-stand rocking wildly, spilling into a lady’s lap. He dodged a bellboy, caught his sleeve on a thorn, and scattered one dozen roses into a riot of red.

Father? Blast that Brown! Brown had just called her “Mrs. Mildred Fitzjames.”

Facts—fragments that he had not bothered to consider—slid miraculously into place now:

That black armband on Fitzjames’ bloody topcoat. That was the emblem of mourning. Those black dresses that Mildred always wore. Mourning dresses. That little flag in the front window with a star in the middle. *A gold star!* Mildred Fitzjames was not the old man’s wife. She was his daughter-in-law! A widow! That gold star would be for Mildred’s husband, Fitzjames’ son, killed in the war!

Daventry dived through a revolving door and catapulted a girl headfirst into the lobby. Fitzjames and daughter were two blocks away, stepping into a cab.

He almost lost the race then, but Mildred couldn’t resist the pun of his straining eyes. She looked over her shoulder. She saw him and she was waiting.

