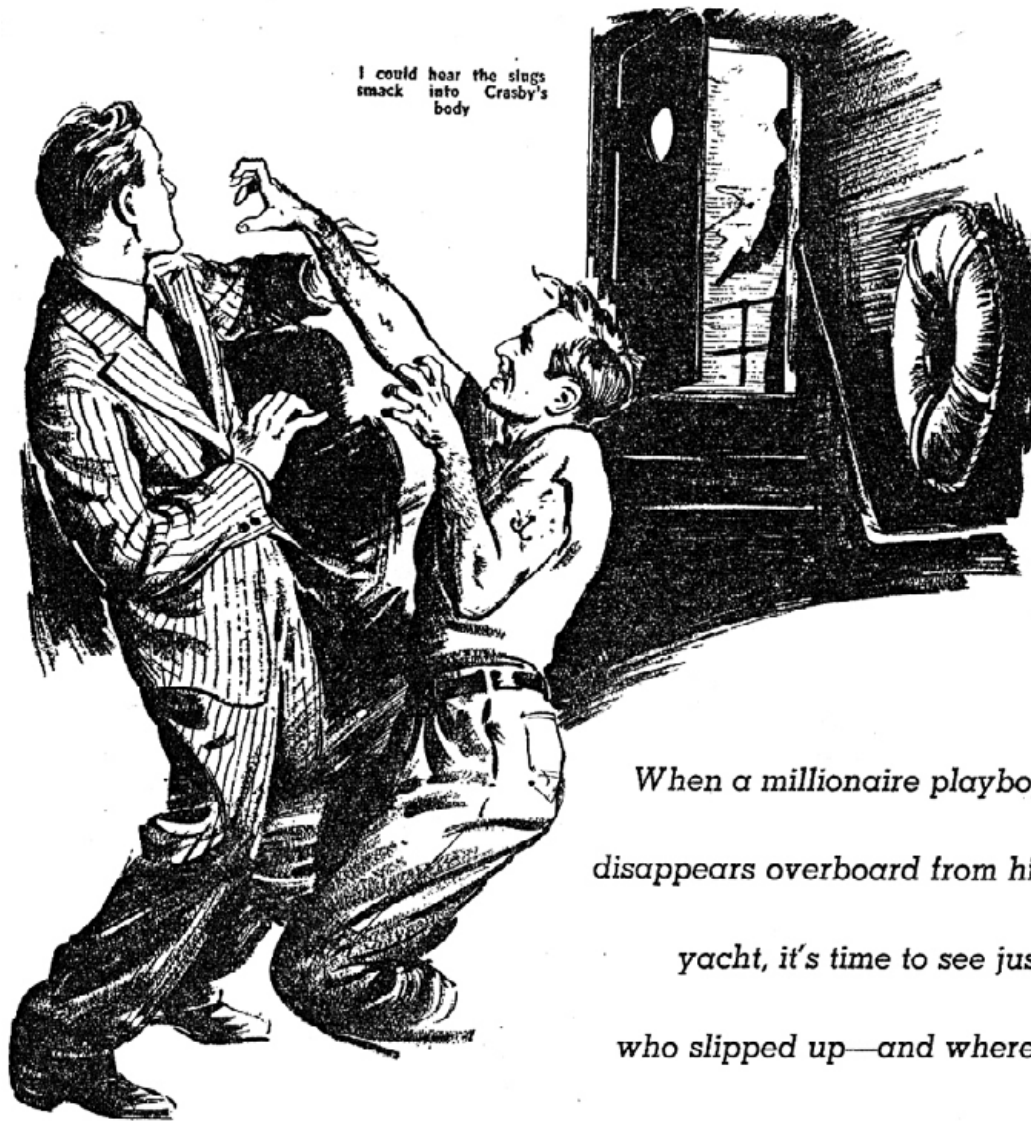


BIG TARGET



When a millionaire playboy disappears overboard from his yacht, it's time to see just who slipped up—and where!

By ROGER FULLER

HOMICIDE," I said, when I picked up the phone. "Sergeant Evans speaking."

There was a second's hesitation and then a raspy, half-whispered voice came over the line. Man or woman, I couldn't tell. The person talking didn't want me to know, either; that was obvious.

"I'm not giving my name," the voice said, "but I think you might be interested in

the Lance Hall case. It might look like an accident or suicide, but it's not. It's murder."

I blinked at that one. The last I'd heard, Lance Hall had been alive and almost disgustingly healthy. Hall was one of the biggest shots in our town, with plenty of bucks, a big yacht named the *Serpentine* and a curvaceous bit of fluff named Thyra Madison whom he was going to marry in

the Fall.

I pressed the button that signaled the Headquarters switchboard man to put a tracer on the incoming call, but I could have spared myself the effort. There was a click at the other end of the line and the wire went dead. A few years in police business—about fifteen—have taught me to save my breath instead of yelling into a dead phone, so I hung up. A couple of seconds later, my switchboard man called to tell me that the phone call I'd just had came from the Argonaut Yacht Club, Seaside 2-1337.

I called back and listened to the bell signal drone in my ear for awhile. The voice that finally said hello was a heavy masculine one.

"This is Homicide," I said. "Did somebody there just phone Headquarters?"

"There's nobody here but me right now," the heavy-set voice said. "I'm Andrew, the attendant here. I just walked in. Homicide? What's happened?"

"Is Mr. Hall about the club anywhere?" I asked, in turn. "Mr. Lance Hall?"

"I—I just saw the *Serpentine* come in," the other end said. "Mr. Hall's been out on a trip. If you call the office, they could tell you better than I can whether Mr. Hall's here. Seaside 2-1330."

I thanked the guy and dialed the new number. A girl's voice answered as soon as the first buzz sounded. I told her who I was and asked for Mr. Hall.

"Mr. Hall?" she asked, and she sounded scared. "Mr. Lance Hall?"

"Please," I told her.

"He—he—wait a minute, please," she gasped.

I waited, checking the time with my wrist watch. It was seventeen minutes past ten, a.m. A man got on the wire after a couple of seconds' delay. He sounded flustered, to say the least.

"This is Commodore Atkins," he said, without preliminaries. "You say this is

Headquarters?"

"Homicide," I told him.

"Maybe somebody from the police had better come down here," the Commodore said. "There's been a—an accident."

"Something happen to Mr. Hall?" I asked.

"Yes," the Commodore said. "He—it sounds incredible, but Lance was swept overboard in last night's storm. His yacht just came in. The Coast Guard is here, but I suppose it's a police matter, too."

"I'll be right down," I told Commodore Atkins. "Please keep everybody who was aboard the yacht there until I talk to them."

When I hung up I found myself agreeing with the Commodore that Lance Hall's falling overboard really did sound incredible. He'd spent all his life on boats, and unless he was fried, I couldn't see him going into the drink in last night's storm. It had been a fairly severe storm, all right, striking just about midnight, but it had been no hurricane. Lance Hall had been a Bermuda racer, he'd sailed to Hawaii and other distant points, before he gave up sail for power, and he'd run through some pretty heavy weather. But, at that, there's always the first time a man makes a careless step, over-confident of his ability to walk a rail with half a load on.

I checked with the Captain of the Bureau and told him about the phone call I'd had.

"Take a look, Evans," Captain Logan told me. "You know boats and that yachting crowd, though heaven knows how you do it on your pay. Let me know if you need anybody to help you."

I could see the big yacht, *Serpentine*, at her mooring when I drove down the twisting driveway that led to the Argonaut Club. She was an easy boat to identify, running between eighty and ninety feet. I'd passed her in the Bay a good many times, and even though I'm strictly a sail man, I'd

have been less than human if I hadn't felt a touch of envy for Hall.

THE Captain's crack about my knowing the yachting crowd wasn't strictly the truth. I sail an Indian Landing, myself, and the little club I belong to is several hundred degrees removed from Argonaut. But there's a camaraderie among boatmen that links us all together, no matter how loosely. With my club burgee flying, I could get mooring and hospitality from any yacht club in the country, whether the mighty Argonaut or the Canoe Club at Casey's Creek.

I walked into the main lounge of the Argonaut Club to find quite a group assembled. There was a young Coast Guard lieutenant and a C.P.O. taking notes from the men and women who were seated in a tight circle over near the windows. All around the wide, sprawling room there were club members who were trying very hard not to look as though they were trying to listen in, which they all were.

I recognized most of the people in the circle. There was that beautiful bit of fluff I mentioned, Thyra Madison, but she wasn't so beautiful right now. While I looked at her, walking toward the group, I saw her raise her face from the handkerchief she was holding to her eyes and it was distorted, swollen, twisted all out of shape by her tears.

Cynical Sergeant Evans, they call me, and my first thought was that she had a right to be tearful. She'd been within a couple of months of being Mrs. Lance Hall, with all those millions, and now she was just Thyra Madison, a pretty girl, certainly, but without any dough, as far as I'd heard. Automatically, I wondered if Lance Hall had changed his insurance to provide for his fiancée, as he would have if he'd lived long enough to marry the gal. Police work gets you thinking like that after awhile.

Sitting on the arm of Thyra's chair, with her hand on the girl's shoulder, was Mrs. Alice Benson. She looked taut and strained but she wasn't crying. Griffin Benson, Alice's husband, sat opposite Thyra. Griff Benson was Lance Hall's best friend and I liked him. Griff went in for small boats, too, Comets and Stars, and we'd raced against each other from time to time. At a regatta he was just another guy, in spite of his money, which was almost as heavy as Hall's.

Sitting beside Griff was a girl I recognized as Lance Hall's secretary. I'd seen her with Lance a good many times—you'd be surprised how a detective sergeant gets around at times—and I knew her name was Turgeon or Spurgeon or something like that. She was young and fairly pretty, in spite of her glasses, and I remembered there'd been a lot of talk, at one time, about the possibility of Lance marrying her, instead of one of the debts that were always throwing themselves at his head. But Lance had played the field, and quite an extensive field it was, until he had met Thyra and after that all other bets were off.

Beyond the secretary were two men I didn't know but who obviously were crewmen from the *Serpentine*. One was wearing a dark blue rayon gabardine uniform with braid on his sleeves and a yachting cap dangling from one hand. He was a thin, hawk-nosed person with a tanned skin and eye wrinkles that showed he'd seen a lot of sun and wind. I tagged him as Hall's skipper and I proved myself right a few minutes later.

The other fellow had on dungarees and a T-shirt, both immaculate. He was a big guy, even sitting down, with a build like Lance Hall's had been, wide in the shoulder and narrow in the hips. He was either a youngster or one of those guys who never look their age until they collapse with a roar. I pegged him as a deck hand aboard the yacht and I found out later that I was

right again.

I introduced myself to the Coast Guard lieutenant and drew him over to one side, along with the C.P.O. Both were nice chaps, up against something they'd never had to deal with before, probably, and glad to have a regular copper on the scene.

"I don't know who takes this over," the lieutenant told me. "It happened in the Bay and that's our territory, but there's no body, yet, and this was his home port and—"

"Sure;" I said. "We won't have any trouble about jurisdiction. Can you give me the story?"

The C.P.O. looked down at his notes and began reciting. That chief certainly was an A-one note-taker. I thought at the time that the Department certainly could use a guy like that, considering some of the scrawls that patrolmen turned in as reports.

"The yacht *Serpentine*," he told me, "DeLancey Hall, master; James Allen, Captain, spoke Coast Guard Cutter YP-313, today at 0317. Position—"

"Never mind the latitude and longitude, please," I broke in. "About where was it?"

"Off Crimson Point," the lieutenant offered. I nodded and the C.P.O. started up again.

"The yacht blinkered the cutter, asking assistance, and the cutter put over a small boat. On boarding the *Serpentine* it was learned that the master, DeLancey Hall, was missing, presumably swept overboard. Hall, according to information supplied by the persons aboard, was last seen at 2315—quarter past eleven—when he went on deck to make sure that certain fittings on the sun deck aft were secured against storm damage. He took with him the deck hand, Jupiter Crasby. The yacht was running short-handed, Captain Allen explained, because Mr. Hall preferred to do some of the work himself and his friend, Mr. Griffin Benson, also was a competent hand."

I knew that was Lance Hall's habit,

taking guests out on his big boat for weekend trips and then working them half to death. A big fellow himself, he could work the average man overboard and never get up a sweat. I guess he got a kick out of that, somehow.

"Crasby says Hall sent him below for some gear with which to fix a running light that apparently had a loose connection. Crasby says that when he got back on deck, Hall was not there. It was raining hard by then and Crasby says he assumed the owner had gone below. Crasby says he repaired the running light and went below himself to his own quarters forward, using a forward hatch. Captain Allen was at the wheel, the others in the main saloon, playing cards.

"When Hall failed to return to the saloon after about an hour, the other people aboard—Miss Thyra Madison, Mrs. Griffin Benson, Benson, and Miss Ann Turgeon—went to Hall's stateroom, which was empty. The party then searched the yacht, splitting up for this purpose, and upon failing to find Hall, notified Captain Allen. Allen put the yacht about and conducted a search of the area but found no trace of the owner before contacting the cutter. That's all we have, so far."

"A swell job," I said. "If it's okay with you, I'll take over the questioning."

IT WAS okay with them, all right. I went back to the group huddled near the windows. I took Allen, the skipper, first.

"Pretty rough out there, Captain?" I asked him.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Rough enough," he said. "Nothing to worry about, with a craft like the *Serpentine*. She's built for ocean travel and she had almost too much beam."

"Rolling much, were you?" I asked him.

He started to shrug again when Alice Benson, Griff's wife, broke into the conversation.

“We were rolling horribly,” she said, with a little shudder. “It’s no wonder that poor Lance fell overboard.”

There was something wrong right there. The Coast Guardsman’s report had said that the *Serpentine* had been heading for her home port, up the Bay, and that course would have taken her almost due northwest. The storm had come out of the southeast. That meant the yacht had a following sea and a craft the size of the *Serpentine* just doesn’t “roll horribly” in a following sea. She might lunge a little, but she wouldn’t roll unless she fell away so she’d be caught in the trough.

Now, Alice Benson was no landlubber who’d call any motion of a boat “horrible.” She’d crewed for her husband, I knew, and in pretty brisk weather. I made a mental note and went on.

This time I chose Griff Benson. Griff looked pretty well shaken up, which, I suppose, was natural, seeing he’d just lost his best friend. There was something else in his expression, though, a wariness, a caution, a weighing of my questions before he gave me my answers.

Here’s his story:

“We were all playing five-and-ten poker in the saloon when Lance felt the wind rising and said he was going out to check the aft sun deck and the running lights. He said he couldn’t depend on his crew to get things done right about the boat, but that was his way. He said a lot of things he didn’t mean in just the way they sounded.”

I gave a hinge at Allen and Crasby. Both of them were scowling at Griff, and no wonder. No boatman likes to be called incompetent, even if the one who does the calling tries to take the edge off his remarks.

“Lance,” Benson continued, “came back to the saloon a few minutes later. He was pretty sore. The sun deck furniture hadn’t been stowed, it seemed, and there was a faulty running light. I offered to help him

fix the things but he said he’d be darned if he’d pay a crew to do things and then have to do them himself. He went to the bridge and came back through the saloon with Crasby. Er—remember I’m just telling this as I saw it, but Crasby seemed to be burned up about being called out of his quarters, into the rain.”

“Not me,” the deck hand put in, quickly. “I wasn’t really sore. Maybe I was a little peeved because Mr. Hall wouldn’t let me get a slicker, but that’s all.”

Griff hunched his shoulders. “Anyway,” he said, “the poker game more or less broke up. My wife and I went to our stateroom and the others wandered around the yacht for awhile. We started to play again, dealing Lance out, until Thyra—Miss Madison—got worried. Then we split up to search the yacht for Lance. When we couldn’t find him, we notified the skipper and you know the rest.”

I thought over what he’d told me.

“The way I get it,” I said, “after Hall went on deck with Crasby, you all left the saloon. Any of you go on deck?”

There was a silence as one looked at the other. Everybody shook their heads.

“Think hard,” I warned. “It might be important.”

More head shakes.

“What did each of you do when you left the saloon, just after Hall went above deck with Crasby?” I asked.

Thyra Madison, it developed between sobs, had gone to her stateroom to change her dress. She had been wearing clothes suitable for a stiff breeze but with the battening of the portholes due to the storm, the saloon had become too hot for the dress she was wearing. She’d changed and come right back.

Griff and Alice Benson had gone to their stateroom to do some packing, preparatory to docking at Argonaut late that night. Ann Turgeon had gone to the galley

to start fixing a late snack for her boss' guests.

"I was on the bridge all the time," Captain Allen said. He had a hard, steely voice. "And I might as well tell you, because you'd probably find out anyway. This was to be my last trip on the *Serpentine*. I told Mr. Hall last week that I was going to look for another berth. We didn't get along too well, to be honest."

"That goes for me, too," said Crasby, the deck hand. "Hall knew I was quitting and he was riding me and the skipper all through that trip. Those riding lights really didn't need fixing right away, and I had secured that furniture right after dinner. He just called me out of my bunk for meanness."

"That's not true!" the secretary, Miss Turgeon, flared. "Lance Hall never did a mean thing in his life!"

"No?" asked Crasby with cool insolence. "Ask anybody that ever worked for him."

"I worked for him!" Ann Turgeon snapped.

Crasby's grin was insulting. "I mean a man," he said deliberately.

"Now, wait a minute!" Griff Benson said hotly. "You can't—"

"Take it easy, folks," I broke in. "Crasby, you can keep your lip buttoned, and oblige me. We won't get anywhere by throwing nasty cracks around."

"Why all this investigation, Sergeant?" Benson asked. "It's obviously an out-and-out accident."

"Perhaps," I said. "We dumb coppers have to go into all the angles, even in the most open-and-shut cases. Besides, I'm puzzled at how Lance Hall, as good a boatman as he is, went overboard in a comparatively mild storm such as last night's."

GRIFF looked down at his hands gripped tightly in his lap. "You've been around the water enough to know how things like that happen," he said in a low voice. "A pitch of the boat at just the wrong time, a gust of wind, a slippery spot on the deck, one drink too many, perhaps."

"He'd been drinking pretty heavily, then?" I asked.

Griff's voice wasn't much more than a mutter. "He was pretty well potted."

"That's not true!" Ann Turgeon broke in again. "Lance had one cocktail before dinner. He passed up highballs that the others had during the poker game. How can you say he was intoxicated, Mr. Benson?"

Benson's eyes darted from the secretary, to the sobbing Thyra, to his wife.

"He looked pretty tight to me," he said sulkily. "Maybe he was sneaking drinks all along. He was in and out of the saloon enough, you know."

Ann's voice trembled with anger. "No more than the rest of us were," she said. "You *know* he wasn't drunk. You—you seem awfully anxious to make sure the police think this was an accident. Maybe it was something else."

"What do you mean?" Thyra Madison asked wonderingly. She had stopped crying but her face was still a wreck. "What else could it be? Who in the world would want to kill Lance?"

There was a stunned silence after that question and the people in the group looked at one another with what seemed to be dawning suspicion. There was a tension that settled over that bunch like a stretched canvas. You could fairly feel the mistrust spreading among the group.

I noticed several exchanges of glances. There was the look that passed between Griff Benson and his wife Alice, and the one that Captain Allen gave Ann Turgeon. But the glaring look that Thyra Madison

gave Crasby, the deck hand, was the most bitter of all.

“Okay,” I said, when that minute of silence stretched out into what seemed to be a long, long time. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you people to stay here at the Argonaut, while we do a little looking around. Strictly routine, you know, but it would be best to have you all together when we need you.”

There was quite a bit of protest over that. Griff Benson reminded me that he had a job that needed doing in town. Thyra Madison went into her sobbing act—if it was an act—again. Alice Benson was resigned but not too happy over the set-up. Allen and Crasby just shrugged and said okay, they’d live on the yacht, as they had been.

The Coast Guard found Lance Hall’s body late that afternoon, not far from Crimson Point. There was a lump on the back of his head that could have been the result of a fall on the wet deck of the *Serpentine* or it could have been something else.

“What was he wearing?” I asked, over the phone, when the Coast Guard base called me at the Argonaut Club.

“Rubber-soled tennis shoes,” they told me, “dark trousers, white shirt.”

“Uh-huh,” I told myself, “and that convinces me he didn’t slip. If he’d had on leather-soled shoes, he might have hit a skid on the wet deck, but never with tennis shoes. Not Lance Hall.”

So, in my own mind, I had a good hunch that this was murder. There was little or nothing to base it on outside of that phone call and my conviction that Lance was too good a yachtsman to go into the drink, unless, as Griff Benson had said, he was looped up.

Headquarters sent me a couple of men and we went to work in earnest. First thing, we found out that Seaside 2-1337 was the phone in the men’s locker room. That

meant, almost certainly, that a man had made the call. A woman could have slipped into the place—Andrew, the attendant, said he’d just come on duty and the place ordinarily was pretty deserted at that time of day—but she’d be taking an awful chance. There was a phone in the ladies’ lounge, too, and I figured that t a woman would have used that one. Unless, of course, some gal wanted me to think that it was a man and was willing to run the risk.

Police work, you know, is comprised ninety-five per cent of detail work, drudgery. In the Lance Hall case, we got our fill of that, all right. The records of all those people had to be checked to the most minute degree in our search for a possible motive.

If Lance Hall had been murdered—and I was pretty sure he had been—the question was why? I wasn’t convinced of Crasby’s sterling character, not by a long shot, but if he was telling the truth, the killer could have slugged Lance and tossed him overboard during the few minutes the deck hand was below looking for tools with which to fix the faulty running light.

During that time, everybody aboard the boat, with the exception of Allen, would have had an opportunity to do the job. And we couldn’t overlook Allen, for that matter. Alice Benson, who knew her boating, had said the *Serpentine* was rolling heavily, and it could very well have been if *an unattended wheel let the yacht swing into the trough of the waves!* If Allen had seen Lance on deck, skipped off the bridge by the outer companionway and slugged him, the yacht would have been almost sure to swing off course and wallow.

But the others had looked at Alice Benson in surprise when she had said the yacht was “rolling horribly.” Even Griff, I had noticed, seemed shocked by the girl’s announcement. There was something between the Bensons that wasn’t right. Both of them would bear watching. They had

only each other to back up their alibis about going to their stateroom to pack.

Nobody had seen Thyra Madison go to her stateroom, either, ostensibly to change her dress. The Turgeon girl admitted, perhaps a little grudgingly, that Thyra had on a different outfit when she returned to the saloon, but it didn't take very long to change a dress.

The secretary herself wasn't too well protected by her story. Nobody had been with her in the galley when she was fixing that late snack.

CRASBY, of course, was out on the longest limb. He'd been the last man seen with Hall and he'd admitted that he thought Hall was "picking on him," riding him. I'd never known Hall very well, personally, but I knew enough about him to know he was a big, bluff man, given to blunt words on occasion. Could be that he bawled out Crasby, up there on the rain-swept, dark deck until the hand lost his temper and belted him one, then tossed him overboard in panic when he realized he'd hit Lance harder than he'd meant to. After all, we had only Crasby's word that Lance had sent him below for tools.

I talked to this one and that one, totting up my bits of information, most of it worthless, and then I went aboard the *Serpentine*. Living space at the Argonaut Club, it had developed, was at a premium despite the club's size—blame the housing shortage, I guess—and the Bensons, Thyra and Miss Turgeon had all decided to stay aboard the yacht rather than camp out in the club lounge. The yacht was completely stocked, and it certainly was no hardship for any of them to keep to their staterooms.

I went over the big boat inch by inch. The sun deck furniture that had taken Lance up on deck was neatly stacked and covered with tarpaulins now. The running lights worked perfectly.

"It was this wire here," Crasby told me, pointing to the cable that led to the port running light. "The thing was frayed, but it wasn't broken. Once in a while, when we hit a big one and pounded fairly hard, it would blink off for a second. It needed fixing, sure, but Captain Allen and I were going to wait till we came in to work on it."

The patch the deck hand told me he'd made, and it was a fresh patch, was about amidships, behind the bridge and running along the outer bulkhead of the main saloon. It was a workmanlike piece of repairing, all right.

"What tools did you use?" I asked Crasby.

"Wire cutters, pliers, knife, tape," he said. "Nothing to it. It wasn't the job that made me sore, it was Hall calling me up on deck in that weather and not waiting for me to get my slicker. Besides, he'd been needling me right along."

"Uh-huh," I said. "How about the furniture on the aft sun deck?"

"I'm telling you the truth," the deck hand said earnestly. "I stowed that stuff right after dinner, covered it and lashed down what needed lashing. When Hall brought me up on deck the stuff was all scattered around again. I think he did it himself, just to give him something more to gripe about."

I couldn't see that, although I didn't say anything. Lance Hall might have been hard on his men, as Allen and Crasby seemed to think, but I couldn't see him indulging in anything as petty as that. Either Crasby was lying about stowing the furniture, or somebody had deliberately disarranged the stuff to get Lance up on deck.

"Show me just where you and Hall were standing when he told you to get the tools," I asked Crasby. He moved over to a position near the rail. "Now, how did you go down to where the tools are kept?"

I followed Crasby along the port side to a companionway near the stern. We went down to the lower deck, moved along a corridor, past the main saloon, past the master's suite and then down another companionway to a locker near the big diesel that powered the boat.

The locker was filled with tools arranged neatly in rows, every tool in its place. I picked out the pliers, knife, tape and cutters that the deck hand said he had used. I cast an approving eye over the array of hammers, wrenches, drills and what-not. Hall might have grumbled about not being able to trust his crew to do their jobs right, but this tool locker certainly was shipshape.

I started to turn away and then I gave the lineup of tools another look.

"Lost a wrench?" I asked Crasby. I pointed to an empty space in the rack that held a fine set of graduated wrenches. The missing wrench had come from a space right next to the biggest one of the set, a ponderous affair.

Crasby stared and lost his youngster look for a second. "That wrench was there the last time I looked," he said.

"Was it there last night?"

He stumbled around a while and then admitted that he couldn't be sure. He'd been in a hurry to grab the tools he needed and get the wet job over with. Because everything was in its place, he'd been able to reach in and lay his hands on what he required without snapping on the locker light, depending only on the dim light of the companionway outside.

"Crasby," I told the deck hand, "you're in a spot. That wrench probably was what was used on Lance Hall last night. You admit you didn't like him, thought he was riding you. You were alone with him. You had plenty of opportunity to kill him, and a wrench that the killer probably used was right here, where you could put your hand on it in the dark. You knew he was up on

deck, in the dark, waiting for you to bring up those wire-mending tools. You could have gotten those tools, all right, and then reached for the big wrench. You could have—"

"Listen!" the deck hand broke in, "I'm not getting framed for this! I didn't do it, I tell you!"

"Who did?" I snapped.

"I—I don't know."

"You made the phone call to Headquarters, didn't you?" I rapped out. "You slipped into the locker room at the Club and called Homicide."

"I—yes," said Jupiter Crasby.

"Why?" I asked. "Why did you do that?"

"Because—because I was scared, that's why," the deck hand faltered. "I was plenty scared. I thought—maybe—well, I wanted the cops on this job, that's all. I was afraid there was going to be another accident and this time it might happen to me."

"You'd better talk, Crasby," I told him. "You know who did the killing and you're afraid the killer knows you know. The only way we can protect you now is to get the name of the person who knocked off Lance Hall!"

HE STOOD there, breathing heavily, perspiration running down his face. If he had ever entertained any ideas about a spot of blackmail after he got over his initial scare, I think he was losing them now.

"You can burn only once," I reminded Crasby. "The killer won't get anything worse by knocking you off, too."

"Okay," Crasby said, hoarsely. "Okay, I'll tell you. It was—"

That's when the light in the companionway behind us went out. It worked on a switch at the head of the ladder and this far down in the boat, with no portholes, it left the space as black as night when it went off.

There were two streaking flares of bright light at the head of the companionway and I could hear the slugs smack into the big body of the man beside me. He gave a grunt and turned toward me, clawing blindly, then dragged me down to the floor with him. Tangled in his arms, I didn't have a chance to even get my gun out before running feet on the deck above us told me the killer had gotten away.

I shoved Crasby away, got to my feet and scrambled up the companionway to the corridor. There was nobody in sight, but I could hear loud voices forward, coming closer.

The first one to appear was Griff Benson, with his wife just behind him, looking wide-eyed past his arm. Then came Captain Allen, Thyra Madison and, last of all, the secretary, Ann Turgeon.

"What happened?" Griff yelled. "We heard shots."

I didn't say anything. I turned back and snapped on the light switch to the locker compartment below. When I got down to Crasby's side again, I knew he would never tell me who had killed Lance Hall. Not in this world, he wouldn't. A big target like Jupiter Crasby would be easy to hit, even for an amateur gunsel.

Yes sir, Crasby had made a big target. Lance Hall had made somebody a big target, too.

And I was due to catch merry hell from the Captain, the Commissioner and about everybody else at Headquarters, I knew. The tops don't like to have witnesses knocked off that way, especially when said witnesses are standing next to Detective Sergeants who should be protecting them.

There was a lot of commotion, of course. Thyra Madison had hysterics. Alice Benson began doing a little screaming of her own when she looked down the companionway and saw Crasby's body. Griff Benson tried to comfort his wife, but I

was aware again of that strangeness between the two. Captain Allen began asking a lot of questions until I shut him up, but brusquely. I was sore, mad as a smoked hornet. I'd been made a monkey of by a killer I had right under my nose. Whoever knocked off Lance Hall had killed Jupiter Crasby and whoever that was was right on the yacht *Serpentine*.

The boat was crowded with cops after that, all hunting for the gun. It was a diver for the harbor police who finally found it close to the side of the yacht, and it didn't do us any good at all. The serial numbers were filed away and there were no prints, of course. Later, the lab might bring out those serial numbers, but it was an old gun that looked as though it had changed hands plenty without benefit of registration. I didn't put much faith in the gun.

We had a pretty complete dossier on everybody aboard the *Serpentine* by that time. Griff Benson's folder surprised me when I found it contained the notation that Griff wasn't as heavy with money as I'd always thought him. He had plenty, it seemed, but it was all tied up in half a dozen different things that left him with only a small income. And Griff had borrowed heavily from Lance, both with and without collateral. They might have been the best of friends, but word had it that Lance nagged Griff recently for a return of some of that moolah.

Alice Benson had been one of the also-rans in the Lance Hall Matrimonial Sweepstakes before she married Griff. Some of Alice's "dear friends" had volunteered the information that Alice never had been out of love with Lance, and that she'd married Griff on the rebound from Lance's jilting. They said she had embarrassed Lance on more than one occasion by making it pretty obvious that whereas she wouldn't dream of cheating at

bridge, she might have a broader view of cheating in other directions.

Thyra Madison had come out of California some five years before. There wasn't much known about her except that she was beautiful, well-bred and well-liked by everybody who knew her. She and Lance had been very much in love. . . And, it developed, she wouldn't get a nickel's worth of Lance Hall's insurance!

There had been no quarrel between Lance and his fiancée during the trip that ended in murder. Thyra obviously knew how to handle the big man perfectly, toning down his fits of temper, acting as a buffer between his blunt ways and the sensitivities of those about him. And, if it meant anything, Thyra claimed to be a descendant of President Madison, which must have set all right with Lance, him being such a stickler for family.

Ann Turgeon admitted, tacitly, that she'd been in love with her boss, Hall, for years. She denied, however, that she'd ever entertained any hopes of marrying him and insisted that their relations had been purely Platonic. She kept pretty much to herself in private life, didn't have many friends and didn't go out much.

Captain Allen's record wasn't as good as it might have been. He'd lost a couple of good jobs through drinking and he'd wrecked one yacht in the Great Lakes while he was stiff, nearly losing his ticket on that account. He swore Lance knew about his record before hiring him and insisted, also, that he was off the booze and had been for several years. He was quitting Lance, he said, because Hall was too tough a man to work for, and because he had a better offer.

There wasn't much we could find out about Jupiter Crasby. The fellow was a floater. He'd worked mostly on the water but he'd also been a miner of sorts, a gandy dancer and a taxi driver. He'd served a stretch in California when he was picked up

in a raid on a gambling barge where he was working as a strongarm man.

“AND there you are,” grunted Captain Logan of Homicide, when we went over the records. “You’ve got plenty of motives. Alice Benson—woman scorned. Griff Benson—dough, plus Hall’s pressure for repayment of the loan, plus the fact that he might have found out there was something going on between his wife and Lance. Miss Madison—I don’t see anything there, unless she thought she’d get that insurance money. Lance might have told her he was changing his policies and put it off. I don’t give that much weight, though. Why kill a guy when you can marry into the money in a couple of weeks and get it legal?”

“Allen,” somebody put in, “could be lying about Lance knowing about his record. Allen could have been scared that Hall would ruin whatever new reputation he had built up and put him back on the beach.”

“Could be,” Logan nodded, “but it’s weak. And as for Crasby—if that dope had just told us right off, he might be alive today and this thing would be all cleared up.”

I sat there, listening with half an ear, bothered by a couple of things that were buzzing through my brain. I couldn’t get them clear in my mind and somehow, they were awfully important. Something to do with tennis shoes and a pair of wide shoulders. And California.

Ever have a name on the tip of your tongue and can’t quite get it? That was the way it was with me and these ideas. I’d almost have something and then the thought would skip away and I’d have to start my brain crawling after it again.

“They were both big targets,” I said out loud. The other men in the room looked at me as though I’d gone nuts.

But I had it then, or a fingernail grip on it, anyway. I started to feel excitement rising inside me.

“Sure,” I said. “They were both big targets. How was Hall dressed when they picked him up? Tennis shoes, dark trousers, white shirt. How was Crasby dressed when you saw him? Tennis shoes, dungarees—dark—and a T-shirt that was white.”

“What are you getting at?” the Captain growled.

“Listen,” I said. “Hall was bumped off on the deck of a yacht that was running through a midnight storm. He was on deck, alone, fussing with a light cable and waiting for Crasby to bring the tools up from below.”

I stood up and actually stabbed my finger at the Captain.

“How’s this for a hunch?” I asked. “The killer thought it was Crasby working on that cable!”

There were some grunts from the people around me.

“Sure,” I said. “The killer knew Hall had ordered Crasby up on deck to repair the running light cable and stowaway the sun deck furniture. The killer waited awhile after Crasby and Hall had gone above and then got that wrench, crept up on deck, saw the big target fussing with the cable and let ‘er go. Wouldn’t the killer be expected to find a deck hand, rather than the owner, up there, in the rain?”

I looked around the circle of faces. They were beginning to show some interest, and I continued.

“Two big men dressed alike, or near enough alike in that darkness—it would be a natural mistake. Crasby, remember, went below for the tools and passed the master’s suite on his way to the tool locker. The killer caught a glimpse of Crasby, took him for Hall going to his rooms, and made for the deck and what was supposed to be Crasby. After the wrench landed, it was too

late. The killer couldn’t tell everybody that it was all a mistake, that it was Crasby who was supposed to be killed. The killer had to get rid of Hall.”

“But who—” the Captain began.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Suppose Crasby was the one slated to be killed. Who would want to kill a deck hand and why? But our Jupiter had led a varied life. He’d been all over and he’d seen a lot. He served time in California. California! Does that ring a bell?”

“Miss Madison hails from California,” somebody said, “but what does that prove?”

“Miss Madison,” I said, “claims to be a descendant of a president. Lance Hall was nuts about family. He wouldn’t marry a girl without a spreading family tree, all good, without one rotten limb. Now suppose—”

“Suppose that family was the bunk,” the Captain interrupted. “Suppose Miss Madison made it up as she went along. Suppose she had a California background that wasn’t so hot. And suppose Crasby had known her, recognized her, met up with her by accident or design and put the screws to her with a little blackmail.”

“Exactly,” I said. “When Hall was killed, Crasby must have guessed that he was the one intended to go over the side. That’s why he called me at Headquarters; that and maybe with the purpose of applying a little more pressure to Thyra, getting more dough by threatening to tell the cops what he knew and what he suspected.”

I SETTLED back in my chair. I felt pretty good, for a change.

“And it was raining cats and dogs when Lance Hall was killed,” I said. “The killer couldn’t help but get wet. And only one person aboard the *Serpentine* changed her clothes during that lull in the poker party—Thyra Madison, or whatever her name is.”

“Let’s go, boys, the Captain said. . . .

Well, it turned out the way I theorized it, after Thyra finally broke down. She'd been a B-girl on the gambling barge Crasby worked on. She had another name then. She hit it lucky one night in Las Vegas and cleaned up at craps, decided to make a new start, came East, took on her new name. She was an intelligent gal and she made her way. She met Lance Hall and decided he was for her.

Then, when everything seemed to be turning out just dandy, who should show up as a deck hand for her fiancée but Jupiter Crasby. Jupiter didn't waste any time putting the bee on her for dough. He had clippings, including photographs, that would have ruined Thyra. She paid but Crasby got more and more demanding. She decided to kill him and she waited for her chance.

She heard Hall order Crasby to stow the deck furniture against the approaching storm. She waited until Crasby had done the job, then disarranged the furniture again. It was she who told Hall his orders hadn't been carried out and she watched Crasby go on deck with Hall. She saw Crasby near the master's bedroom and thought it was Hall, come below to get into something dry, leaving Crasby above. She'd already stashed the wrench, and she slipped up on deck, banged the big target across the back of the head and slid him over the rail. She said she didn't know her mistake until the last second when, horrified, she watched her fiancée, the man who spelled security for

her, plunge down into the water. Then she went below, changed into dry clothes and walked back to the saloon.

Thyra had to play out her hand, wrecked as it was. She watched Crasby like a hawk, knowing he suspected. When Crasby and I went below to the tool locker, she got her gun and followed us, crouched at the head of the companionway. She heard Crasby start to spill, snapped off the lights and shot him.

About the Bensons, Griff Benson had a suspicion that his wife was carrying on with Lance and he knew, too, that Lance didn't love Alice and never had. When Lance turned up missing, Griff was afraid Alice had something to do with his disappearance. He tried to protect her by the story of Lance drinking heavily.

By the same token, Alice knew of her husband's difficulties with Lance. She thought Griff might have had something to do with Hall going overboard, and that's why she sounded off about the yacht "rolling horribly," to make an accident more logical.

The others, Allen and Miss Turgeon, didn't have anything to do with it at all, even if they did make pretty fair suspects there for awhile.

Thyra Madison, or whatever her name really is? She's still awaiting trial. She'll probably ask for a jury trial. With that beautiful face, she just might get off with something less than first degree murder, too.