The third set of flashbulbs exploded and the actress relaxed and pulled down her skirt. Lieutenant MacDonald continued to stare somewhat foolishly at the silver trophy in his hands.

“Well?” the actress grinned. “How does it feel to be the recipient of the Real Detective Award for the Real Detective of the Year?”

“Thirstifying,” said MacDonald honestly.

The actress nodded. “Well spoken, my fine ferreting friend. I always feel a spot of alcohol is indicated after cheesecake myself. Where are we going?” MacDonald still contemplated the trophy. It had been exciting, very exciting, to be chosen by the top fact-crime radio program for its annual award; but he’d been feeling uneasy ever since the announcement. Despite the extraordinary record of solved cases that had made him the bright young star of the Los Angeles Police Department, he felt like an impostor.

“Mind a ride downtown?” he asked. “We’re going to deliver this trophy to the man it really belongs to.”

The actress raised her unplucked brows as they turned east on Sunset. “I’ve worked in Hollywood for three years,” she said, “and I’ve never known whether Sunset Boulevard ran beyond Gower. They tell me there’s a city called Los Angeles down this way. That where we’re going?”

“Uh huh. And you’re going to meet the damnedest man in that city of the damned…” And MacDonald began the story.

He began with his own first case-the case that started with his finding a dead priest and ended with his shooting one of his fellow lieutenants. He explained where he had found the solution of that case, and where he had found the solution for which he had just been awarded the trophy.

“You weren’t giving awards back in the early thirties,” he said. “But there was a man in the department then who topped anybody you’ve honoured. He had a mind… it’s hard to describe: a mind of mathematical precision, with a screwball offbeat quality-a mind that could see the shape of things, grasp the inherent pattern-“

“Like a good director,” the actress put in.

“Something,” MacDonald admitted. “Then there came that political scandal-maybe you’ve heard echoes-and the big shake-up. There was a captain who knew what wires to pull, and there was a lieutenant who took the rap. The lieutenant was our boy. He had a wife then and she needed an operation. The pay checks stopped coming and she didn’t get it…” The actress’s lively face grew grave as she followed the relentless story of the disintegration of greatness: the brilliant young detective, stripped at once of career and wife, slipping, skidding, until there was nothing left but the comfort of cheap sherry and the occasional quickening of the mind when it was confronted with a problem…

MacDonald pulled up in front of the Chula Negra. He peered in, caught sight of Mama Gonzales’ third daughter Rosario, and beckoned her to the door. “You got any marches on your juke box?” he asked, handing her a nickel.

So it was to the strains of the Mexican national hymn that the Real Detective Award trophy entered the little Mexican restaurant. Lieutenant MacDonald bore it proudly aloft and the actress followed him, confused and vaguely delighted.

Mexicanos al grito de guerra…

MacDonald halted in front of the fourth booth on the left, with the certainty of finding its sharp-nosed white-skinned inhabitant. He placed the trophy on the table, flourished his hand and proclaimed, “To the Real Detective of the Year!” The actress placed one foot on the bench and lifted her skirt over her knee.

“That makes it an official award,” she grinned.

…al sonoro rugir del candn boompty boomp!

Nick Noble’s pale blue eyes surveyed the symbolic silver figure of Justice Triumphant Over Wrongdoing. “If it was only a cup…” he sighed, and downed his water glass of sherry.

That was the start of an evening memorable in many ways. It was MacDonald’s first non-professional visit to the Chula Negra; and he was amazed to realise that Nick Noble could drop cryptic comments on the theatre of twenty years ago which fascinated the actress as much as his comments on crime had stimulated the lieutenant. He was further amazed to realise the warmth and vitality of the girl beside him, whom he had at first regarded solely as the inevitable wench demanded by cameramen.

They fitted together somehow, her bubbling eagerness and Noble’s weary terseness.

They belonged together because they were the same thing underneath, the same piercing through of conventional acceptance, straight to reality.

MacDonald was growing more and more aware of the girl, more and more aware of the peculiarity of a man's being single in his thirties, when the episode began which was to make the evening completely memorable.

It started unspectacularly enough, with a voice calling, "Hi, Don!" The voice was high-pitched, but firmly male-a tenor with baritone quality. The man was slight but firmly built, dressed in the standard mismatched uniform of middle-bracket Hollywood, and MacDonald was certain he'd never seen him before. But even as the man seized his hand, as the actress looked up curiously and Nick Noble finished his latest sherry, MacDonald began thinking back. Far back, obviously. Anyone who called him Don dated from college days at USC.

Now he was Mac or Lieutenant or Loot. A faint but ghastly picture flitted across his mind, of something called an Apolliad, an evening of students' creative contributions to the higher literature. There must be some reason why he was thinking of that-there must, in fact, have been some reason why he had attended it…

"Steve Harnett!" he cried. "You old son of a-" He broke off, glancing sideways at the actress.

"I've heard the word," she said dryly. "I just didn't think men ever greeted each other that way outside of bad plays and Rotary Club meetings."

"It's grand to see you, Don," Harnett was saying. "I kept reading about you in the papers and saying I've got to look you up and then… well, you know how it is."

"Don't I," MacDonald confessed. "I read about you too. I'll go you one better: I even listen to Pursuit, just to see how far away from real murder you can get."

"Oh! Do you write Pursuit?" Only half of the girl's breathlessness was good technique.

"I should've warned you." MacDonald looked rueful. "She's a radio actress."

"And therefore should know by now that a writer's introduction to the producer is the kiss of death. Still you might as well introduce us."

"Sure… Good Lord! Do you realise that in all the hullabaloo of those publicity photographs I never did catch your name?"

"Lynn Dvorak," said Nick Noble quietly.

“Don’t tell - me that’s a deduction!”

“Asked her. While you were greeting your friend.” MacDonald grinned. “If all your rabbits-out-of-sherry-bottles were as simple as that-“

“They are,” said Noble. “To me.” His washed-out blue eyes glazed over oddly as he contemplated the actress and the radio writer.

Someone presumably introduced Tristan to Iseult and Paolo to Francesca. No one introduced Petrarch to Laura, so no one wrote a tragedy on the subject culminating in murder. Someone introduced Harvey Hawley Crippen to Ethel LeNeve and someone introduced Judd Gray to Ruth Snyder.

And Lieutenant Donald MacDonald, Homicide, LAPD, said, “Lynn Dvorak, may I present Steve Harnett?”

So for once, MacDonald was later to reflect, Nick Noble had been in on a murder even before it happened. It was in October, that first and fatal interview, and throughout that winter the lieutenant kept running into Steve and Lynn, at the Philharmonic, at Musso and Frank’s, at the Biltmore Theater, until he began thinking of them as SteveandLynn in one word, and automatically looking for one if he saw the other.

“I started something,” he would muse ruefully as he had a drink with them after a concert. It was not only that they were physically in love (even to the hand-holding-in-public stage, which was embarrassing in a man of Steve’s thirty-six years); but they obviously fitted together so well in so many non-physical respects. Their ears heard the same music; their mouths laughed the same laughter.

But with Steve at least there was something under the laughter, something that caused moments when the successful writer, the man happily in love, gave way for an instant to a small boy, terrified of some incalculable but certain retribution.

It was one of those moments that seized Steve as the three of them were drinking after an unusually interesting production of one-acts at the Actors’ Lab. He had said nothing for five minutes, and there was supplication in the glance Lynn cast to MacDonald as she gave up her single-handed attempt at brightness and retired to the ladies’ room.

MacDonald could think of nothing to do but emit that wordless questioning noise and assume that sympathetic half-smile which had caused the Pengcraft murderer to reveal where he had hidden the other half of the body.

Steve Harnett roused himself from his brooding. “I’ve got to talk to you, Don,” he said abruptly. “It’s getting me down. I can’t think straight.”

“Any time,” said MacDonald. “Unless a crime wave takes priority.”

“Dinner next Thursday?” Steve said eagerly. “I’m in Brentwood; it’s in the phone book. Say around seven for drinks?”

MacDonald made a note and tried to smile reassuringly at Lynn when she came back.

“That couple you introduced here?” Nick Noble asked two nights later, when MacDonald had dropped in with a report on the death-cell confession of a man in whose career Noble had taken a certain decisive interest. “They all right?”

“Sure. I guess so.”

“Liked the girl. Alive-like Martha… Trouble for her. Sorry…”

“Why should there be trouble?” MacDonald asked uneasily.

Nick Noble paused and deliberately brushed away the fly which always perched invisibly on his sharp nose. “Call it… the Unspeckled Band,” he said.

There were times, MacDonald reflected as he beckoned to Rosario, when Nick Noble’s cryptic impulses seemed to spring from pure malice.

The Harnett home was small, comfortable, unpretentious, and therefore probably only mildly fabulous in cost. Steve Harnett, MacDonald had learned from a few questions of other friends in radio, was well in the charge-account-at-the-Brown-Derby class but somewhat short of the swimming pool level. His questions should have prepared him for his first surprise; but there was one question he hadn’t thought to ask.

The woman who answered the door was in her early thirties-slender, a trifle pale, and more than a trifle attractive, again in a comfortable, unpretentious, and mildly expensive manner. She held out a hand and said, “Good evening.

Lieutenant MacDonald? I’m Harriet-Steve’s wife.”

Abruptly MacDonald understood the Unspeckled Band-the colourless strip on Steve’s third finger, left hand. He was still trying to mask his angry amazement with polite conversation when Steve came in, followed by a plain heavy-set girl with a handful of papers. Here in Brentwood domesticity, MacDonald observed, Steve wore a plain gold wedding ring.

“Glad you could make it, Don. You and Harriet getting yourselves acquainted?

This is Pat McVeagh, my secretary-Lieutenant MacDonald.” And he was suddenly very

busy with ice and gin and vermouth and lemon peel and the careful avoidance of MacDonald's eyes.

The secretary left after one drink, without having opened her mouth for any non-alcoholic purpose. Then, just as MacDonald was trying to get the feel of the Harriet-Steve relationship, the elder Mrs. Harnett slipped in and there were more introductions.

MacDonald could not have told you, an hour after dinner, what he had eaten. He was too concentrated on trying to persuade himself that he was on a social and not a professional visit. He was too surrounded by all too tangible undercurrents.

Mrs. Harriett Sr., he decided, was the most obtrusively unobtrusive little old lady he had ever known. She effaced herself completely-a gray wraith in a corner, coming to life only with an occasional plaintive don't-mind-me. But whatever topic was under discussion-another round of drinks, a proposed weekend at La Jolla, a new limerick of Steve's composition-her quiet reminder of her own self-effacement had the power of a Security Council veto.

There were other undercurrents: a barb from Steve to Harriet about the cooking of the dinner, a barb from Harriet to Steve about his prospects in radio, some obscure reference to the absent secretary…

It was with great relief that MacDonald let Steve drag him off to the study as soon as decently possible after dinner. It was a good room, from the outmodedly comfortable chairs to the cases full of erratically and lovingly chosen books, from the battered standard typewriter to the miniature electric icebox, of the type usually employed for baby formula.

Steve Harnett took two cans of beer from the box, punctured them, handed one to his guest, kicked off his shoes, and began to pace around the room.

"Necessary adjunct to work, beer," he muttered. "Always figure it takes me exactly a quart to a script."

"You work on beer and Nick Noble on sherry," MacDonald observed. "And I can't drink on duty. There's no justice in this world." He waited, but Steve kept on pacing. "You never mentioned Harriet," he said expressionlessly. "I suppose I must've read about your marriage in an alumni bulletin, but I'd forgotten."

"We've been married ten years." Steve's voice was more tenor than baritone now.

"Any children?"

“Last fall we were hoping… That’s when I met you. But in December Harriet had to go to the hospital. Now they say we won’t ever.”

“So it all started while Harriet was-“

Steve stopped pacing. “Don’t think I’m saying that to justify it, Don. I’m not. I can’t justify it, not even to myself. But it’s happened-hell, it happened that night down at your little Mex joint. Dead Shepherd, now I find thy saw of might…”

“…Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?” MacDonald finished for him.

“I remember, Steve. You always were a sucker for quotations. Lends authority, doesn’t it? Takes away your own responsibility for what you’re saying.”

“Does my radio-trained ear detect what we cliché-experts call a thinly-veiled edge of contempt in your voice, Don?”

“It’s no business of mine,” MacDonald said optimistically. “But you’re getting yourself into one sweet mess. Does Harriet know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“She’s bound to eventually. You haven’t been precisely discreet, and there’s always a helpful friend… Does Lynn know about Harriet?”

“Yes…” Steve’s eyes rested on the gold band on his left hand.

“In other words, now she does but she didn’t at first?” Steve didn’t answer that one. Instead he said, “But, Don, you don’t understand.

Maybe nobody can until it happens to him. But this… this isn’t just an affair.”

“Are they ever?”

“It isn’t just… fun in bed. It’s being together-being us.”

“So what did you want me for? Name of a good lawyer?” Steve drew back suddenly. “But I couldn’t divorce Harriet. I love her.”

“Let them eat cake,” MacDonald snorted, “and have it too!”

“Don’t you see, Don? They’re both so… so right. Both things. The thing with me and Harriet and the thing with me and Lynn. I can’t say: this I cleave to, this I discard. It wouldn’t be fair to either of them.”

“Which the present situation, of course, is.”

“Hell, Don, I’m not an adulterer.” Steve managed an odd sort of smile. “I’m a bigamist.” He added hesitantly, “There’s a quotation for that too: How happy could I be with either, were ‘tother fair charmer away…” MacDonald could not swear why he shivered at that moment, but he had a rough idea. “I still don’t see why you wanted to talk to me about it. I did introduce you, but…”

“I think it’s because I knew you pretty well a long time ago, but you’re not a part of my present life. I had to talk to somebody. I can’t talk to people who know me and Harriet now. I had to talk it out just to see if…” MacDonald knew very well why he was shivering as he replied, “You know, Steve, I don’t think that was the reason… underneath.”

“And it wasn’t, I’m sure,” MacDonald said later that night to Nick Noble. “You asked about trouble. Here it is, and your Unspeckled Band can prove as venomous as a swamp adder, if that’s what it was. And subconsciously, at least, Steve sees it too: that this is the buildup to a standard, cliché-expert murder situation. Each woman has a motive for killing the other; and if Steve ever gets out of the equipoise of his Beggars’ Opera how-happy-could-I-be-with-either, he’ll have a motive for getting rid of the girl left over. That subconscious fear of murder led him to expose the situation to a Homicide officer.” There was a water glass full of sherry in front of Nick Noble. He took what seemed like a casual swig, and the glass was half full. Then he muttered

“Beggars’ Opera?” and shook his head. “Groucho Marx,” he said decisively.

Even after long years of inoculation Lieutenant MacDonald could still occasionally be taken aback in the Chula Negra. “And how did Groucho Marx get into this?”

“Didn’t ever see Animal Crackers?” Noble murmured regretfully. “Long time ago.’Way back when…”

His voice trailed away. MacDonald understood. ‘Way back when Lieutenant Nicholas Noble, the pride of Homicide, took his beautiful wife Martha to the pictures…

“But what can I do?” MacDonald insisted. “What can any officer do when he sees a murder building up in front of him-cast and motives complete and nothing to do but wait until it happens?”

For once Nick Noble had not even a cryptic answer.

That was in March. The murder did not come until late April. In the interval MacDonald steered away from any contact with Steve and Lynn; a meeting now could

prove too embarrassing. But he heard enough gossip to know that Harriet, if still ignorant, must have no friends and no telephone. And he heard other gossip, too, to the effect that Steve Harnett was cracking up as a radio writer, that his option wouldn't be picked up at the end of this thirteen on Pursuit, which with the free-lance market shot to pieces…

MacDonald had tried to avoid embarrassment in seeing Steve again. But it was not embarrassment that he felt now in April as he faced Steve Harnett, beside the pink-ruffled bed which held Harriet's curiously arched body. There was no emotion save cold rage in MacDonald's voice as he roared, "So you finally made up your mind!"

Steve had his shoes off and a tumbler of straight whiskey in his hand. He looked up helplessly and said, "You won't believe me, Don. Why should you? But you don't understand…"

MacDonald controlled his voice. "Look, Steve. There's only one way to play this. I'm just any cop and you're just any… husband of the deceased. All right, we know its strychnine; even a layman could tell that. Now tell me how." Steve's vitality and charm had yielded to bewildered chaos. "As I was saying, it must have been the candy. I was working late and Harriet took the candy to bed with her. I worked so late I slept on the couch in the study. This morning Mother…. found her."

"Nobody heard anything? She must've gone through hell."

"Mother's not well; she usually takes phenobarbital at night. And when a script's going hot, the house could fall down and I wouldn't know it."

"Now this candy…?"

"I was telling you, it just came in the mail and we thought whoever forgot to put in a card would phone about it. It's a kind Harriet likes, so-"

"And you write mystery shows!" MacDonald gasped. "One of the oldest clichés-in fact and fiction-and you let your wife…! I suppose there's independent evidence that the candy actually did come in the mail?"

"Mother was with us when Harriet opened the package. She didn't want any; sweets upset her. And I was drinking beer, so Harriet took them to bed later on.

I think the wrapper's still in the wastebasket…" A brand-new machine had replaced the battered standard in Steve's study.

MacDonald found a label in the drawer of the desk and inserted it in the typewriter. When he had finished typing, he set it beside the label on the wrapper from the

wastebasket. There was no telling the two labels apart.

Steve's mouth opened wide. "But does that prove…?"

"No," MacDonald grunted. "It doesn't. It's a new machine. It hasn't had time to develop obvious idiosyncrasies. Any new typewriter of the same model would have approximately the same result. But it does indicate-" The phone rang. MacDonald picked it up.

An impersonal voice announced, "I have a call from New York for Mr. Stephen Harnett."

"New York for you," said MacDonald.

"Sponsor trouble," Steve groaned. "Or the network on that last scriptI was afraid it was a little too… Blast it! I can't handle things like that now. I can't…"

"Try," said MacDonald. "Occupy your mind while I see Lynn Dvorak." Steve had started to reach a shaky hand toward the phone. Now he snatched it back. "Lynn! You can't drag her into this!"

"Can't I? You say you're innocent. OK. Who else has a motive? Go talk to your sponsor."

"Lynn…" There was horror in Steve's eyes. "She couldn't have…"

"Go on. Telephone. See you later."

Steve laughed harshly. "Life must go on and stuff. And life's crime's fool…" Steve Harnett's hand wavered halfway to the telephone. As MacDonald left the room he could hear angry squawks coming from the still unanswered receiver.

The lieutenant had never been more wretched on professional business than he was as he drove to the little house in the hills east of Highland, almost in downtown Hollywood.

A baffling case was one thing. That you could sink your teeth into; or if it was too flatly impossible, you could take it to the Chula Negra and watch Nick Noble's eyes glaze over as he probed to the truth. But something so wretchedly obvious as this…

He had, inadvertently, started it all. He had, quite advertently, foreseen its inevitable outcome. And here it was.

He remembered Steve Harnett, even back at the University, as flashy, clever,

plausible, entertaining-but essentially weak. There'd been something (he couldn't recall the details) about a girl that Mrs. Harnett didn't quite approve of and how she'd managed to break up the relationship. And there'd been that odd episode when Steve was directing a play: the two girls, both beautiful, both good actresses, both avid for the lead-and Steve's sudden pneumonia followed by two weeks' convalescence on the desert while someone else took over the direction and casting…

A psychoanalyst, he reflected, could have fun-probably would have, if there was enough money in the defence. And meanwhile the layman could content himself with the old-fashioned verdict that there were certain people who simply didn't have the courage to face up to things.

There was, of course, the remote possibility that Lynn might be the actual sender of the strychnine-laden chocolates. But how much did that direct responsibility matter compared with the ultimate responsibility of what Steve had done to both women? Except, of course, that in that case Lynn would go to the gas chamber and Steve would probably go on writing radio melodramas…

There was no answer to his ring. The door was unlocked, so he didn't have to worry about skeleton keys.

He didn't have to worry about Lynn and the gas chamber, either.

She sat in a chair half-facing the door, well lit by the reading lamp which must have been left burning from the night before. Her face grinned at him, in that sardonic welcome which only a strychnine-fed host can provide.

There were smudges of chocolate on the grinning lips, and there was a box of chocolates on the table by the phone.

MacDonald used the phone to call the necessary technicians. Before they arrived he had discovered in the wastebasket the familiar wrapper and the familiar typed label.

"And now," MacDonald demanded in the fourth booth on the left of the Chula Negra, "where the hell are we?"

"Hell," said Nick Noble succinctly and truthfully.

"It made sense before. Steve had made up his mind. He didn't have the heart or the guts to make a clean cut, so he simply removed the one he didn't want. It would've made the same kind of sense if we'd found only Lynn. But both of them… that switches the motivation altogether. Now we have to look for somebody who wants both women out of Steve Harnett's life. And who has such a motive?" He paused and tried to answer himself. "I've got to look into the secretary. Every so often there's something

in this office-wife business.

She’s a dowdy, homely wench, but she probably doesn’t see herself that way.”

“Labels,” said Nick Noble. “Let’s see.”

MacDonald placed them before him:

Mrs Stephen Harnett

11749 Verdugo Drive

Los Angeles 24, Calif.

Mrs Lynn Dvorak

6708 Las Aves Road

Hollywood 28, Calif.

Nick Noble leaned back in the booth and a film seemed to obscure his eyes.

“Mrs…?” he said softly.

“Lynn? Divorced. Three years ago. That doesn’t enter in. You’ll notice the postmark, too. Downtown Hollywood. Steve admitted he’d been in to see the advertising agency; but that doesn’t help now. The secretary lives near here-which might be a good reason for not mailing here. And that reminds me: I’m down in this part of town to see her. I’d better-“

“Why?” said Nick Noble.

MacDonald smilingly disregarded the query. “Oh-one odd thing I forgot to tell you about Steve. When that New York call came through he muttered something about life goes on, and added: Life’s crime’s fool. I told you he’s a sucker for quotations, but I couldn’t spot this one; it bothered me, so I stopped at the library to use a concordance. It’s Hotspur’s death speech in Henry IV, Part I, the same speech Huxley used for a title a while back, only it’s properly Life’s time’s fool. Interesting subconscious twist, don’t you think?” Nick Noble’s lips moved softly, almost inaudibly: But thought’s the slave of life, and

life’s time’s fool; And time, that takes survey of all the world,

Must have a stop…

He broke off, looking almost embarrassed by so long and articulate a speech.

“Wife and I,” he explained. “Used to read Shakespeare. Time… crime… must have a stop.”

“Lieutenant MacDonald?”

This was a strange new voice, deep, with a slight Central European accent.

Bitterly remembering what had begun when last a new voice accosted him in the Chula Negra, MacDonald looked up to see a dapper little man waving a sheet of notepaper at him.

“They tell me at your Headquarters,” the little man was saying, “I may possibly find you in this Lokal; so I come. Our friend Stephen Harnett gives me this letter for you long since, but I am first now in Los Angeles with the opportunity to present it.”

Puzzled, MacDonald began to read:

Dear Don:

This is to introduce Dr Ferdinand Wahrschein, who is (need I say?) a friend of the sponsor’s wife and who is conducting a technical investigation into American police methods. I’d deeply appreciate (and so would the sponsor) any help which you can give him.

Sincerely,

STEVE

The lieutenant rose, tossing the letter to Nick Noble. “Delighted to meet you, but you catch me just when I am leaving to interview a witness, and I’d sooner do it alone. But I tell you what: if you really want to know how the local department cracks its toughest nuts, you stay right here with The Master.” And he was gone. Dr. Ferdinand Wahrschein stared speculatively at the pinched white face in the booth, then gingerly seated himself and resignedly began, “Na also! Is it your finding that anthropometric method-“

“Sherry?” suggested Nick Noble hospitably.

Miss Patricia McVeagh had a room (adjacent bath-no cooking priv.) in what had once been an old family mansion on Bunker Hill. Lieutenant MacDonald walked from the Chula Negra to Third and Hill and there rode up the funicular Angels’ Flight. He was

glad he was in plain clothes. The once fashionable Bunker Hill district is now tenanted largely by Mexicans and by Americans of Spanish-Indian descent, many of whom feel they have good reason not to care for uniformed members of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Miss McVeagh opened the door and said, “Lieutenant MacDonald, isn’t it?

What on earth…?” Her tone meant (a) she hadn’t seen today’s papers, or (b) such an actress was wasting her time as a secretary.

She hadn’t grown any more glamorous since the martinis in March; but there was something possibly preferable to glamour in the smile of hospitality which managed to conquer her puzzlement.

MacDonald began abruptly, “I don’t need to bother you with the complete fill-in,” which is one of the best known ways of causing witnesses to volunteer their own suggestions. “It’s just a routine matter of checking certain movements in the Harnett household. I gather you weren’t working there today?” Miss McVeagh smiled. “Is that what Mr. Harnett told you? I suppose I shouldn’t… Look, Lieutenant; I don’t have anything to drink, but how about some Nescafe? I could talk easier with a cup in my hand. Do you mind?” MacDonald did not mind. He liked people to talk easy. And while he waited for the Nescafe, he decided he liked people who lived in cheap rooms and spent the money they saved on a judicious balance of Bach (Johann Sebastian) and Tatum (Art).

Miss McVeagh came back with two cups and a carbon copy of a letter. “If it’s just where do I stand with the Harnett household, this letter ought to clear things up. I mailed it this morning.”

MacDonald read:

Dear Mr. Harnett:

I realise that your financial position since Pursuit did not pick up the option makes my regular employment out of the question. But I still feel, as I told you that time when I so mistakenly took a second of your martinis, that a good secretary is also a collaborator.

For that reason, I’d like to offer to place my secretarial services on a speculative basis. The exact terms we can work out if you like the idea; but the general notion would be that I’d work on the usual schedule, but be paid anywhere from $0.00 to $?.?? according to your monthly level.

He stopped reading there and said, “You love him that much?”

“Love?” Her mouth opened wide.

“You’d work for nothing just to try to pull him back on his feet?”

“I would. So where does love come in?”

“It would seem,” MacDonald observed between swallows of Nescafe, “to indicate at least a certain… devotion.”

“Sure,” she nodded. “Devotion to Pat McVeagh. Look, Lieutenant. Steve Harnett’s good. When he does write, he can write like a blue streak. And when he gets himself straightened out, he’s going to hit the big time. What’s radio?

What’s five hundred a week… said she blithely on Bunker Hill. But it’s true: it’s the real big time Steve Harnett’s headed for, and when he hits it, I want in.”

“This not being straightened out,” MacDonald ventured. “It’s been bad?”

“It’s been hell,” she said flatly. “I’ll tell you: Last week I was typing some letters on the standard out in the patio. He was supposed to be roughing out a plot in the study on his portable. Comes time for me to go home, he has to sign the letters, he hasn’t emerged, I take a chance on his wrath and knock on the study door. He doesn’t shout. He just whispers ‘Come in,’ and I come in and there he is. He’s been in there eight hours. He hasn’t done one blessed word.

His hands are shaking and his eyes look like he’s going to cry. I give him the letters, he picks up a pen, and it falls out of his fingers. That’s how bad it’s been. Lieutenant; but I’m still sold on him and I’ll take my chances.” Dr. Ferdinand Wahrschein felt a buzzing in his head. He was not sure whether to attribute it to his first experience with California sherry by the water glass, or to the answers he was receiving to his methodically prepared questionnaire.

Nine out of ten of those answers would baffle him completely; but the tenth would cast a lightning flash of clarification on a long obscure problem.

Pleasantly bebuzzed, he sat back and listened to Lieutenant MacDonald’s resume of his conversation with Miss McVeagh. “I’m sold on her, Nick,” MacDonald ended. “Here: read her letter. I’ll swear that’s an absolutely honest expression of just what her interest in Steve Harnett is. And if she’s out on motive, who’s left?”

Nick Noble accepted the letter and handed back another paper in exchange.

“Something for you to read too. Came by messenger.” My Dear Mr. Noble:

My son informs me that he has once met you, and that you have had extraordinary success in solving problems perplexing to the regular police.

Though I do not know you, may I beg you to exert your abilities on the problem of the deaths of my son's wife and of his friend? My son is no ordinary man; and his peace of mind, if you can secure it, will be deeply valued by

Your sincere friend,

FLORENCE HARNETT (Mrs. S. T. Harnett)

"See it now?" said Nick Noble.

MacDonald felt Dr. Wahrschein's beady and eager eyes on him, and sensed vaguely that the honour of the department depended on him. "I can't say…" he began.

"Labels," said Nick Noble. "Look at them."

MacDonald looked at the labels. He stared at them. He glared at them. He scrutinised their inscrutability. Then suddenly he seized the other three papers which lay on the table, spread them in a row before him, looked from one to the other, and slowly nodded.

"You see?" said Nick Noble. "Clear pattern. Three main points. 1: Groucho Marx."

MacDonald nodded gravely; he'd remembered that one. Meanwhile Dr.

Ferdinand Wahrschein stared at him.

"2," Noble went on: "the cliché."

"Cliché?"

"The chocolates. Everybody knows gimmick. Botkin, Molineux, Anthony Berkeley. Why eat? Unless…"

"Of course. And the third point…" MacDonald indicated the assorted papers before him and echoed Noble's own statement. "Crime must have a stop." Dr. Ferdinand Wahrschein giggled and beckoned to Rosario for more sherry.

This essay on American police methods should be aber fabelhaft!

Steve Harnett filled his glass of straight whiskey. "I'm alone," he said thickly.

“Alone. They’re gone. Harriet’s gone. Lynn’s gone too. How happy… But they’re gone.” His bare toes wiggled in anguish. “And Pursuit’s gone too, come Thursday week. And McVeagh’s gone on account of I can’t pay her any more.

I’m alone…”

“Are you?” Mrs. Harnett asked gently. She sat unobtrusively in a corner while her son paced the room.

“I know,” Steve muttered. “You’re here. You’re always here, darling, and you know how much… Blast it, there is truth in clichés. A man’s best mother is his-“ The phone rang.

“I’ll take it, dear.” Mrs. Harnett seemed hardly to move, but the phone had not rung three times before she answered it. “Just a minute,” she said quietly into the mouthpiece. “I’ll see if he’s in.” She put her hand over the diaphragm as she whispered, “New York.”

Steve let out a yell. “They fire me and still they own my soul while the contract runs! But I can’t. Not now I can’t. Look at my hands. They’re quivering like an aspen… an aspic… an aspen…”

He was still judiciously weighing the two words when Mrs. Harnett had finished murmuring apologies and hung up. “I’ll stand between you and these things now, dear,” she murmured. “I’ll-“

But the next ring was on the doorbell, and Lieutenant MacDonald was not having any standing between. He strode in, snatched the glass from Steve, and began talking.

“This thing sticking out of my pocket,” he said, “is a warrant. Just so a mystery plot man like you gets all the gimmicks straight, we’ll brief it. You couldn’t make up your mind, could you? You kept quoting How happy could I be with either… Only there’s another quote that starts like that. It was Groucho Marx who said, How happy I could be with either of these women… if only both of them would go away! And that’s the decision you reached. You were going to pieces; and what a nice simple life you could have if only you weren’t bothered with either Harriet or Lynn. No more problems, no decisions, no impingements… just you alone, in your insufficient self-sufficiency…!” Steve said, “If I had that glass back I could think better.”

“You don’t want things outside yourself, but you can’t live without them.

You’ve found that out by now, haven’t you? OK, take the glass. And take the proof. There’s been too much written about poisoned chocolates. Nobody’d eat an

anonymous gift nowadays-especially no one close to a gimmick-conscious man like you. Unless they were reassured. ‘Stupid of me, darling; I forgot to put in the card.’ And who’s the only person who, immediately or by phone, could reassure both Harriet and Lynn?

“And the best proof. Crime must have a stop. A full stop. The typewriter was almost certainly the one in your study, but that proved nothing. Anybody could’ve used it-Miss McVeagh, your mother… But typing habits are something else. And typists are divided into those who do and do not put a period, a full stop, after abbreviations like Mr. and Mrs. I saw a letter of McVeagh’s; she wrote Mr. Harriett-M, R, period. I saw a note from your mother; she wrote Mr.

Noble-M, R, period. I saw a note from you; you wrote Dr Ferdinand Wahrschein-D, R, no period. And the murder labels were both addressed Mrs-M, R, S, no period.

“The D.A.’ll want to know where the strychnine came from. I’ll make a guess.

Your mother’s a semi-invalid, I gather. Maybe heart-trouble? Maybe using strychnine? Maybe missing a few tablets lately?”

Lieutenant MacDonald had never seen anyone wring her hands before, but there was no other description for what Mrs. Harnett was doing. “I have noticed,” she struggled to say, “twice recently, I’ve had to have a prescription refilled before I needed to.”

Steve gulped and set his glass down. “Hitting it too hard, Don,” he choked out.

“Minute in the bathroom. Then you can…” He gestured at the warrant.

“You must understand, Lieutenant,” Mrs. Harnett began as Steve left. “It isn’t as if my Stephen were like other men. This isn’t an ordinary case. Of course I have to tell the truth when it comes to something like the strychnine, but-“ A dim fear clutched at Lieutenant MacDonald as he callously shoved past the old lady toward the bathroom. He threw open the unlatched door. Stephen Harnett stood there by the basin. MacDonald remembered McVeagh’s description : His hands are shaking and his eyes look like he’s going to cry.

His trembling fingers were unable to bring the razor blade functionally close to the veins of his wrist. The blade slipped from his hand and clattered into the bowl as he turned and surrendered to the law.

“He’ll never have to make another decision of his own,” MacDonald said to Nick Noble when he dropped into the Chula Negra after his testimony on the first day of the trial. “From now on it’s all up to his lawyers and the State. I think he likes it.

“Of course they’ve made that nonsensical double plea : Not guilty and Not guilty by reason of insanity. In other words, I didn’t do it but if I did you can’t hurt me. It may stick; I think he’ll like it better if it doesn’t.”

“Is he?” Noble wondered into his glass.

“I don’t know. What’s sane? Like the majority of people? Then no murderer’s sane: the majority aren’t murderers. But the big trouble is with the people who are almost like the majority, the people you can’t tell from anybody else till the push comes which they can’t take. The people who could be the guy in the next apartment, the gal in the same bed… or me. So who’s sane? Who’s the majority?

Maybe the majority is the people who haven’t been pushed…” Nick Noble opened his pale blue eyes to their widest. “You’re growing up, Mac,” he said, and finished his sherry hopefully.