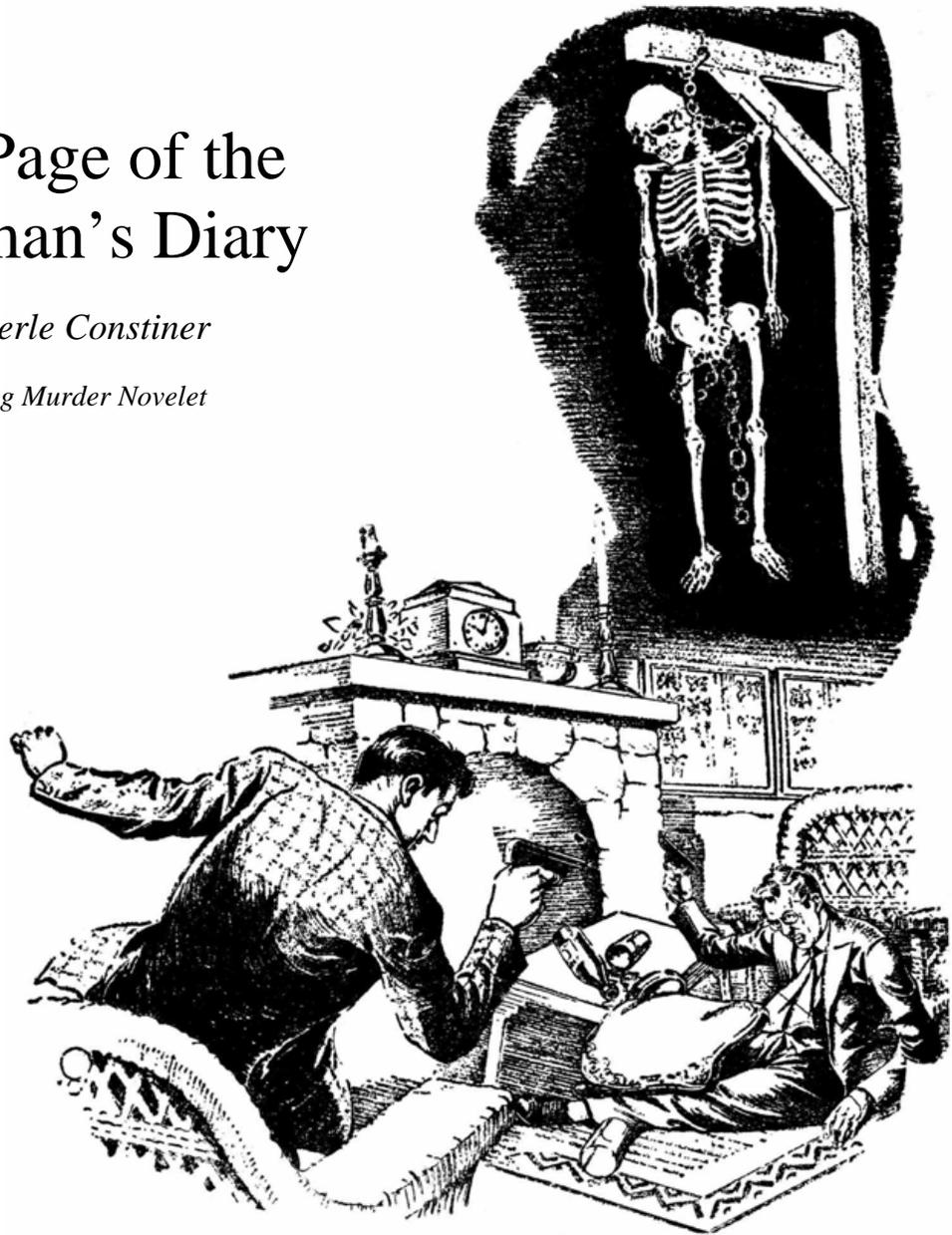


Last Page of the Hangman's Diary

By Merle Constiner

Baffling Murder Novelet



The mystery that menaced the tenants of Gaol's Crossing most was the whereabouts of the hangman's notebook. And Detective Kincaid learned too late that uncovering it might reveal that the last entry in that ancient executioner's diary might be Kincaid's death notice.

CHAPTER I

THE house was big and old. Its ancient brick was immaculately sanded in glowing coral, its pretentious bow windows glinted dully in the afternoon sun. A wreath of lilies hung on the carved oak door. The man known as Kincaid sat on the park bench and waited.

The door opened, a casket was carried out, a

few people filtered out on to the porch. The wreath was taken down. A hearse pulled slowly down the drive, followed by five sleek black cars. Each car bore a tiny flag which said *Funeral*. The procession, crawling like sick ants, rounded the corner and vanished. Kincaid crossed the street, mounted the broad stone steps and grasped the doorknob. He didn't ring, his instructions had been to enter.

He walked down the lofty hall, its carpet littered with rose petals and wisps of fern, past the baroque parlor with its mirrors and gilt, and came to the library. *First room beyond the library*, the letter had said. The library door, a steel slab painted and grained, was ajar. He hesitated, stepped inside.

The room was windowless, dark. He groped for a wall switch; finding none, he flicked on his flash. Everything seemed in order. The Severn library was monastic in its simplicity—a bare table, an easy chair, row of glassed cabinets. He returned to the corridor, proceeded until he came to a cream-colored door, and knocked.

A cagey voice called, “Come in?”

The small downstairs bedroom was pleasant and masculine. The walls were wainscoted in blue, and the rug on the floor was deep indigo. The furniture, a bed in the corner, a few chairs, a chest of drawers, was fine old early American pine, waxed and buttery yellow. The man sitting on the edge of the bed was wearing turquoise pajamas; he was middle-aged, with a mop of silky blond hair and heavy moist lips. His eyes, in their wrinkled sacs, were abnormally clear.

He said carefully, “You Kincaid?”

Kincaid nodded. The man said, “Get over here, under the light, where I can look at you.”

Kincaid didn’t move. He was tall, deep-chested, and the sleeves of his cheap basket-weave coat missed his knobby wrist bones by a short inch and a half. His linen was spotlessly clean, but there was a curl of leather sticking out from his shoe sole. His long face was lean and thoughtful, gentle yet somehow dangerously sensitive. He asked, “Mr. Julian Sherrold?”

“I am Mr. Sue Bell Sherrold,” the man remarked genially. “Mrs. Sherrold’s husband, stagnating in ease. You behold in me, sir, a man who has taken the oath to love, honor and decay.”

Kincaid said nothing. Mr. Sherrold asked arrogantly, “Just who are you? I need a good detective and you come recommended to me in a most roundabout manner. Kincaid, the anonymous paragon, the model of perfection! I write you a letter care of a chop house in an alley. What’s your name in full? What’s your background? Where’s your office?”

“I got your letter and I’m here,” Kincaid said curtly. “Don’t let my clothes fool you, my fees are high. What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to find out if a book has been

stolen. Stolen by professionals. I don’t want the book, you understand. I just want to know who ordered the job.”

“I passed a coffin coming in,” Kincaid said sociably, “Let’s hear all about that. Who died, and of what?”

MR. SHERROLD’S eyes seemed fixed. “It’s a wonderful story and I’d like to discuss it with you, but the truth of the matter is that I’m a little hazy on it at the present moment. The deceased was a wealthy old gentleman known to the last generation as Moneyback Severn. A expatent medicine king. He was my wife’s uncle and my employer. You ask what killed him. He was eighty years old. According to the doctor, he just closed up his end-gate and moved on.”

Sherrold meditated. “He lived a very moderate and successful life. Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man wealthy and stealthy and wise.”

“Are you drunk? Love, honor and decay. And now, wealthy and stealthy. Your eyes look a little brassy, too.”

Sherrold chuckled. “I’m all right. I had to see you alone and decided that now, while everyone was away to the funeral, would be the best time. I put on an act for them. Took some sleeping tablets, told them I was unwell and that they’d have to omit me from the obsequies. I’m okay now, I’m as clear as a bell. Did I tell you about—”

“Is this Mr. Severn’s house?”

“Was, yes. It was given to him by his late wife.”

“You say you were employed by him. What did you do?”

“Nothing until recently. Sue Bell was sort of a glorified housekeeper. Boyce Severn’s passion, as you know, was his book collection. When he began to fail, I moved down here and took over.” Sherrold made a little circular gesture with his thumb. “I’m not getting it across, eh? Here’s what I mean. Downstairs here I can keep an eye on the books. It’s a very valuable collection—”

“I know all about it,” Kincaid said. “So this room is a sort of sentry box to the library. The library’s down the hall. I can’t see—?”

“There are three small rooms in this suite. This bedroom, the library, and between them”—he pointed to a door in the north wall—“the bathroom. Old Boyce slept here, lived here. He could go back and forth to his books without even stepping out into the house. Did I tell you about the mourner?”

"Sure," Kincaid lied amiably. "By now it's one of my favorite stories—let's run through it again."

Sherrold nodded. "I feel that way about it, too. It fascinates me. Like I said, I was on the bed here. Outside in the parlor they were circulating around the coffin of Uncle Boyce. I'd just taken some sedatives and was half asleep, when this man was bending over me. I sat up suddenly and asked him what he wanted. He seemed quite embarrassed and mumbled so I could hardly understand him. He claimed he was a friend of the dear departed and had got lost in the house."

Sherrold scoffed. "Such a story, when I caught him red-handed. A petty thief, that's what he was. I hear they barge funerals in respectable homes and pick up what loot they can—"

"You say you caught him red-handed?"

"I did indeed. He had my fine Sheffield straight-edge razor! I made him hop into the bathroom and put it right back where he'd got it! You know what I think? I think he was bending over me to see how soundly I was asleep. I think he was planning on going over this room inch by inch and stealing everything of value. I consider myself very lucky."

Kincaid sighed. "When I came down the hall, the door to the library was open."

Sherrold looked astounded. "Why, that's impossible! There are only two keys, the bathroom and the hallway. I have them both right here." He groped under the mattress, came out with two keys on a safety pin. "See?"

Kincaid frowned. "I want you to accompany me to the library. I'll feel better if you check up before I leave. And we'll go by the bathroom. I'm curious about the layout."

Sherrold got to his feet, crossed the room, and opened the door. The bathroom was modern, shining in blue tile. Kincaid drew up, asked bewilderedly, "What in the world's this?"

There were three normal lights in the room, the overhead, and the two bracket lights by the medicine cabinet mirror. Each of these bracket lights had slots in their base, auxiliary outlets. One of them had an ordinary table lamp plugged in its auxiliary outlet. The cord ran down past the washbowl. The lamp, a large affair with a cumbersome parchment shade, was set on the tile floor.

Kincaid said enthusiastically, "Don't tell me you've been shooting dice!"

Sherrold hardly gave it a second glance. "Funny

stuff, always funny stuff. What goes on around here would drive another man crazy. Sue must have done that. Why, I haven't the slightest idea. Maybe she dropped a hairpin." He unlocked the door that faced them. "Here we are."

They stepped into the library. The panel of light from the bathroom door fell on a small cabinet of books. Sherrold strode to it, gave it a quick but thorough invoice. "This is the cream of the collection. Priceless Americana. Everything's here. *That hall door is open!* Whew!"

Kincaid asked delicately, "This book you want me to look into. Was it stolen from Mr. Severn?"

"Oh, no. And I don't want you to recover it; I have no claim to it. I just want you to find out about it."

"What's its name?"

"*Hangman's Holiday, or My American Vacation*. By Dr. Cyprien Laroue. Published in Philadelphia in 1811. Don't you think you'd better write that down?"

"Maybe I can remember it," Kincaid said gently. "One thing more, Mr. Sherrold. This man that bent over you with the razor, this muttering mourner, what did he look like?"

"He had a long thin nose and appeared very bashful."

"Could he have been sent here by anyone?" Kincaid hesitated. "Well, say, to spy on you?"

"Comes to mind, of course, my wife's brother, Millard Frey. He lives out at Rawlson Apartments. He doesn't love me any too much, but what would be the idea? And what's this got to do with Laroue?"

"Who knows?" Kincaid said piously. "Go back to bed and await the return of your funeral party. Don't go to sleep and don't worry. I'll find out about *Hangman's Holiday* for you. I guarantee it. But it'll cost you money. I don't like the way this case is starting."

THE ramshackle, rundown frame building was back of Old Market, not far from the waterfront. A borderline tenement known as Studio Flats, catering to hangers-on in the arts and crafts, to hole-in-the-wall music teachers, to frustrated painters and phony poets. It was a rat-run and a firetrap. Kincaid so disliked its denizens that he refused to enter its grimy doors unless he was more than amply remunerated.

He ascended three shallow wooden steps, came

out into the bare barn-like entrance hall; from here, minor corridors ran off into the bowels of the dank edifice, turning corners, coming to abrupt blind ends, of a half-dozen different levels.

The room was Number 12, back in a murky dog-leg, just under the ladder-like stairs that ran to the second floor. Kincaid slapped the brass knocker against its escutcheon. There were sounds within and the door opened. Kincaid said, "Greetings, Dave. I hate to admit it, but I want in."

The young man was frail, studious looking. He was wearing silver-rimmed spectacles and had a drab corduroy dressing-robe thrown about his shoulders. He said, "Hello, Kincaid," without cordiality, and stepped to one side. Kincaid entered, gazed about him with distaste.

The room, covered with straw matting, was about ten feet square. A camping cot with rumpled bedclothes was in the corner. A topcoat and hat hung from a row of hooks above an expensive traveling bag. The walls were decorated with erotic nudes.

Kincaid said absently, "So this is the kind of a den a book thief fancies. I'm not surprised. In my opinion, Dave, you boys are really the dregs, and I'm not kidding."

Dave Pelfrey said blandly, "We get along." He took off his spectacles, and his eyes suddenly lost that scholarly look, became hard, mean. He hung up his dressing-robe. Beneath it he wore a shoulder holster over his singlet.

Kincaid lowered himself to a chair. He said softly, "I do hate a sneak thief."

Pelfrey flushed. "My racket is highly skilled—and I'm as good as the best. The average public has never heard of us. It's easy pickings if you can handle yourself. Shall I tell you how it works?"

"I know in a general way. But I'm always glad to listen."

"I take swings across the country, me and my topcoat." Kincaid had heard of that topcoat; its lining was a system of intricate, concealed pockets.

Pelfrey smirked, "I take swings across the country from coast to coast. I have a list of good, and I mean really good, stuff to pick up. My list tells me where to get it. Private libraries, university libraries and so on. Every town I stop, I raid the bookstores for current junk which I unload at the next burg. That pays my expenses, it's bread and butter stuff. The big money is in the collector's items. I cleared six thousand dollars my last trip.

That's an indication of how it pays."

"What do you steal? First editions of Poe and that sort of thing?"

"That's what the layman thinks. That junk's poison. Mainly we pick up things you wouldn't think were worth a dime, early American printings. Stuff with goofy titles like *Captain Digby's Explorations of the Tombigbee* or *Elizabeth Whoziz' Seven Years Captivity Among the Shawnees of Meggs County*. That stuff is worth its weight in gold."

"Pretty risky at that, though," Kincaid objected. "Say you come back with a satchelful. How do you know you're going to be able to market it?"

"I work on straight commission. The stuff is sold before it's hooked. Crooked dealers put the items in their catalogue, even when they haven't them in stock. When orders come in, say from libraries or private collectors, then I get to work. It's foolproof." Pelfrey gave an ugly grin.

Kincaid asked placidly, "Why do you tell me all this?"

"I haven't told you anything. I just like to talk shop."

"O KAY then. Here's a question for you. Dave Pelfrey, you're an illiterate gamin. I bet you never read a book in your life. Someone who knows the game makes out a list, tells you what items are in what libraries in what towns. Who's the brains behind a rat like you?"

"Now," Pelfrey said icily, "you're getting nosy. Like I said, it's crooked dealers. I take order for lots of 'em. From the West Coast to the Battery." He went definitely hostile. "What brings you here, Kincaid? What you want with me, anyway? I haven't crossed you, have I?"

"No, and I don't want you to. I'm on the track of a book, Dave. I don't want this book, you understand. I just want to know who stole it from where, who ordered the job done, and where the volume is now. Do you care to go along with me on it? There's no honorarium in it for you. I just thought you might like to give with the information." Kincaid inspected his fingernails.

Pelfrey paused. "You don't scare me a bit, Kincaid. I think your rep is built on bluff."

Kincaid wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, said, "Wow, it's hot. I'm played out. This detective business is too much work. I often wonder how I—"

Pelfrey said elaborately, "I don't mean I won't cooperate, of course. What book were you inquiring about?"

"*Hangman's Holiday, or My American Vacation*. By a Dr. Laroue. Philly, 1811."

Pelfrey froze. "That's one baby I can't discuss. This I will say in confidence, holding you to your promise not to prosecute. It came from Mobile, from a private home, and was a burglary job at that end. It's here in town, under lock and key. I can't divulge who has it. The book's quite valuable, there aren't many copies extant."

"You steal it?"

"Oh, sure. But I'll deny it."

Kincaid stood up. "I'll be getting along. By the way, did you know you're involved in a murder case? I have no proof, not one shred of evidence, but I've a pretty strong hunch. I've a growing conviction that Boyce Severn was killed."

Pelfrey gave his chin a single quick shake. "Not me."

"I didn't say you were an accessory; I said you were involved. I'd use the word 'innocently'—but somehow it gags me."

"Never heard of any Boyce Severn."

"Oh, come now, Dave. A man in your line of work? Uncle Boyce is the lad who got together the famous Severn Collection!" Kincaid walked to the door.

Pelfrey said doggedly, "I tell you I never heard of him."

CHAPTER II

FROM a booth in a nearby drugstore, Kincaid called the Severn house. By now, he figured, the funeral party should have returned. A rather strident, dominating female voice answered.

"Mrs. Sherrold?" he asked. The voice said, "Yes?"

"This is Attorney Robertson," Kincaid said curtly. "A slight difficulty seems to have arisen over the will. Would you have dinner with me at Charlie Beggs' Chop House, in St. George Court? I feel we'd better straighten—"

"But the will was read, right here, not an hour ago. Uncle Boyce's estate goes half to me and half to Millard Frey. It wasn't quite as large as we expected but— All right, I'll come. Shall I bring my husband?"

"If you like. However, ahem, on the other

hand—"

There was a pause. She said, "I see, I'll be there alone. Julian's had a hard day, no need to disturb him—"

Kincaid hung up.

The Rawlson Apartments were out in the suburbs, in a neighborhood of landscaped terraces, of conical evergreens and broad velvet lawns. The building was small, snooty looking, in collegiate Gothic with keystone windows and entranceways.

As Kincaid passed through the foyer, he had the sensation that he was on his way to class and wished he had his lesson prepared a little better. On a battery of mailboxes he saw the name, *Millard Frey, 2-K*. He took the automatic elevator to the second floor.

2-K was at the end of the corridor. He rapped lightly with the tips of his fingers. His summons was answered immediately.

Mr. Frey was a small man in banker's grey with highly polished shoes and carefully manicured hands. His hair was thin. In recompense he'd spent a great deal of loving attention to his mustache, which lay *couchant* on his shelving upper lip, waxed and curled, like a pair of furry snails.

He studied his guest a moment, his eyes veiled in concentration; finally, he said, "This is a pleasure! Come in, Kincaid."

Kincaid entered. He said, "You know me?"

Mr. Millard Frey smiled. "Your picture was in the paper a year or so ago, in connection with the Chacey case. I rarely forget a face."

"A number-one boner," Kincaid said. "I knew I'd regret it."

Books were everywhere. In rows along the baseboard, stacked on tables and on chair seats, piled beneath the rose plush settee. And all of them musty and old. Frey cleared a place for his visitor, seated himself vis-à-vis. He picked up a meerschaum pipe, got it going, said comfortably:

"I wonder what brings you here? They tell me you're top-notch in your line. Crime is one of the many things I know absolutely nothing about. How can I be of service?"

"I'm on the trail of a book," Kincaid declared gravely. "I'm retained by a party down in Mobile, where it was stolen, to recover it. Burglary of a private home was committed. We want not only the book, but the thief."

"I shall certainly assist you to the best of my ability, sir." Frey looked angry. "I'm a private

collector, in a small way of course, and book thieves are the bane of our existence. We buy from dealers whom we consider reputable, but we never actually know whether we hold deed to our purchases. Rare books are not labeled, of course, but they have secret marks here and there on their pages. Thus the owner can identify them instantly.

“A collector, such as myself, never knows when a book detective—you likely didn’t know there was such a specialized field, but there is—when a detective will walk in and take away his prize item. A friend of mine had a beautiful old Thirteenth Century song book, bound in bull-hide, with brass knobs on the cover to keep it out of spilt wine, and a detective—”

“The volume I’m interested in is Early American—”

“Americana is out of my field. I’m mainly occupied with medieval printings, incunabula.”

“This *Hangman’s Holiday, or My American Vacation*, was written by a guy named Laroue and published in Philadelphia in 1811. I hoped maybe you’d recall it.”

MR. FREY beamed. “Well, you’re in luck. It just so happens that I’m familiar with *Hangman’s Holiday* through hearsay. It’s quite a curiosity. Back at the turn of the Eighteenth Century a Frenchman named Dr. Laroue, a professional executioner on the continent, paid a visit to this country. Law and order was rather wild and woolly here in those days and this interested Laroue. On his travels, he made a study of gallows and gibbets. I understand it’s a grisly document. I wouldn’t want it around.”

Kincaid rubbed the back of his large hand, said, “Bless my heart,” absently, and, “Think of that!” After a moment, he asked, “How did you happen to—?”

“Boyce Severn was telling me about it before his death. He’d seen Laroue’s work years ago out in Colorado. After he’d moved to town he got quite a kick out of discussing it. He wanted a copy badly, but there was no copy to be had. You’ve heard about Gaol’s Crossing, haven’t you?”

Kincaid said nothing.

“Boyce Severn inherited that old brick house from his wife who died eight years ago. Back in the Eighteenth Century, before the town was built up all around it, it was a rural jail—and known as Gaol’s Crossing. It had a public gallows and was

one of the places visited by Dr. Laroue. Boyce wanted the book; he was a great antiquarian.”

“What became of the old jail, the original building?”

“It’s an interesting story. I understand that the present house was added to it, in fits and starts, over a great many years. When the construction ceased, about five decades ago, the house stood practically as it is today, with the old jail as a wing on the south—”

“Why do you say practically?”

“Because the wing is now on the north. About eight years ago the old jail burned. It was said to be haunted. No one liked it anyhow. So the wing was rebuilt of new material, around on the opposite side of the house.” Frey looked slightly envious.

“That’s a little suite now, the north wing. It was built for Boyce Severn. It has a fireproof, burglarproof library, and a bedroom-bathroom adjoining.”

Kincaid said sympathetically, “I was sorry to learn of Mr. Severn’s death. Was it a blow to you?”

Frey smiled sardonically. “Yes. It was a blow to me, but not the way you mean. He was a difficult man to get along with. Contrary to general opinion, it turns out he left a rather meager estate. The old house and a few thousand dollars. Fortunately, neither Mrs. Sherrold nor I need money.”

“But he had a fortune? Where did it go?”

“Books. Books, sir, can be a gentleman’s pastime, or a vicious vice. Uncle Boyce squandered his fortune, threw it down the sewer!”

Neither spoke for a moment. At last Mr. Millard Frey arched his eyebrows. Choosing his words carefully, he said, “Now, don’t go up into the air if I’m wrong; permit me to indulge in a little harmless speculation. Be honest, wasn’t *Hangman’s Holiday* just a blind? Aren’t you actually retained for some other reason—and by none other than Boyce Severn himself!”

“But Severn,” Kincaid answered cautiously, “is dead and buried.”

“How well I know it; I was at his funeral this afternoon. Let’s put it this way. Before Uncle Boyce died, he retained you. Even though he’s dead, you’re going through with the case.”

Kincaid looked guilty. “What case? How did you know—?”

“I’m glad you’re being frank with me.” Frey looked foxy. “It’s quite an enigma, isn’t it?”

Kincaid averted his eyes. Mr. Frey seized his

advantage. "I ran into it quite by mistake. About a month ago I was out to the Severn house, at Uncle Boyce's invitation, to look at his collection. He had me for supper periodically, you know. As I left to go home he wrote down the name of his favorite dealer in New Orleans, on a scrap of paper from his vest.

"When I returned to my apartment, I happened to notice in perusing it that there was another note scrawled on the reverse, in Uncle Boyce's copperplate script. Here, I'll get it."

He opened a table drawer, handed Kincaid a dirty triangle of worn paper. Frey said urgently, "Look at that!" Kincaid read:

Investigate Dog's-Tooth Bond. Hire detective if necess'ry. Don't delay.

"What's a dog's-tooth bond?" Frey asked. "I thought it might be a legal term and called my lawyer; he'd never heard of it. Uncle Boyce was proverbially stingy. Why would he pay money to hire you to investigate—?"

Kincaid was silent. Beyond the window, in the west, the sun was setting behind a mass of fleshy clouds. An oblong of watery, cherry-red light edged across his shirtfront, brought out the gentle, sad lines of his long thoughtful face. He said, "I'll be seeing you. I've got a dinner date."

KINCAID descended the eight steps to the entranceway below the street, pushed open the door to Beggs' Chop House. It was early for the rush hour and the place was nearly empty. The room was narrow and gloomy, with squared beams overhead, and a row of booths along the far wall. The napery and silverware were grade-A.

A cherubic little man in a white apron was leaning across a short counter by the door, his arms folded affectionately around the cash register. Kincaid said, "Anything new, Charlie?"

The cherubic little man lowered his voice. "There's a dame, boss, asking for you. She's in the last booth. Yippee!"

Kincaid said coldly, "We'll dispense with the yippee, Mr. Beggs. Just drag a couple of steaks over the charcoal, mix up a bit of green salad, and so forth. This is business."

Sue Bell Sherrold was a slender, rather pretty brunette in her middle thirties. She was expensively, almost coquettishly dressed. Yet when

Kincaid slid into the seat across from her she looked at him, not as an average female observes a strange man, but as a veteran gambler peeps at an opponent's cards.

She asked curiously, "Are you Mr. Robertson, the attorney?" Her strident, dominating voice indirectly reminded him of his frayed coat sleeves.

He said, "I'm Kincaid, a detective. That Robertson gag was to get you to talk to me—"

Before he had finished his sentence, she'd picked up her purse and put on one glove. He said hurriedly, "If you leave, you'll regret it." She relaxed.

He met her eyes squarely. "Did you kill your Uncle Boyce?"

It didn't faze her. She said, "Why should I? I have about eighty thousand dollars left to me by my aunt. My husband and I did the old man's banking toward the end. We knew he wouldn't leave much. He left about thirty thousand cash, by the way. We were all familiar with the will, half to Millard Frey, half to me. I wouldn't commit murder for fifteen thousand dollars."

Kincaid said, "Under the law a killer can't inherit from his victim. Say this Millard Frey didn't know the state of Severn's affairs and took a chance. If you could prove that, then you'd get the whole business, the whole thirty thousand."

Sue was way ahead of him. She said brassily, "I agree with you that Uncle Boyce was done away with. I think he was given a heart depressant. As a matter of fact, I found a cardboard box of tablets on the kitchen table. I got scared and put it in the furnace."

"However, this is all between you and me. The human body is a sacred thing to me. I wouldn't permit Uncle Boyce to be exhumed until we have more evidence. I think the law would back me up in this. What makes you think Millard did it?"

"Was that what I said? I don't remember. Tell me, Mrs. Sherrold, do you know a man with a long, thin nose. A man that has a nervous way of acting sort of bashful?"

"That sounds a little like a man that occasionally sold Uncle Boyce a book. A man named Dave Pelfrey. But I don't remember him as being especially bashful. Why?"

"Just how were you related to Mr. Severn?"

Beggs brought the meal, laid it out with a flourish. He turned to Kincaid, said servilely, "You're a new customer, I see. I hope you bring

your wife in again. You're respectable folks, the kind we like to serve. Yippee!"

AFTER they were alone again, Mrs. Sherrold broke a French roll, said, "I'm not actually related to Uncle Boyce. His wife was my aunt. That's a very tragic story. Uncle Boyce came from out on the West Coast. He retired about twenty years ago. He met my aunt at the home of Millard Frey when Millard was living in Florida. After a whirlwind courtship my aunt decided to marry him. They were both pretty old and didn't hit it off too well. About four years and they separated.

"She came back here and reopened Gaol's Crossing, the old family home. He moved to Denver. He made a rather handsome settlement on her when they parted. I guess they both thought they were happy. But they weren't. They still loved each other."

"How do you know?"

"She lost her life when the south wing burned a few years ago. When her will was read, we discovered that she'd left him her home. She was extremely proud of Gaol's Crossing; I wondered why she didn't leave it to me because I'm in the direct line, but I'm glad she did what she did. Uncle Boyce was completely broken up when he heard of her death—"

"How do you know?"

"I was out in Denver with him when the undertaker called him. He commissioned Julian to build a new wing, on the north, with a vault and all. When it was finished he came back here with his books and settled down." She had a way of rotating her underjaw when she spoke as though she were grinding the words with her back teeth. Sue Bell Sherrold, Kincaid decided, was a woman of will.

He remarked mildly, "The south wing burned down, and they rebuilt on the north. All right. But why? Why wasn't the south good enough? It had been good enough for a hundred and fifty years!"

She looked uncomfortable. "Now I'm just telling you what I've been told. The old jail had ghosts. There used to be a gallows by it in Colonial times. They say sometimes when you were in bed you could hear the gibbet rope squeak on the crossbeam. Personally, I'm damn glad it's gone! My aunt cherished it as traditional." Mrs. Sherrold was obviously frightened.

"The creak of a hangman's rope, eh?" Kincaid pursed his lips. "Sounds to me like a loose timber

in the wind."

"No, no! It was solidly built, and the rope was always heard best on quiet windless nights!" She faltered.

"Uncle Boyce didn't believe in the supernatural, yet one day, before he took sick, he said a strange thing. Millard Frey was over to dinner. Uncle Boyce said, 'Millard, I have a hard time sleeping at night. There's a queer creaking sound going on up in the attic, all night long!' We were all speechless!"

"Why?"

"Why? I'll tell you why! There isn't any attic over Uncle Boyce's bedroom!" She smudged on a bit of lipstick, picked up her purse. "That annex is just one story."

"Are you inferring," Kincaid asked gently, "that the gallows' ghost has moved from the old, and now nonexistent, south wing to the nice, new, Twentieth Century north wing?"

She got to her feet, smiled artificially. "Figure it out for yourself. I'm simply saying *I don't like it!*"

He paid the bill at the cash register. "You'll be home this evening? I may want to get in touch with you."

"I'll be there until nine, yes. Later, we're going over to Millard's. We're all a little confused after the funeral."

Kincaid's lined face went unbearably sympathetic. "I can imagine. You go now, I'll wait here. Perhaps we'd better not be seen together. Oh, yes. About your aunt. Who did she leave the smallest bequest to?"

"The smallest? That's an absurd question. You mean the largest?"

"I mean the smallest."

"That was left to a woman named Angela Thomas. Two thousand dollars and all of my aunt's clothes. Now don't ask me who this Angela Thomas is. When I got back to town I looked her up out of idle curiosity. I couldn't find a trace of her, she'd simply vanished."

WHEN Mrs. Sue Bell Sherrold had left the restaurant, Kincaid walked back into the kitchen, nodded vaguely to the chef, and entered a door marked *Servant's Lavatory*.

Kincaid's office was small, air-conditioned, and frugally comfortable. His lifetime hobby was caves, though he'd never been under the ground. The walls were covered with flashlight photos of

Mammoth and Carlsbad and Great Onyx. The furniture consisted of three large filing cabinets, a flat-topped cherry desk. There was only one chair, he rarely received guests. He took off his coat and tie, went to a washstand in the corner and shaved. Shaving was a nervous habit with him; on a tough case he'd shave as many as five times.

He dusted a little talcum across his throat and felt better. He sat at the desk and picked up the telephone. After a moment he got his connection, said, "This you, Mr. Sherrold? This is Kincaid. I'm beginning to get a little stuff together and I'd like to make a report. I got some business on my mind, too, that I'd like to get cleared up.

"Meet me in an hour and a half on the mezzanine of the Hobart, that's a bachelor's hotel on Canal. No, that's not where I live, that's just where I want you to meet me. Where am I calling from? I'm calling from a Chinese grocery. I just stopped in for a pint of bean sprouts. 'Bye."

He picked up the telephone book, glanced through the *T*'s, turned back to the *A*'s. There it was:

Angelica Thomas Mrs. r 746 Redwood . . . Kirby-6304

Angela Thomas had gone into hiding. She was now Mrs. Thomas Angelica.

CHAPTER III

REDWOOD was a short two-block street in a modest residential section. It fitted like an I-beam between a deserted playground and a barren vacant lot. The young maples in the strip along the sidewalk were barely chest high, and the cheap pavement was already cracked and grass-grown. The double row of bungalows were all more or less of the same pattern. Despite the atmosphere of nonentity the crescent moon with its evening star made it a pleasantly lethargic scene.

Kincaid ascended the cement steps to the porch of 746 and pushed the buzzer.

The door opened. The woman that confronted Kincaid was possibly sixty-five. Her flat face was unfriendly, distrustful. She wore a soiled pink negligee trimmed with seedy monkey fur. Kincaid asked courteously, "You Angela Thomas?"

The cords of her throat tightened. She blustered. "I'm Mrs. Thomas Angelica. I never heard of that

other person. I can show it to you in the phone book. You get off that porch and leave me alone, or I'll call the police!"

"Fine!" He agreed somberly. "I'll just sit here on the step and wait." Before she could answer, he added significantly. "Maybe for eight years you've been expecting me. I'm the man from the Golden Eagle Insurance Company. Why didn't you turn in that policy? It won't do you any good, you know."

She was completely muddled. "What policy? I don't know what—"

He laughed scornfully. "When the old lady died eight years ago and left you that two thousand dollars and her clothes. The clothes are yours, and so is the money. The policy, however, appears to be missing. You must have it. It must be among her effects."

She took a deep breath, came to a decision. "Step into the parlor. We'll talk this over. There's a mistake somewhere."

Seated in a rickety platform rocker, beneath a heavily betasseled bridge lamp, Kincaid folded his strong fingers about his kneecap, waited in ominous silence.

Angela Thomas tucked her negligee decorously about her shanks. "I'm an honest, hard-working woman. I never had any trouble with the law in my life."

"But you're living under an assumed name."

"That's my affair." She fastened her gaze unseeingly on a plaster Scotty with a big blue bow about its neck. "The lady you're referring to is the late Mrs. Jennie Severn. I was her maid for a good long time. When she married that old grouch, I left her. Nobody could get along with Old Boyce Severn. I thought Mrs. Jennie had forgot me, but when she died, she left me a nice little nest egg and all of her garments. What is this about an insurance policy?"

"There appears to be a small one missing. It hasn't been turned in. Mrs. Sue Sherrold feels that it might have got into those garments you received. By the way, the Sherrolds and Mr. Frey mean no offense; they have only the greatest affection for you."

"Affection, hah! I've never laid eyes on any of them." She grinned, showing a glistening set of false teeth and plastic upper-gum. "Why did they pick on me? I don't want nothing to do with any of them. Why didn't they look out at the lodge? If she had anything to hide, that's where she would hide

it. It was a kind of sanctum of hers, you might say.”

Kincaid said with great condescension. “Mrs. Jennie had no lodge, as far as I’ve ever heard.”

“The hell she didn’t,” Miss Angela blushed, added, “as the saying goes. She was a rapturous stoddent of wildlife, Mrs. Jennie was. She had a little cabin just east of town at Pigeon Swamp. She’d take her bird books and her flower books and go out there to wear off her hangovers.

“She was a funny one. She’d write poems about butterflies and frogs and things and send ‘em into children’s magazines, lyin’ about her age, just to get them printed. I’ve seen many a one: *The Dance of the Bunny Rabbits*, by Jennie Jackson Severn, aged 8. Bless her sweet heart!”

“How do I find this place?”

“It’s at your left, beyond the second bend in the road. There used to be at sign there: *Jennie Wren’s Jungle*.”

Kincaid flinched. “Bless her sweet heart, aged 8! Well, Miss Thomas, if it’s all right with you, I’ll just take a gander at those clothes and be getting along. You’ve convinced me you’re in the clear. It’s just routine. By the way, how did you like Gaol’s Crossing?”

“I never served her while she was at the old house; that was later. I was out there once, though. She took me out to hear the ghost. Br-r-r!” Angela Thomas arose.

“I’ve wore out most of the clothes. They was a few things like shoes, and some stuff I didn’t care for, though, that I left untouched. It’s in a trunk in my bedroom closet. Excuse me a minute, while I throw some things out of sight—I wasn’t expecting a gennulman caller.”

She disappeared through a doorway.

KINCAID picked up the telephone from the table, called a number. In a soft voice, he said, “Mr. Millard Frey? Kincaid speaking. I wonder if you’ll grab your hat and meet me at 746 Redwood. Right this minute. Believe me, it’s important. What? Guests at nine o’clock. You can be back in time if you snap it up.” He slipped the receiver into its bracket, sat back in his chair.

The house was tomb silent.

He waited three long minutes and went into the bedroom.

Angela Thomas lay sprawled on a hooked rug at the foot of her diminutive bed. Her shoulders were contorted and her flat face was discolored. Kincaid

bent over her. She was dead.

The casement windows looking out into the side yard were open.

It was the room of an elderly spinster, full of fripperies and frills; there was a rag doll on the pillow, ruffles on the curtains, lace and ribbons everywhere. Kincaid went to the closet, pulled a battered steamer trunk out into the center of the floor.

The top compartment revealed a dozen pairs of Mrs. Jennie’s shoes—everything from satin slippers to low-heeled walking boots. Kincaid lifted out the tray. Here in the lower section was a feminine hunting outfit complete, pleated moleskin skirt, flannel shirt, sheepskin jacket. Here, too, in its canvas case, was a small-bore shotgun.

Piece by piece, Kincaid examined the garments. He made a find in the pocket of the flannel shirt, a sheet of folded paper. He flattened it out, read:

Dear Mrs. Severn:

I’m sticking this in your mailbox hoping you’ll take it to heart and change your ways. Some of us country neighbors of yours are plenty tired about the reckless way you cut loose with that shotgun all day long. You just missed my little boy yesterday when he was coming home from school. Why don’t you stay out of the swamp? You kill game that poor folks need. Why don’t you stay in town where you belong?

A FRIEND

Kincaid put the paper in his billfold, replaced the trunk in the closet, and returned to the front room.

He was back in his platform rocker, deep in thought, when the buzzer sounded. He got laboriously to his feet, went to the front door, and let in Mr. Millard Frey.

MR. FREY, when he had seen the corpse, exhibited characteristics which bordered on hysteria. He went completely to pieces. First, he wanted to bolt, then he wanted to phone the police. His final wild suggestion was that they call the newspapers.

“Publicity is what we need,” he stammered excitedly. “That’ll show we’re guiltless! It’s the only thing that will vindicate us. Oh, why on earth did you lure me here?”

“There’ll be plenty of publicity,” Kincaid explained dryly. “But it can wait. Like I keep telling you, there wasn’t any murder when I phoned

you. I brought you here to identify this woman. And I guess you can do it as well when she's dead. She told me that she was Mrs. Severn's maid while she was still Miss Jennie Jackson. She attended her when she was in Florida. Now your sister, Mrs. Sherrold, claims that Miss Jennie met Mr. Boyce at your home down there. Is this woman on the floor Mrs. Severn's maid?"

Frey was regaining his aplomb. "Possibly. I couldn't say. Miss Jackson was at my home for dinner. In Florida guests rarely bring their own maids. I never saw this woman before."

"Could your sister identify her? Was your sister there with you?"

"She was living in the same town, yes. But she and Julian had a residence of their own. It's nicer that way." He smiled. "I don't know whether she was ever a visitor at Miss Jennie's hotel or not. You'd better ask her."

"There's not much love lost between you two, is there?"

Millard Frey didn't answer. He appeared to be meditating. "I'm going to tell you something, something that's been bothering me for eight years. Now I'm no detective and know absolutely nothing about crime, but I am interested in abstract problems. I was never too satisfied with conditions surrounding Aunt Jennie's death—"

"Now it's Aunt Jennie!"

"She was our aunt. She left us money. We were never intimate with her." He looked nettled. "As I was remarking, there was something evanescent about her passing. I'm down in Florida; a lawyer contacts me and says I've been left a bit of money. I came up here. My aunt was killed in a fire, I hear. I go out to the cemetery and see her tombstone. But she left money to a maid. Where is that maid? No one seems to know. Gradually I found myself wrapped in a fantastic obsession, Kincaid. Do you know what it was?"

"Nope. What?"

"My aunt, they claimed, was burned—and the maid was missing. Was there, I asked myself, a substitution of bodies? Was it the maid who was burned and buried; had Aunt Jennie simply scrambled? She was always eccentric. What do you think of that theory?"

"I think it's hogwash." Kincaid sounded angry. "This is the maid, right here. Take my word for it. Your Aunt Jennie is dead. Buried in the family cemetery plot as is proper and befitting."

Mr. Frey showed signs of physical relief. "I hope you're right. For eight years I've been afraid that Aunt Jennie would wander in one day, claim she'd had a touch of amnesia, and take away my inheritance! Let me tell you, it's been a strain."

Kincaid asked, "This afternoon, at the Severn house, when the obsequies were going on, did you notice a stranger? A bashful guy with a thin nose?"

Frey's little mustache wavered in doubt. "There were several strangers there. And several thin noses. I want to get out of here. Dead people make me nervous."

"Maybe I'm an ignorant guy," Kincaid said with no particular sincerity, "but comes to my inward eye, as the poet sayeth, that living room of yours with those old books scattered around, stacked all over the place sixteen ways to Christmas. It strikes me that's a hell of a way to treasure a valuable collection. It looks more like the cataloging office of, say, a dealer. Do you sell?"

"Oh, sometimes I swap a little on the side, or maybe unload a volume or two if I can do so at an attractive profit, but my real interest is in ownership. I know my quarters look mussy but I don't mind. In fact I enjoy the atmosphere."

"Did you ever hear of a guy named Dave Pelfrey?"

Frey grimaced. "I certainly have. He's well-known to the trade. We're all in constant terror of him. I wish he were behind bars."

Kincaid nodded moodily. He said, "Let's be going." He walked to the front door like a great cat, light footed, but awkward, lumbering shoulders. Outside, he laid down final instructions.

"Stop in a phone booth and report a body at Seven Forty-six Redwood. Don't give your name, disguise your voice. Then go home and sit on a Gutenberg Donatus and wait for your guests. I may get in touch with you later on."

IT WAS twenty minutes past eight when Kincaid returned to the Severn house. There was a light burning in the downstairs hall, and another in an upstairs bedroom. This was the way he'd planned it. Frey was in transit on the way back to his apartment, Julian Sherrold was at the Hobart. That left Mrs. Sue Sherrold. Kincaid liked to deal with Mrs. Sherrold. She was plastic, so guilelessly grasping, so earnestly mercenary.

He stood in the penumbra of the park and studied the old building with brooding eyes. Its

stark hulk, indistinct in the night, was stem and menacing. He crossed the street and made his way to the south side of the building, keeping well back from the nimbus of light. There was no vestige of the old jail, grass had been planted, the old brick had been neatly sanded to remove the scars of smoke and fire.

He circled the house to the rear, came to the annex on the north. The north wing was of new brick, harsh and yellow in the beam of his flashlight. It was a graceless-looking addition, rectangular, one story high—serviceable rather than decorative.

He made his way to the porch, rang the bell. After an interval, Mrs. Sherrold admitted him. She said, "I haven't anything more to say to you."

"I know. I want to talk to your husband."

"Julian isn't here."

Kincaid said, exasperated, "Is that so? Then I guess I'll have to wait."

They stood a few feet beyond the threshold, in the hallway. She was dressed in a trim green frock, as icy green as summer lightning through a willow. In the soft pooled light of the waxed walnut woodwork she looked ten years younger. She leaned against the ramshorn of the newelpost, indolently, but in such a way that she blocked his further entry.

"Julian is meeting someone at the Hobart. He says it's a bachelor's hotel. I wonder?"

"I wouldn't know, I never heard of it." Kincaid gazed down on her with hooded eyes. "How about letting me in? I want to take a look through your home."

She laughed coldly. "What an attractive picture. Fat chance! Who are you, Kincaid, anyway? And who are you working for?"

"Take this house," he said apropos of nothing. "Your uncle left it to you. Are you going to live here, or are you intending to sell it?"

She liked to talk money. She said, "Millard and I have decided to put it on the market. It's too large for Julian and I and—"

"This house has a ghost. Ghosts drag down the sales price. Let me in, let me look around and I guarantee to exorcise the flibbertigibbet of Gaol's Crossing. What do you say?"

Her face was expressionless. She stepped to one side. "It's a deal. Come in."

He started up the stairs. She looked startled. "Where are you going? The ghost is in—"

"I know. But I'm going to turn this place inside out, from the attic down!"

THE three rooms in the attic were completely bare, an old-time ballroom and two cubicles which had once been servants' quarters. There were four bedrooms on the second floor, each with bath. On the left, at the front, was Mrs. Sherrold's room, across from it, her husband's.

"He hasn't used it," she explained. "Since he's been sleeping downstairs."

Next in line were two long vacant bedrooms, their furniture covered with dust-cloth coverings. At the end of the hall, by the back stairwell, was a massive, worm-eaten door. "Uncle Boyce's," Mrs. Sherrold said. They entered.

Kincaid switched on the ceiling light.

Musty and dank, fetid with stale air, the place was more grotto than room. Beyond grimy windows, heavy shutters, sagging on their hinges, had long barred daylight. There was an enormous bed with a crazy quilt, a number of assorted chairs, each broken or damaged in some minor detail, a desk with an antique typewriter.

Kincaid said rudely, "You must have loved the old man. It looks to me like you shoved him into the family storeroom."

"This is the room he chose," Mrs. Sherrold said stridently. "We attempted to talk him out of it, but here is where he wanted to be."

"Just what happened?"

"At first he had that little suite downstairs with his books. Then, after he began to get ill, he asked to be moved up here. He put Julian downstairs where he could keep an eye on the collection."

"How long was he here before he died?"

"About two weeks."

"Was he pretty sick?"

She ran her finger absently along the bedpost, picked up a smear of dust, made a moue of distaste. "Yes, he was quite ill. That's why he was unable to tell us about the prowler. Sometimes in the dead of night we'd hear that old typewriter of Uncle Boyce's hammering away. We'd come back and investigate, but the intruder always got away. There would be the typewriter and there would be Uncle Boyce in a semi-coma on the bed."

"You questioned the old man, but he couldn't give intelligible answers?"

"Exactly."

Kincaid strolled to the desk. Beside the

typewriter was a stack of white cards, about five by seven inches, of the sort used in index files. Two of them had been filled out; the first read:

DIGBY, CAPTAIN HUGH. *Explorations of the Tombigbee.* Mobile, privately printed, 1803. Orig. wraps. 80pp.

The second said:

FOXX, WM. *Elizabeth Huggins' Seven Years' Captivity Among the Shawnees of Meggs County.* Cincinnati, 1829.

Kincaid smiled slowly. "All right. Now we'll go down to the ghost."

In the vaulted hallway of the ground floor, he devoted his interest to the north wing. He tried the great steel door to the library. Mrs. Sherrold gave an embarrassed laugh. "It's locked. We turned the keys over to the administrator this afternoon, after the funeral. You know, after the will was read. They said it was customary."

"Who is the administrator?"

"Uncle Boyce's bank."

"Is the other door locked? The door through the bathroom?"

"Of course."

He stepped into the bedroom where he had talked with Sherrold that afternoon. She followed, closed the door behind her. Again in admiration, he glanced about him. New walls hadn't the value of mellow old ones, but the blue color scheme of the wainscoting, and the deeper indigo rug, contrasting so cheerfully with the clear yellow pine of the furniture made a gay, masculine feel to the place that struck his fancy.

He said, "I could live here and be happy. I could—"

And then it came, the creaking sound. *Tick-tick-tick-tick* . . . He counted ten of them, mathematically spaced. Faint and eerie, like a tiny distant clock. Like a wet stiff rope swinging on a rustic gallows. Ten creaks, a pause, and then it started over again. He tried to place it with his ear, but it seemed to come from nowhere.

Sue Sherrold was rigid in terror. She put her hand on his shoulder. "That's it. I never come in here. It sickens me. I can see a corpse swinging on a gibbet. I can see—"

"I've read a bit about gallows," Kincaid said

sepulchrally. "In the old days, the trick to a hanging was to have it public. It not only scared the head off incipient malefactors, but exhibited the criminal so that, as it was said, he was 'a comfortable sight to the relations and friends of the deceased!' Ah, those were the good old days!"

Tick-tick-tick.

He opened the bathroom door. The large table lamp with the parchment shade was still on the floor beneath the washbowl. He pointed to it, asked, "Mrs. Sherrold, did you connect that up in that nutty way?"

Wordlessly, she shook her head.

He sauntered back to the center of the room. Again the little creaking noises cut loose. She said desperately, "It's awful. I can't stand it!"

He ignored her show of emotion, said, "I made a bargain with you. I promised to lay your ghost. Okay, here's the letdown. That creaking sound is not the squeak of a phantom rope. It's beetles, just good old beetles. I hate to dispel the legend of Gaol's Crossing, but you're listening to *Anobium tessellatum*, little black babies maybe a quarter of an inch long."

Her eyes expressed incredulity. "I can hardly believe it. How do they do it? I mean what makes them do it?"

"You run into them now and again; they're not rare. They do it by butting their heads against hard wood. Maybe I shouldn't tell you this without a chaperon. They're in love, they think they're putting out oomph." He knocked his faded felt hat against his knee. "Anything else?"

"Not tonight," she answered frigidly. "I think that's enough for one evening, don't you? I'll show you to the door."

He bowed graciously.

CHAPTER IV

JULIAN SHERROLD was sunk in a leather chair in the mezzanine of the Hobart Hotel. He was sitting midway between the elevator and the Club Bar, engaging the scurrying help in pleasant small talk whenever he could get their eye, saluting strangers with a smile and a cordial wave of his pudgy forefinger. He was having himself a merry, nonalcoholic fiesta, on the house. Kincaid took his elbow, coaxed him into a secluded corner.

Kincaid asked, "Think back. You're on your bed, groggy from sleeping tablets. Out in the other

room the mourners are gathered around Uncle Boyce's coffin. You wake up. Somebody you've never seen is bending over you. Holding a razor taken from your bathroom. A man with a long thin nose. Tell me, Mr. Sherrold, was he wearing a hat?"

"Why, yes. He had on a brownish fedora. Say! It wasn't very polite of him, was it? I never thought about it that way. A hat in the house, and in the presence of death. Just rabble, I guess."

"I have in mind a certain Angela Thomas. Could it have been a woman—with her hair done up on the top of her head?"

Sherrold mulled it over. He declared uneasily, "No, Kincaid, this was positively a man. I can't prove it, of course, but you sense those things, don't you?"

"Uh-huh. Frequently. Mr. Sherrold, when Mrs. Severn died, who got the cabin in the swamp at the edge of town?"

"Millard got it. He didn't want it and peddled it to Sue for five hundred dollars. It was her intention to do it over into a sort of play camp. She never got around to it. The play urge isn't particularly strong in Mrs. Sherrold, I'm afraid."

"About how long was it after Mrs. Severn died before Uncle Boyce hove in?"

"Nearly a year. He and Millard Frey came about the same time." Sherrold mused a moment, said in heavy irony, "Have you talked with Millard? What a marvelous brain that man has! Simply churning with high-tension theories. Has he told you his theory of Aunt Jennie's death?"

Kincaid said extravagantly, "Mr. Frey impressed me as a very shrewd lad. I've found you can learn a great deal by listening to a man of Mr. Millard Frey's caliber."

Sherrold sucked in his cheeks. "Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. Here's a sample of his lucid brainwork. He says that Sue and Old Uncle Boyce got together and hatched up a devious plot. Uncle Boyce had made a big settlement on Aunt Jennie when they separated and later he squandered his share. So he got Sue to inveigle the old lady to leave him a bit of cash in her will."

"But she didn't. She only left him the house. She left her dough to her blood relatives. Frey got his share."

"Yes, but, according to Millard, the oldster didn't know it. So he had Sue hold down his residence in Colorado and came to town and tried

to burn her in her bed. Well, according to Millard's marvelous brain, Aunt Jennie wasn't sleeping in the bed that night but the maid was. It was the maid they buried. Aunt Jennie got scared and scrambled—"

Kincaid flagged him down. "Sorry, but this is where I came in. Do you believe that story?"

"But the way Millard tells it to you! Grabs you by the coat lapels, breathes into your face, holds you with his glittering eye!"

Sherrold changed the subject. "You said you had a report to make. Is it about *Hangman's Holiday*?"

"Yes. I think I'm on the right track. But frankly, Mr. Sherrold, I can't quite figure you. You don't want the book."

"No. I don't want it."

"You just want to know where it is?"

Sherrold chuckled. "Precisely. Bewildering, isn't it?"

"How did you know the book might be stolen in the first place?"

Sherrold arose. "I better hustle along. Millard is expecting us for the evening. How did I know it was stolen? A friend of Uncle Boyce's, a bibliophile named Dave Pelfrey, was around one night. He was in his cups. He let the information slip."

Kincaid watched him descend the stairs, amble elegantly through the lobby.

PIGEON SWAMP lay in a scabrous strip just east of the city limits. A desolate island of bog and brush, of dump heaps and impenetrable clumps of thicket, it was without road or lane and was crisscrossed by a warren of hidden footpaths. What few occupants it held feed in isolated scrap-lumber hovels and tar-papered shacks.

The moon was high in a clear cloudless sky when Kincaid saw the sign. It was on a wrought iron bracket, almost obscured by dead pipestem weeds. It said, *Jennie Wren's Jungle*.

He located a narrow trail, left the pike and pushed his way through the lush foliage. The going was tough. Wild grape and trumpet vine barred his path; wet ferns, knee high, brushed against him. About two hundred yards and he came to the clearing.

The little rustic lodge, sitting there in the moonlight, was well-built, attractive, but a bit on the bucolic side. Solid and squat, with a fieldstone

chimney, it was of notched logs—one of those portable mail order jobs—and the porch railing which extended around three sides was of unbarked poles. It hunched there, mottled with moon and shadow, desolate, forgotten.

Kincaid held his breath, listened. He'd always heard that swamps were full of night noises, a so-called symphony of frogs and owls and insects. There was no sound in Pigeon Swamp. It was like being in another world.

He flipped on his torch, throwing the oval beam in circles before his feet as he advanced. He was about to mount the steps to the porch when he caught them full in the light of his flash. He bent down and examined them. They were of yellow pine, clean but weathered. He saw several things that interested him. He saw for instance a set of wet heel marks, one going in and one going out. Heel marks and nail holes!

He got the implication a split second too late.

Dave Pelfrey's voice behind him said, "Get up, Kincaid. Keep your hands well behaved. We're going inside."

They crossed the porch and entered the cabin.

Pelfrey struck a match, lit a coal oil lamp.

The lodge was clean and fresh smelling—and showed signs of occupancy. The Navajo rugs on the floor, the cases of mounted butterflies on the wall, the cheesecloth insect net in the corner, were Mrs. Severn's. But the brier pipe on the stone mantel shelf told another story.

Pelfrey showed no firearm, seemed perfectly self-assured. Kincaid said, "So this is where you park the stuff when it's hot, hey?"

Pelfrey pulled two comfortable rattan chairs up to the cold hearth, twisted them so they faced each other, set a taboret with glasses and decanter between them. "Sit down, Kincaid. We've come to the place where you'd better explain yourself." His frail shoulders leaned forward, his squinting eyes were hard, dangerous.

Kincaid said, "Dave, I've always underestimated you, I thought you were all mouth. Now I know I'm talking to a killer."

"I've never killed yet. But I may anytime."

"That's your story." Kincaid's graven face was bleak. "I say you've already killed this evening. That you strangled an old lady out on Redwood Avenue."

Pelfrey offered the decanter to Kincaid. Kincaid shook his head. Pelfrey poured himself a drink,

said, "Science is a wonderful thing. But it can't classify glove prints. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Who hired you to kill her, Dave?"

Pelfrey's pinched cheeks drew back in a silent snarl. "I tried to play along with you this afternoon, but you're getting out of hand. What do you know about this setup?"

"Dave, did you ever sell Boyce Severn any hot books?"

"None of your damn business."

"You steal books. But someone tips you off what stuff to take, and where to find it. Who's your spotter, Dave? All book thieves have spotters."

"Maybe I'm my own spotter."

Kincaid guffawed, "Baloney! You're just a dumb ape that's been schooled to retrieve. You were getting along okay with your filthy racket—then you got delusions of grandeur. You decided to branch out. That's where you made your mistake, Dave. You don't have the cortex for big-time larceny."

KINCAID got lumberingly to his feet. He walked three paces toward the door, stopped, turned around. "Dave, my old grandpappy used to say, leave blackmail strictly alone. If a certain party has more money than you have, and you feel tempted to extort a little, pause and reconsider. He may have more brains than you have, too."

"Blackmail?" Pelfrey said. "Where did you get that idea? Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

"What were you doing out here tonight?"

"I was waiting for you. To show you the error of your ways."

"No good," Kincaid declared. "That won't do. You ran into me by accident. Your heel prints were on the outside step, one set going in and one set coming out. You'd come out here for something. You'd entered the lodge, here, and got it. By the time you'd met me, you were already on your way back to town. That means you have it on you."

Pelfrey splayed his fingers of his right hand, laid it on his coat lapel. There were flecks of moisture in the corners of his lips.

Kincaid said quietly, "Whatever it is, you have it on you right now. Let's take a look at it."

With a single swift movement, Pelfrey broke his automatic from its shoulder-clip—and Kincaid

fired twice.

The book thief flattened against the chair back. Kincaid reholstered his short-barreled Special. He stood for a moment, frowning darkly at the lifeless body. Finally, with a sigh of resignation, he searched the dead man's pockets.

It wasn't in his pocket, it was behind his belt at the small of his back. A small black book with an embossed cover, not more than five by three inches. Its pages were yellow with age. He turned carefully to the title pages:

Hangman's Holiday
or
My American Vacation
by
Dr. Cyprien Laroue
Philadelphia—1811

He held it beneath the lamp, leafed slowly, intently through it.

The allusions to Gaol's Crossing appeared in Chapter Six: *The next gibbet I visited was at a small backwood's gaol in the southern part of the State known simply as Gaol's Crossing. Having spent the night at a nearby stage inn, and hearing that a hanging was to take place the following afternoon, I . . .*

Halfway down the following page, Dr. Laroue got down to brass tacks:

Quite a crowd had assembled for the execution, the crime having attained widespread notoriety throughout the countryside. The hanging took place at precisely four of the clock. The gibbet was of oak with a crossbeam of hickory and stood ten feet from beam to earth.

It was a moving scene indeed. The upturned faces of the yokels, the swinging corpse, the turbulent sunset sky. As I stood on the gaol's doorstep, the shadows of the gibbet lengthening away to the right across the snowswept field, the hayricks and the copse beyond, I thought me how different from my homeland . . .

The name of the criminal, at this date of writing, escapes me. However, I recall that his crime was particularly atrocious, it being charged that he murdered a family of five, by the name of Atkinson, I believe, with a broad-ax.

It had been a tough case but when it had started to break, it really went to pieces in a hurry. He knew everything now. All he needed was confirmation. No matter how you looked at it, there

was only one answer.

He stopped at the office of the *Morning Herald*, saw a friend, got permission to look through the files. It took him some time to locate it, but finally, after a lot of page turning, he found it. It was on the date of November 15, 1938.

SHOOTS SELF

The first fatality of the hunting season occurred yesterday when Mrs. Jennie Severn, of this city and Florida, shot herself while cleaning her shotgun in the living room of her lodge in Pigeon Swamp. . . .

THE little French clock with its porcelain cupids on Millard Frey's mantelpiece said eleven-fifteen when Kincaid appeared in the doorway. Mr. Frey admitted him to the apartment with a quirk of his lip and a gesture of reluctance. He said, "This is just a family gathering, maybe tomorrow—This is no time to—" Kincaid pushed past him, into the room.

Sue Sherrold was on the settee, her ice-green skirts fanned out on the cushion beside her, a cup of chocolate on her knee. Sherrold, on a footstool, was idly amusing himself with his host's books. He held them as though they were magazines and turned the pages crudely, schoolboy fashion, by slapping them with the palm of his hand.

Kincaid said, "Hi, people!" Everyone ignored him.

Mrs. Sherrold spoke with a sob in her throat. "It's his sweet smile that I remember. Uncle Boyce was a little short-tempered at times, but he had the sweetest smile that the angels ever bestowed upon—"

Mr. Frey corrected her gently. "I'll always think of him in terms of his lofty intellect and noble ideals."

"I'll always remember him because he died with a stomach full of poison," Kincaid put in dreamily. "And because I'm a law officer, and he helped me snag a vicious murderer."

They stared at him. Sherrold put down his book. Mr. Frey looked politely displeased, said archly, "Murderer?"

"That's right." Kincaid nodded grimly. "It was pretty obvious all along that there were two major kills. Aunt Jennie's for profit, Uncle Boyce's for expediency. It was a simple scheme, extremely simple, built on a gigantic falsehood. For eight years it worked."

He gave them a moment to think it over. "Eight

years ago Aunt Jennie was slain for her money; she had the lion's share of Boyce's fortune. She was killed with a shotgun at her lodge in Pigeon Swamp. It went off smoothly, per schedule, was accepted as a routine hunting accident. Then the will was read. To the killer's consternation she'd left her home here to her ex-husband, Boyce. The murderer hadn't figured the old man in the picture. That called for new plans."

Millard Frey said, "I have a theory, Mr. Kincaid—"

"The old man was notified," Kincaid continued, "of his inheritance. The story he got was that Jennie had been burned up in the south wing. He was told to come to town when the new wing was finished on the north. About a year later he moved in. He set up his collection, got down to work on his hobby. Everything went along okay for a while.

"He heard the ticking in the walls, thought nothing of it until it began to get on his nerves. He did a little entomological research and discovered his bedroom was infested with *Anobium tessellatum*. That was the beginning of the end for him; he had to be killed."

"So that creaking sound is made by insects!" Frey exclaimed. "I'm not surprised. I was convinced it was nothing supernatural—"

"Let's look at it the way Uncle Boyce did," Kincaid suggested. "He learned, to his confusion, that *Anobium tessellatum* were wood-boring beetles that lived in very old houses. Very old, get that. Yet the north was new. But you can't get wood beetles overnight! He was thus forced to the astonishing conclusion *that there hadn't been any south wing; that he was living in the old gaol building; that there hadn't been any fire!*"

Mrs. Sherrold said uncertainly, "That's ridiculous."

"Did you ever see a south wing?" Kincaid glanced about him. "Did any of you ever see a south wing? Of course not. You're all strangers. It was an easy bluff to put over."

Julian Sherrold said, "That's pretty tenuous arguing—"

"Here's proof." Kincaid took out the copy of *Hangman's Holiday*. "A man named Dr. Laroue once visited the old gaol. You can read all about it here. He stood on the doorstep of the old building, in the afternoon, and the shadows fell away to his *right*. If the wing had been on the south, the shadows would have lengthened to his *left*.

"Uncle Boyce then realized the truth: the old wing had simply been redecorated with wainscoting, and so on, on the inside. On the outside it had been faced with new brick. That, Frey, was what his puzzling memorandum meant. Dog's-tooth bond is the style of brickwork that—"

"Who"—Sherrold asked—"is the culprit?"

"You," Kincaid answered bleakly, quietly unholstering his Special and leveling it. "I hereby charge you formally with homicide. While your wife was in Colorado, you came up from Florida and—"

SHERROLD said sadly, "This is very rough horseplay, Kincaid. Remember I'm your client."

"Continue with your case," Frey said coldly. "As my representative." He paused. "Why sir, after he'd worked out a murder that satisfied the law—a fake shooting accident, you say—why didn't he pass it along to Boyce Severn? Why the sudden and dangerous switch to a mythical fire?"

"That, of course," Kincaid explained, "is the crux of the whole business. Because that was one story that wouldn't have fooled her husband. Boyce Severn knew his wife to be a passionate nature lover. She never owned a shotgun. You couldn't have paid her to shoot an animal. When Sherrold killed her at the cabin, with a gun he'd bought for the purpose, he also left hunting clothes. And a phony note which he stuck in the pocket of her flannel shirt."

He pointed a commanding finger at the girl. "Have Boyce Severn's body exhumed."

She looked dazed. Kincaid said, "You, Frey, are the one who hired Pelfrey to steal *Hangman's Holiday*. You suspected something sour. You'd better leave those rats alone in the future. Pelfrey, at Sherrold's order, killed Angela Thomas. He was afraid of her and she was afraid of you people. I must have led the lug to her myself.

"Pelfrey was bad medicine. In my opinion, Sherrold was the brains behind his thefts. They'd probably been working in cahoots for a long time. Recently, however, when the old man got sick, they laid a neat scheme."

Millard Frey said, horrified, "You mean that Julian was looting the Severn Collection, selling that valuable stuff to Pelfrey?"

"That wouldn't have brought in any real dough. They had a better plan worked out. Pelfrey would

steal good stuff. Sherrold would enter this hot junk in Severn's files. They knew he was going to die. They were boosting the estate, getting rid of their thefts at top prices under the cloak of Severn's reputation. Sherrold's an opportunist."

Sherrold said weakly, "Of all the rigmarole—!"

"Rigmarole is a good word, coming from you. You've been feeding me tricky lies ever since I've been on the case. I suspected you from the beginning, by the way. I didn't know what you were up to, but I knew you were badly out of line. I'm thinking about the lamp in your bathroom, the one on the floor. I can tell you all about it now.

"You stayed home from the funeral, to talk to me—and to finish the last minute salting of index cards to stolen books in Boyce's library. You had to do this on the sly. I came a little quicker than you expected. You were in the library. You took the big lamp from the library into the bathroom and plugged it in anywhere. You were afraid I'd stop in at the library and accidentally touch it. Those table lamps stay hot for about three minutes.

"You were supposed to be in bed, drugged. You made up the story about the mumbling mourner, to

explain the presence of an intruder and the open library door. You added a razor in his hand and a touch of pretended dumbness on your part. It almost took me in."

Julian Sherrold said patronizingly, "I can't see that you've much of a case, Kincaid. If Uncle Boyce was poisoned, as you speculate, anyone might have done it. Any of the three of us. The only affair I'm immediately concerned with, is the death of Aunt Jennie. That's completely written off the police books. She killed herself, by accident, in the living room of her lodge—"

"Then we'll have to reopen the books. She was killed. And not in the cabin, as you claim, but on the steps. There are extra nail holes in those steps. She was shot there and carried inside. Later, you hid the bloodstains by reversing the steps and the risers, turning the bloodstains under!"

Mr. Millard Frey said ponderously, "See me tomorrow, Kincaid, and I'll see that you're recompensed for services rendered. You may rest assured that I shall run this Pelfrey to earth and extract a full confession from him."

Kincaid said, "It's a nice trick if you can do it."