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THE ASSISTANT MURDERER

Gold on the door, edged with black, said ALEXANDER RUSH, PRIVATE DETECTIVE. Inside, an ugly man sat tilted back in a chair, his feet on a yellow desk.

The office was in no way lovely. Its furnishings were few and old with the shabby age of second-handdom. A shredding square of dun carpet covered the floor. On one buff wall hung a framed certificate that licensed Alexander Rush to pursue the calling of private detective in the city of Baltimore in accordance with certain red-numbered regulations. A map of the city hung on another wall. Beneath the map a frail bookcase, small as it was, gaped emptily around its contents: a yellowish railway guide, a smaller hotel directory, and street and telephone directories for Baltimore, Washington, and Philadelphia. An insecure oaken clothes-tree held up a black derby and a black overcoat beside a white sink in one corner. The four chairs in the room were unrelated to one another in everything except age. The desk's scarred top held, in addition to the proprietor's feet, a telephone, a black-clotted inkwell, a disarray of papers having generally to do with criminals who had escaped from one prison or another, and a grayed ashtray that held as much ash and as many black cigar stumps as a tray of its size could expect to hold.

An ugly office — the proprietor was uglier.

His head was squatly pear-shaped. Excessively heavy, wide, blunt at the jaw, it narrowed as it rose to the close-cropped, erect grizzled hair that sprouted above a low, slanting forehead. His complexion was of a rich darkish red, his skin tough in texture and rounded over thick cushions of fat.

These fundamental inelegancies were by no means all his ugliness. Things had been done to his features.

One way you looked at his nose, you said it was crooked. Another way, you said it could not be crooked; it had no shape at all. Whatever your opinion of its form, you could not deny its colour. Veins had broken to pencil its already florid surface with brilliant red stars and curls and puzzling scrawls that looked as if they must have some secret meanings. His lips were thick, tough-skinned. Between them showed the brassy glint of two solid rows of gold teeth, the lower row lapping the upper, so undershot was the bulging jaw. His eyes — small, deep-set, and pale blue of iris — were bloodshot to a degree that made you think he had a heavy cold. His ears accounted for some of his earlier years: they were the thickened, twisted cauliflower ears of the pugilist.

A man of forty-something, ugly, sitting tilted back in his chair, feet on desk.

The gilt-labelled door opened and another man came into the office. Perhaps ten years younger than the man at the desk, he was, roughly speaking, everything that one was not. Fairly tall, slender, fair-skinned, brown-eyed, he would have been as little likely to catch your eye in a gambling-house as in an art gallery. His clothes — suit and hat were gray — were fresh and properly pressed, and even fashionable in that inconspicuous manner which is one sort of taste. His face was likewise unobtrusive, which was surprising when you considered how narrowly it missed handsomeness through the least meagreness of mouth — a mark of the too-cautious man.

Two steps into the office he hesitated, brown eyes glancing from shabby furnishings to ill-visaged proprietor. So much ugliness seemed to disconcert the man in gray. An apologetic smile began on his lips, as if he were about to murmur, “I beg your pardon, I'm in the wrong office.”

But when he finally spoke it was otherwise. He took another step forward, asking uncertainly:

“You are Mr. Rush?”

“Yeah.” The detective's voice was hoarse with a choking harshness that seemed to corroborate the heavy-cold testimony of his eyes. He put his feet down on the floor and jerked a fat, red hand at a chair. “Sit down, sir.”

The man in gray sat down, tentatively upright on the chair's front edge.

“Now what can I do for you?” Alec Rush croaked amiably.

“I wan t— I wish — I would like —” and further than that the man in gray said nothing.

“Maybe you'd better just tell me what's wrong,” the detective suggested. “Then I'll know what you want of me.” He smiled.

There was kindliness in Alec Rush's smile, and it was not easily resisted. True, his smile was a horrible grimace out of a nightmare, but that was its charm. When your gentle-countenanced man smiles there is small gain: his smile expresses little more than his reposed face. But when Alec Rush distorted his ogre's mask so that jovial friendliness peeped incongruously from his savage red eyes, from his brutal metal-studded mouth — then that was a heartening, a winning thing.

“Yes, I daresay that would be better.” The man in gray sat back in his chair, more comfortably, less transiently. “Yesterday on Fayette Street, I met — a young woman I

know. I hadn't — we hadn't met for several months. That isn't really pertinent, however. But after we separated — we had talked for a few minutes — I saw a man. That is, he came out of a doorway and went down the street in the same direction she had taken, and I got the idea he was following her. She turned into Liberty Street and he did likewise. Countless people walk along that same route, and the idea that he was following her seemed fantastic, so much so that I dismissed it and went on about my business.

“But I couldn't get the notion out of my head. It seemed to me there had been something peculiarly intent in his carriage, and no matter how much I told myself the notion was absurd, it persisted in worrying me. So last night, having nothing especial to do, I drove out to the neighbourhood of — of the young woman's house. And I saw the same man again. He was standing on a corner two blocks from her house. It was the same man — I'm certain of it. I tried to watch him, but while I was finding a place for my car he disappeared and I did not see him again. Those are the circumstances. Now will you look into it, learn if he is actually following her, and why?”

“Sure,” the detective agreed hoarsely, “but didn't you say anything to the lady or to any of her family?”

The man in gray fidgeted in his chair and looked at the stringy dun carpet.

“No, I didn't. I didn't want to disturb her, frighten her, and still don't. After all, it may be no more than a meaningless coincidence, and — and — well — I don't — That's impossible! What I had in mind was for you to find out what is wrong, if anything, and remedy it without my appearing in the matter at all.”

“Maybe, but, mind you, I'm not saying I will. I'd want to know more first.”

“More? You mean more —”

“More about you and her.”

“But there is nothing about us!” the man in gray protested. “It is exactly as I have told you. I might add that the young woman is — is married, and that until yesterday I had not seen her since her marriage.”

“Then your interest in her is —?” The detective let the husky interrogation hang incompleted in the air.

“Of friendship — past friendship.”

“Yeah. Now who is this young woman?”

The man in gray fidgeted again.

“See here, Rush,” he said, colouring, “I'm perfectly willing to tell you, and shall, of course, but I don't want to tell you unless you are going to handle this thing for me. I mean I don't want to be bringing her name into it if — if you aren't. Will you?”

Alec Rush scratched his grizzled head with a stubby forefinger.

“I don't know,” he growled. “That's what I'm trying to find out. I can't take a hold of a job that might be anything. I've got to know that you're on the up-and-up.”

Puzzlement disturbed the clarity of the younger man's brown eyes.

“But I didn't think you'd be —” he broke off and looked away from the ugly man.

“Of course you didn't.” A chuckle rasped in the detective's burly throat, the chuckle of a man touched in a once-sore spot that is no longer tender. He raised a big hand to arrest his prospective client in the act of rising from his chair. “What you did, on a guess, was to go to one of the big agencies and tell 'em your story. They wouldn't touch it unless you cleared up the fishy points. Then you ran across my name, remembered I was chucked out of the department a couple of years ago. 'There's my man,' you said to yourself, 'a baby who won't be so choicy!'“

The man in gray protested with head and gesture and voice that this was not so. But his eyes were sheepish.

Alec Rush laughed harshly again and said, “No matter. I ain't sensitive about it. I can talk about politics, and being made the goat, and all that, but the records show the Board of Police Commissioners gave me the air for a list of crimes that would stretch from here to Canton Hollow. All right, sir! I'll take your job. It sounds phoney, but maybe it ain't. It'll cost you fifteen a day and expenses.”

“I can see that it sounds peculiar,” the younger man assured the detective, “but you'll find that it's quite all right. You'll want a retainer, of course.”

“Yes, say fifty.”

The man in gray took five new ten-dollar bills from a pigskin billfold and put them on the desk. With a thick pen Alec Rush began to make muddy ink-marks on a receipt blank.

“Your name?” he asked.

“I would rather not. I'm not to appear in it, you know. My name would not be of

importance, would it?”

Alec Rush put down his pen and frowned at his client.

“Now! Now!” he grumbled good-naturedly. “How am I going to do business with a man like you?”

The man in gray was sorry, even apologetic, but he was stubborn in his reticence. He would not give his name. Alec Rush growled and complained, but pocketed the five ten-dollar bills.

“It's in your favour, maybe,” the detective admitted as he surrendered, “though it ain't to your credit. But if you were off-colour I guess you'd have sense enough to fake a name. Now this young woman — who is she?”

“Mrs. Hubert Landow.”

“Well, well, we've got a name at last! And where does Mrs. Landow live?”

“On Charles-Street Avenue,” the man in gray said, and gave a number.

“Her description?”

“She is twenty-two or—three years old, rather tall, slender in an athletic way, with auburn hair, blue eyes, and very white skin.”

“And her husband? You know him?”

“I have seen him. He is about my age — thirty —but larger than I, a tall, broad-shouldered man of the clean-cut blond type.”

“And your mystery man? What does he look like?”

“He's quite young, not more than twenty-two at the most, and not very large — medium size, perhaps, or a little under. He's very dark, with high cheek-bones and a large nose. High, straight shoulders, too, but not broad. He walks with small, almost mincing, steps.”

“Clothes?”

“He was wearing a brown suit and a tan cap when I saw him on Fayette Street yesterday afternoon. I suppose he wore the same last night, but I'm not positive.”

“I suppose you'll drop in here for my reports,” the detective wound up, “since I won't

know where to send them to you?”

“Yes.” The man in gray stood up and held out his hand. “I'm very grateful to you for undertaking this, Mr. Rush.”

Alec Rush said that was all right. They shook hands, and the man in gray went out.

The ugly man waited until his client had had time to turn off into the corridor that led to the elevators. Then the detective said, “Now, Mr. Man!” got up from his chair, took his hat from the clothes-tree in the corner, locked his office door behind him, and ran down the back stairs.

He ran with the deceptive heavy agility of a bear. There was something bearlike, too, in the looseness with which his blue suit hung on his stout body, and in the set of his heavy shoulders — sloping, limber-jointed shoulders whose droop concealed much of their bulk.

He gained the ground floor in time to see the gray back of his client issuing into the street. In his wake Alec Rush sauntered. Two blocks, a turn to the left, another block, and a turn to the right. The man in gray went into the office of a trust company that occupied the ground floor of a large office building.

The rest was the mere turning of a hand. Half a dollar to a porter: the man in gray was Ralph Millar, assistant cashier.

Darkness was settling in Charles-Street Avenue when Alec Rush, in a modest black coupe, drove past the address Ralph Millar had given him. The house was large in the dusk, spaced from its fellows as from the paving by moderate expanses of fenced lawn.

Alec Rush drove on, turned to the left at the first crossing, again to the left at the next, and at the next. For half an hour he guided his car along a many-angled turning and returning route until, when finally he stopped beside the curb at some distance from, but within sight of, the Landow house, he had driven through every piece of thoroughfare in the vicinity of that house.

He had not seen Millar's dark, high-shouldered young man.

Lights burned brightly in Charles-Street Avenue, and the night traffic began to purr southward into the city. Alec Rush's heavy body slumped against the wheel of his coupe while he filled its interior with pungent fog from a black cigar, and held patient, bloodshot eyes on what he could see of the Landow residence.

Three-quarters of an hour passed, and there was motion in the house. A limousine left the garage in the rear for the front door. A man and a woman, faintly distinguishable

at that distance, left the house for the limousine. The limousine moved out into the cityward current. The third car behind it was Alec Rush's modest coupe.

Except for a perilous moment at North Avenue, when the interfering cross-stream of traffic threatened to separate him from his quarry, Alec Rush followed the limousine without difficulty. In front of a Howard Street theatre it discharged its freight: a youngish man and a young woman, both tall, evening-clad, and assuringly in agreement with the descriptions the detective had got from his client.

The Landows went into the already dark theatre while Alec Rush was buying his ticket. In the light of the first intermission he discovered them again. Leaving his seat for the rear of the auditorium, he found an angle from which he could study them for the remaining five minutes of illumination.

Hubert Landow's head was rather small for his stature, and the blond hair with which it was covered threatened each moment to escape from its imposed smoothness into crisp curls. His face, healthily ruddy, was handsome in a muscular, very masculine way, not indicative of any great mental nimbleness. His wife had that beauty which needs no cataloguing. However, her hair was auburn, her eyes blue, her skin white, and she looked a year or two older than the maximum twenty-three Millar had allowed her.

While the intermission lasted Hubert Landow talked to his wife eagerly, and his bright eyes were the eyes of a lover. Alec Rush could not see Mrs. Landow's eyes. He saw her replying now and again to her husband's words. Her profile showed no answering eagerness. She did not show she was bored.

Midway through the last act, Alec Rush left the theatre to maneuver his coupe into a handy position from which to cover the Landows' departure. But their limousine did not pick them up when they left the theatre. They turned down Howard Street afoot, going to a rather garish second-class restaurant, where an abbreviated orchestra succeeded by main strength in concealing its smallness from the ear.

His coupe conveniently parked, Alec Rush found a table from which he could watch his subjects without being himself noticeable. Husband still wooed wife with incessant, eager talking. Wife was listless, polite, unkindled. Neither more than touched the food before them. They danced once, the woman's face as little touched by immediate interest as when she listened to her husband's words. A beautiful face, but empty.

The minute hand of Alec Rush's nickel-plated watch had scarcely begun its last climb of the day from where 'VI' is inferred to 'XII' when the Landows left the restaurant. The limousine — against its side a young Norfolk-jacketed Negro smoking — was two doors away. It bore them back to their house. The detective having seen them into the house, having seen the limousine into the garage, drove his coupe again around and

around through the neighbouring thoroughfares. And saw nothing of Millar's dark young man.

Then Alec Rush went home and to bed.

At eight o'clock the next morning ugly man and modest coupe were stationary in Charles-Street Avenue again. Male Charles-Street Avenue went with the sun on its left toward its offices. As the morning aged and the shadows grew shorter and thicker, so, generally, did the individuals who composed this morning procession. Eight o'clock was frequently young and slender and brisk, Eight-thirty less so, Nine still less, and rear-guard Ten o'clock was preponderantly neither young nor slender, and more often sluggish than brisk.

Into this rear guard, though physically he belonged to no later period than eight-thirty, a blue roadster carried Hubert Landow. His broad shoulders were blue-coated, his blond hair gray-capped, and he was alone in the roadster. With a glance around to make sure Millar's dark young man was not in sight, Alec Rush turned his coupe in the blue car's wake.

They rode swiftly into the city, down into its financial centre, where Hubert Landow deserted his roadster before a Redwood Street stockbroker's office. The morning had become noon before Landow was in the street again, turning his roadster northward.

When shadowed and shadower came to rest again they were in Mount Royal Avenue. Landow got out of his car and strode briskly into a large apartment building. A block distant, Alec Rush lighted a black cigar and sat still in his coupe. Half an hour passed. Alec Rush turned his head and sank his gold teeth deep into his cigar.

Scarcely twenty feet behind the coupe, in the doorway of a garage, a dark young man with high cheek-bones, high, straight shoulders, loitered. His nose was large. His suit was brown, as were the eyes with which he seemed to pay no especial attention to anything through the thin blue drift of smoke from the tip of a drooping cigarette.

Alec Rush took his cigar from his mouth to examine it, took a knife from his pocket to trim the bitten end, restored cigar to mouth and knife to pocket, and thereafter was as indifferent to all Mount Royal Avenue as the dark youth behind him. The one drowsed in his doorway. The other dozed in his car. And the afternoon crawled past one o'clock, past one-thirty.

Hubert Landow came out of the apartment building, vanished swiftly in his blue roadster. His going stirred neither of the motionless men, scarcely their eyes. Not until another fifteen minutes had gone did either of them move.

Then the dark youth left his doorway. He moved without haste, up the street, with

short, almost mincing, steps. The back of Alec Rush's black-derbied head was to the youth when he passed the coupe, which may have been chance, for none could have said that the ugly man had so much as glanced at the other since his first sight of him. The dark young man let his eyes rest on the detective's back without interest as he passed. He went on up the street toward the apartment building Landow had visited, up its steps, and out of sight into it.

When the dark young man had disappeared, Alec Rush threw away his cigar, stretched, yawned, and awakened the coupe's engine. Four blocks and two turnings from Mount Royal Avenue, he got out of the automobile, leaving it locked and empty in front of a graystone church. He walked back to Mount Royal Avenue, to halt on a corner two blocks above his earlier position.

He had another half-hour of waiting before the dark young man appeared. Alec Rush was buying a cigar in a glass-fronted cigar store when the other passed. The young man boarded a street car at North Avenue and found a seat. The detective boarded the same car at the next corner and stood on the rear platform. Warned by an indicative forward hitching of the young man's shoulders and head, Alec Rush was the first passenger off the car at Madison Avenue, and the first aboard a southbound car there. And again, he was off first at Franklin Street.

The dark youth went straight to a rooming-house in this street, while the detective came to rest beside the window of a corner drug store specialising in theatrical make-up. There he loafed until half-past three. When the dark young man came into the street again it was to walk — Alec Rush behind him — to Eutaw Street, board a car, and ride to Camden Station.

There, in the waiting-room, the dark young man met a young woman who frowned and asked:

“Where in the hell have you been at?”

Passing them, the detective heard the petulant greeting, but the young man's reply was pitched too low for him to catch, nor did he hear anything else the young woman said. They talked for perhaps ten minutes, standing together in a deserted end of the waiting-room, so that Alec Rush could not have approached them without making himself conspicuous.

The young woman seemed to be impatient, urgent. The young man seemed to explain, to reassure. Now and then he gestured with the ugly, deft hands of a skilled mechanic. His companion became more agreeable. She was short, square, as if carved economically from a cube. Consistently, her nose also was short and her chin square. She had, on the whole, now that her earlier displeasure was passing, a merry face, a pert, pugnacious, rich-blooded face that advertised inexhaustible vitality. That

advertisement was in every feature, from the live ends of her cut brown hair to the earth-gripping pose of her feet on the cement flooring. Her clothes were dark, quiet, expensive, but none too gracefully worn, hanging just the least bit bunchily here and there on her sturdy body.

Nodding vigorously several times, the young man at length tapped his cap-visor with two careless fingers and went out into the street. Alec Rush let him depart unshadowed. But when, walking slowly out to the iron train-shed gates, along them to the baggage window, thence to the street door, the young woman passed out of the station, the ugly man was behind her. He was still behind her when she joined the four o'clock shopping crowd at Lexington Street.

The young woman shopped with the whole-hearted air of one with nothing else on her mind. In the second department store she visited, Alec Rush left her looking at a display of laces while he moved as swiftly and directly as intervening shoppers would permit toward a tall, thick-shouldered, gray-haired woman in black, who seemed to be waiting for someone near the foot of a flight of stairs.

“Hello, Alec!” she said when he touched her arm, and her humorous eyes actually looked with pleasure at his uncouth face. “What are you doing in my territory?”

“Got a booster for you,” he mumbled. “The chunky girl in blue at the lace counter. Make her?”

The store detective looked and nodded.

“Yes. Thanks, Alec. You're sure she's boosting, of course?”

“Now, Minnie!” he complained, his rasping voice throttled down to a metallic growl. “Would I be giving you a bum rumble? She went south with a couple of silk pieces, and it's more than likely she's got herself some lace by now.”

“Um-hmm,” said Minnie. “Well, when she sticks her foot on the sidewalk, I'll be with her.”

Alec Rush put his hand on the store detective's arm again.

“I want a line on her,” he said. “What do you say we tail her around and see what she's up to before we knock her over?”

“If it doesn't take all day,” the woman agreed. And when the chunky girl in blue presently left the lace counter and the store, the detectives followed, into another store, ranging too far behind her to see any thieving she might have done, content to keep her under surveillance. From this last store their prey went down to where Pratt

Street was dingiest, into a dingy three-story house of furnished flats.

Two blocks away a policeman was turning a corner.

“Take a plant on the joint while I get a copper,” Alex Rush ordered.

When he returned with the policeman the store detective was waiting in the vestibule.

“Second floor,” she said.

Behind her the house's street door stood open to show a dark hallway and the foot of a tattered-carpeted flight of steps. Into this dismal hallway appeared a slovenly thin woman in rumpled gray cotton, saying whiningly as she came forward, “What do you want? I keep a respectable house, I'll have you understand, and I —”

“Chunky, dark-eyed girl living here,” Alec Rush croaked. “Second floor. Take us up.”

The woman's scrawny face sprang into startled lines, faded eyes wide, as if mistaking the harshness of the detective's voice for the harshness of great emotion.

“Why — why —” she stammered, and then remembered the first principle of shady rooming-house management —n ever to stand in the way of the police. “I'll take you up,” she agreed, and, hitching her wrinkled skirt in one hand, led the way up the stairs.

Her sharp fingers tapped on a door near the head of the stairs.

“Who's that?” a casually curt feminine voice asked.

“Landlady.”

The chunky girl in blue, without her hat now, opened the door. Alec Rush moved a big foot forward to hold it open, while the landlady said, “This is her,” the policeman said, “You'll have to come along,” and Minnie said, “Dearie, we want to come in and talk to you.”

“My God!” exclaimed the girl. “There'd be just as much sense to it if you'd all jumped out at me and yelled 'Boo!'“

“This ain't any way,” Alec Rush rasped, moving forward, grinning his hideous friendly grin. “Let's go in where we can talk it over.”

Merely by moving his loose-jointed bulk a step this way, a half-step that, turning his ugly face on this one and that one, he herded the little group as he wished, sending

the landlady discontentedly away, marshalling the others into the girl's rooms.

“Remember, I got no idea what this is all about,” said the girl when they were in her living-room, a narrow room where blue fought with red without ever compromising on purple. “I'm easy to get along with, and if you think this is a nice place to talk about whatever you want to talk about, go ahead! But if you're counting on me talking, too, you'd better smart me up.”

“Boosting, dearie,” Minnie said, leaning forward to pat the girl's arm. “I'm at Goodbody's.”

“You think I've been shoplifting? Is that the idea?”

“Yeah. Exactly. Uh-huh. That's what.” Alec Rush left her no doubt on the point.

The girl narrowed her eyes, puckered her red mouth, squinted sidewise at the ugly man.

“It's all right with me,” she announced, “so long as Goodbody's is hanging the rap on me — somebody I can sue for a million when it flops. I've got nothing to say. Take me for my ride.”

“You'll get your ride, sister,” the ugly man rasped good-naturedly. “Nobody's going to beat you out of it. But do you mind if I look around your place a little first?”

“Got anything with a judge's name on it that says you can?”

“No.”

“Then you don't get a peep!”

Alec Rush chuckled, thrust his hands into his trouser-pockets, and began to wander through the rooms, of which there were three. Presently he came out of the bedroom carrying a photograph in a silver frame.

“Who's this?” he asked the girl.

“Try and find out!”

“I am trying,” he lied.

“You big bum!” said she. “You couldn't find water in the ocean!”

Alec Rush laughed with coarse heartiness. He could afford to. The photograph in his

hand was of Hubert Landow.

Twilight was around the graystone church when the owner of the deserted coupe returned to it. The chunky girl — Polly Vanness was the name she had given — had been booked and lodged in a cell in the Southwestern Police Station. Quantities of stolen goods had been found in her flat. Her harvest of that afternoon was still on her person when Minnie and a police matron searched her. She had refused to talk. The detective had said nothing to her about his knowledge of the photograph's subject, or of her meeting in the railroad station with the dark young man. Nothing found in her rooms threw any light on either of these things.

Having eaten his evening meal before coming back to his car, Alec Rush now drove out to Charles-Street Avenue. Lights glowed normally in the Landow house when he passed it. A little beyond it he turned his coupe so that it pointed toward the city, and brought it to rest in a tree-darkened curb-side spot within sight of the house.

The night went along and no one left or entered the Landow house.

Fingernails clicked on the coupe's glass door.

A man stood there. Nothing could be said of him in the darkness except that he was not large, and that to have escaped the detective's notice until now he must have stealthily stalked the car from the rear.

Alec Rush put out a hand and the door swung open.

“Got a match?” the man asked.

The detective hesitated, said, “Yeah,” and held out a box.

A match scraped and flared into a dark young face: large nose, high cheek-bones: the young man Alec Rush had shadowed that afternoon.

But recognition, when it was voiced, was voiced by the dark young man.

“I thought it was you,” he said simply as he applied the flaming match to his cigarette. “Maybe you don't know me, but I knew you when you were on the force.”

The ex-detective sergeant gave no meaning at all to a husky “Yeah.”

“I thought it was you in the heap on Mount Royal this afternoon, but I couldn't make sure,” the young man continued, entering the coupe, sitting beside the detective, closing the door. “Scuttle Zeipp's me. I ain't as well-known as Napoleon, so if you've never heard of me there's no hard feelings.”

“Yeah.”

“That's the stuff! When you once think up a good answer, stick to it.” Scuttle Zeipp's face was a sudden bronze mask in the glow of his cigarette. “The same answer'll do for my next question. You're interested in these here Landows? Yeah,” he added in hoarse mimicry of the detective's voice.

Another inhalation lighted his face, and his words came smokily out as the glow faded.

“You ought to want to know what I'm doing hanging around 'em. I ain't tight. I'll tell you. I've been slipped half a grand to bump off the girl — twice. How do you like that?”

“I hear you,” said Alec Rush. “But anybody can talk that knows the words.”

“Talk? Sure it's talk,” Zeipp admitted cheerfully. “But so's it talk when the judge says 'hanged by the neck until dead and may God have mercy on your soul!' Lots of things are talk, but that don't always keep 'em from being real.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, brother, yeah! Now listen to this: it's one for the cuff. A certain party comes to me a couple of days ago with a knock-down from a party that knows me. See? This certain party asks me what I want to bump off a broad. I thought a grand would be right, and said so. Too stiff. We come together on five hundred. I got two-fifty down and get the rest when the Landow twist is cold. Not so bad for a soft trick — a slug through the side of a car — huh?”

“Well, what are you waiting for?” the detective asked. “You want to make it a fancy caper — kill her on her birthday or a legal holiday?”

Scuttle Zeipp smacked his lips and poked the detective's chest with a finger in the dark.

“Not any, brother! I'm thinking way ahead of you! Listen to this: I pocket my two-fifty advance and come up here to give the ground a good casing, not wanting to lam into anything I didn't know was here. While I'm poking around, I run into another party that's poking around. This second party gives me a tumble, I talk smart, and bingo! First thing you know she's propositioning me. What do you guess? She wants to know what I want to bump off a broad! Is it the same one she wants stopped? I hope to tell you it is!

“It ain't so silly! I get my hands on another two hundred and fifty berries, with that much more coming when I put over the fast one. Now do you think I'm going to do

anything to that Landow baby? You're dumb if you do. She's my meal ticket. If she lives till I pop her, she'll be older than either you or the bay. I've got five hundred out of her so far. What's the matter with sticking around and waiting for more customers that don't like her? If two of 'em want to buy her out of the world, why not more? The answer is 'Yeah!' And on top of that, here you are snooping around her. Now there it is, brother, for you to look at and taste and smell."

Silence held for several minutes, in the darkness of the coupe's interior, and then the detective's harsh voice put a sceptical question:

"And who are these certain parties that want her out of the way?"

"Be yourself!" Scuttle Zeipp admonished him. "I'm laying down on 'em, right enough, but I ain't feeding 'em to you."

"What are you giving me all this for then?"

"What for? Because you're in on the lay somewhere. Crossing each other, neither of us can make a thin dimmer. If we don't hook up we'll just ruin the racket for each other. I've already made half a grand off this Landow. That's mine, but there's more to be picked up by a couple of men that know what they're doing. All right. I'm offering to throw in with you on a two-way cut of whatever else we can get. But my parties are out! I don't mind throwing them down, but I ain't rat enough to put the finger on them for you."

Alec Rush grunted and croaked another dubious inquiry.

"How come you trust me so much, Scuttle?"

The hired killer laughed knowingly.

"Why not? You're a right guy. You can see a profit when it's showed to you. They didn't chuck you off the force for forgetting to hang up your stocking. Besides, suppose you want to double-cross me, what can you do? You can't prove anything. I told you I didn't mean the woman any harm. I ain't even packing a gun. But all that's the bunk. You're a wise head. You know what's what. Me and you, Alec, we can get plenty!"

Silence again, until the detectives spoke slowly, thoughtfully.

"The first thing would be to get a line on the reasons your parties want the girl put out. Got anything on that?"

"Not a whisper."

“Both of 'em women, I take it.”

Scuttle Zeipp hesitated.

“Yes,” he admitted. “But don't be asking me anything about 'em. In the first place, I don't know anything, and in the second, I wouldn't tip their mitts if I did.”

“Yeah,” the detective croaked, as if he quite understood his companion's perverted idea of loyalty. “Now if they're women, the chances are the racket hangs on a man. What do you think of Landow? He's a pretty lad.”

Scuttle Zeipp leaned over to put his finger against the detective's chest again.

“You've got it, Alec! That could be it, damned if it couldn't!”

“Yeah,” Alec Rush agreed, fumbling with the levers of his car. “We'll get away from here and stay away until I look into him.”

At Franklin Street, half a block from the rooming-house into which he had shadowed the young man that afternoon, the detective stopped his coupe.

“You want to drop out here?” he asked.

Scuttle Zeipp looked sidewise, speculatively, into the elder man's ugly face.

“It'll do,” the young man said, “but you're a damned good guesser, just the same.” He stopped with a hand on the door. “It's a go, is it, Alec? Fifty-fifty?”

“I wouldn't say so.” Alec Rush grinned at him with hideous good nature. “You're not a bad lad, Scuttle, and if there's any gravy you'll get yours, but don't count on me mobbing up with you.”

Zeipp's eyes jerked to slits, his lips snarled back from yellow teeth that were set edge to edge.

“You sell me out, you damned gorilla, and I'll —” He laughed the threat out of being, his dark face young and careless again. “Have it your own way, Alec. I didn't make no mistake when I throwed in with you. What you say goes.”

“Yeah,” the ugly man agreed. “Lay off that joint out there until I tell you. Maybe you'd better drop in to see me tomorrow. The phone book'll tell you where my office is. So long, kid.”

“So long, Alec.”

In the morning Alec Rush set about investigating Hubert Landow. First he went to the City Hall, where he examined the gray books in which marriage licenses are indexed. Hubert Britman Landow and Sara Falsoner had been married six months before, he learned.

The bride's maiden name thickened the red in the detective's bloodshot eyes. Air hissed sharply from his flattened nostrils. “Yeah! Yeah!” he said to himself, so raspingly that a lawyer's skinny clerk, fiddling with other records at his elbow, looked frightenedly at him and edged a little away.

From the City Hall, Alec Rush carried the bride's name to two newspaper offices, where, after studying the files, he bought an armful of six-month-old papers. He took the papers to his office, spread them on his desk, and attacked them with a pair of shears. When the last one had been cut and thrown aside, there remained on his desk a thick sheaf of clippings.

Arranging his clippings in chronological order, Alec Rush lighted a black cigar, put his elbows on the desk, his ugly head between his palms, and began to read a story with which newspaper-reading Baltimore had been familiar half a year before.

Purged of irrelevancies and earlier digressions, the story was essentially this:

Jerome Falsoner, aged forty-five, was a bachelor who lived alone in a flat in Cathedral Street, on an income more than sufficient for his comfort. He was a tall man, but of delicate physique, the result, it may have been, of excessive indulgence in pleasure on a constitution none too strong in the beginning. He was well-known, at least by sight, to all night-living Baltimoreans, and to those who frequented race-track, gambling-house, and the furtive cockpits that now and then materialise for a few brief hours in the forty miles of country that lie between Baltimore and Washington.

One Fanny Kidd, coming as was her custom at ten o'clock one morning to “do” Jerome Falsoner's rooms, found him lying on his back in his living-room, staring with dead eyes at a spot on the ceiling, a bright spot that was reflected sunlight—reflected from the metal hilt of his paper-knife, which protruded from his chest.

Police investigation established four facts:

First, Jerome Falsoner had been dead for fourteen hours when Fanny Kidd found him, which placed his murder at about eight o'clock the previous evening.

Second, the last persons known to have seen him alive were a woman named Madeline Boudin, with whom he had been intimate, and three of her friends. They had seen him, alive, at some time between seven-thirty and eight o'clock, or less than half an hour

before his death. They had been driving down to a cottage on the Severn River, and Madeline Boudin had told the others she wanted to see Falsoner before she went. The others had remained in their car while she rang the bell. Jerome Falsoner opened the street door and she went in. Ten minutes later she came out and rejoined her friends. Jerome Falsoner came to the door with her, waving a hand at one of the men in the car — a Frederick Stoner, who knew Falsoner slightly, and who was connected with the district attorney's office. Two women, talking on the steps of a house across the street, had also seen Falsoner, and had seen Madeline Boudin and her friends drive away.

Third, Jerome Falsoner's heir and only near relative was his niece, Sara Falsoner, who, by some vagary of chance, was marrying Hubert Landow at the very hour that Fanny Kidd was finding her employer's dead body. Niece and uncle had seldom seen one another. The niece — for police suspicion settled on her for a short space — was definitely proved to have been at home, in her apartment in Carey Street, from six o'clock the evening of the murder until eight-thirty the next morning. Her husband, her fiancé then, had been there with her from six until eleven that evening. Prior to her marriage, the girl had been employed as stenographer by the same trust company that employed Ralph Millar.

Fourth, Jerome Falsoner, who had not the most even of dispositions, had quarrelled with an Icelander named Einar Jokumsson in a gambling-house two days before he was murdered. Jokumsson had threatened him. Jokumsson — a short, heavily built man, dark-haired, dark-eyed — had vanished from his hotel, leaving his bags there, the day the body was found, and had not been seen since.

The last of these clippings carefully read, Alec Rush rocked back in his chair and made a thoughtful monster's face at the ceiling. Presently he leaned forward again to look into the telephone directory, and to call the number of Ralph Millar's trust company. But when he got his number he changed his mind.

“Never mind,” he said into the instrument, and called a number that was Goodbody's. Minnie, when she came to the telephone, told him that Polly Vanness had been identified as one Polly Bangs, arrested in Milwaukee two years ago for shoplifting, and given a two-year sentence. Minnie also said that Polly Bangs had been released on bail early that morning.

Alec Rush pushed back the telephone and looked through his clippings again until he found the address of Madeline Boudin, the woman who had visited Falsoner so soon before his death. It was a Madison Avenue number. Thither his coupe carried the detective.

No, Miss Boudin did not live there. Yes, she had lived there, but had moved four months ago. Perhaps Mrs. Blender, on the third floor, would know where she lived now. Mrs. Blender did not know. She knew Miss Boudin had moved to an apartment

house in Garrison Avenue, but did not think she was living there now. At the Garrison Avenue house: Miss Boudin had moved away a month and a half ago — somewhere in Mount Royal Avenue, perhaps. The number was not known.

The coupe carried its ugly owner to Mount Royal Avenue, to the apartment building he had seen first Hubert Landow and then Scuttle Zeipp visit the previous day. At the manager's office he made inquiries about a Walter Boyden, who was thought to live there. Walter Boyden was not known to the manager. There was a Miss Boudin in 604, but her name was B-o-u-d-i-n, and she lived alone.

Alec Rush left the building and got in his car again. He screwed up his savage red eyes, nodded his head in a satisfied way, and with one finger described a small circle in the air. Then he returned to his office.

Calling the trust company's number again, he gave Ralph Millar's name, and presently was speaking to the assistant cashier.

“This is Rush. Can you come up to the office right away?”

“What's that? Certainly. But how — how —? Yes, I'll be up in a minute.”

None of the surprise that had been in Millar's telephone voice was apparent when he reached the detective's office. He asked no questions concerning the detective's knowledge of his identity. In brown today, he was as neatly inconspicuous as he had been yesterday in gray.

“Come in,” the ugly man welcomed him. “Sit down. I've got to have some more facts, Mr. Millar.”

Millar's thin mouth tightened and his brows drew together with obstinate reticence.

“I thought we settled that point, Rush. I told you —”

Alec Rush frowned at his client with jovial, though frightful exasperation.

“I know what you told me,” he interrupted. “But that was then and this is now. The thing's coming unwound on me, and I can see just enough to get myself tangled up if I don't watch Harvey. I found your mysterious man, talked to him. He was following Mrs. Landow, right enough. According to the way he tells it, he's been hired to kill her.”

Millar leaped from his chair to lean over the yellow desk, his face close to the detective's.

“My God, Rush, what are you saying? To kill her?”

“Now, now! Take it easy. He's not going to kill her. I don't think he ever meant to. But he claims he was hired to do it.”

“You've arrested him? You've found the man who hired him?”

The detective squinted up his bloodshot eyes and studied the younger man's passionate face.

“As a matter of fact,” he croaked calmly when he had finished his examination, “I haven't done either of those things. She's in no danger just now. Maybe the lad was stringing me, maybe he wasn't, but either way he wouldn't have spilled it to me if he meant to do anything. And when it comes right down to it, Mr. Millar, do you want him arrested?”

“Yes! That is —” Millar stepped back from the desk, sagged limply down on the chair again, and put shaking hands over his face. “My God, Rush, I don't know!” he gasped.

“Exactly,” said Alec Rush. “Now here it is. Mrs. Landow was Jerome Falsoner's niece and heir. She worked for your trust company. She married Landow the morning her uncle was found dead. Yesterday Landow visited the building where Madeline Boudin lives. She was the last person known to have been in Falsoner's rooms before he was killed. But her alibi seems to be as air-tight as the Landows'. The man who claims he was hired to kill Mrs. Landow also visited Madeline Boudin's building yesterday. I saw him go in. I saw him meet another woman. A shoplifter, the second one. In her rooms I found a photograph of Hubert Landow. Your dark man claims he was hired twice to kill Mrs. Landow — by two women neither knowing the other had hired him. He won't tell me who they are, but he doesn't have to.”

The hoarse voice stopped and Alec Rush waited for Millar to speak. But Millar was for the time without a voice. His eyes were wide and despairingly empty. Alec Rush raised one big hand, folded it into a fist that was almost perfectly spherical, and thumped his desk softly.

“There it is, Mr. Millar,” he rasped. “A pretty tangle. If you'll tell me what you know, we'll get it straightened out, never fear. If you don't — I'm out!”

Now Millar found words, however jumbled.

“You couldn't, Rush! You can't desert me — us — her! It's not — You're not —”

But Alec Rush shook his ugly pear-shaped head with slow emphasis.

“There's murder in this and the Lord knows what all. I've got no liking for a blindfolded game. How do I know what you're up to? You can tell me what you know — everything — or you can find yourself another detective. That's flat.”

Ralph Millar's fingers picked at each other, his teeth pulled at his lips, his harassed eyes pleaded with the detective.

“You can't, Rush,” he begged. “She's still in danger. Even if you are right about that man not attacking her, she's not safe. The women who hired him can hire another. You've got to protect her, Rush.”

“Yeah? Then you've got to talk.”

“I've got to —? Yes, I'll talk, Rush. I'll tell you anything you ask. But there's really nothing — or almost nothing —I know beyond what you've already learned.”

“She worked for your trust company?”

“Yes, in my department.”

“Left there to be married?”

“Yes. That is — No, Rush, the truth is she was discharged. It was an outrage, but —”

“When was this?”

“It was the day before the — before she was married.”

“Tell me about it.”

“She had — I'll have to explain her situation to you first, Rush. She is an orphan. Her father, Ben Falsoner, had been wild in his youth — and perhaps not only in his youth — as I believe all the Falsoners have been. However, he had quarrelled with his father — old Howard Falsoner — and the old man had cut him out of the will. But not altogether out. The old man hoped Ben would mend his ways, and he didn't mean to leave him with nothing in that event. Unfortunately he trusted it to his other son, Jerome.

“Old Howard Falsoner left a will whereby the income from his estate was to go to Jerome during Jerome's life. Jerome was to provide for his brother, Ben, as he saw fit. That is, he had an absolutely free hand. He could divide the income equally with his brother, or he could give him a pittance, or he could give him nothing, as Ben's conduct deserved. On Jerome's death the estate was to be divided equally among the old man's grandchildren.

“In theory, that was a fairly sensible arrangement, but not in practice — not in Jerome Falsoner's hands. You didn't know him? Well, he was the last man you'd ever trust with a thing of that sort. He exercised his power to the utmost. Ben Falsoner never got a cent from him. Three years ago Ben died, and so the girl, his only daughter, stepped into his position in relation to her grandfather's money. Her mother was already dead. Jerome Falsoner never paid her a cent.

“That was her situation when she came to the trust company two years ago. It wasn't a happy one. She had at least a touch of the Falsoner recklessness and extravagance. There she was: heiress to some two million dollars — for Jerome had never married and she was the only grandchild — but without any present income at all, except her salary, which was by no means a large one.

“She got in debt. I suppose she tried to economise at times, but there was always that two million dollars ahead to make scrimping doubly distasteful. Finally, the trust company officials heard of her indebtedness. A collector or two came to the office, in fact. Since she was employed in my department, I had the disagreeable duty of warning her. She promised to pay her debts and contract no more, and I suppose she did try, but she wasn't very successful. Our officials are old-fashioned, ultra-conservative. I did everything I could to save her, but it was no good. They simply would not have an employee who was heels over head in debt.”

Millar paused a moment, looked miserably at the floor, and went on:

“I had the disagreeable task of telling her her services were no longer needed. I tried to — It was awfully unpleasant. That was the day before she married Landow. It —” He paused and, as if he could think of nothing else to say, repeated, “Yes, it was the day before she married Landow,” and fell to staring miserably at the floor again.

Alec Rush, who had sat as still through the recital of this history as a carven monster on an old church, now leaned over his desk and put a husky question:

“And who is this Hubert Landow? What is he?”

Ralph Millar shook his downcast head.

“I don't know him. I've seen him. I know nothing of him.”

“Mrs. Landow ever speak of him? I mean when she was in the trust company?”

“It's likely, but I don't remember.”

“So you didn't know what to make of it when you heard she'd married him?”

The younger man looked up with frightened brown eyes.

“What are you getting at, Rush? You don't think — Yes, as you say, I was surprised. What are you getting at?”

“The marriage license,” the detective said, ignoring his client's repeated question, “was issued to Landow four days before the wedding-day, four days before Jerome Falsoner's body was found.”

Millar chewed a fingernail and shook his head hopelessly.

“I don't know what you're getting at,” he mumbled around the finger. “The whole thing is bewildering.”

“Isn't it a fact, Mr. Millar,” the detective's voice filled the office with hoarse insistence, “that you were on more friendly terms with Sara Falsoner than with anyone else in the trust company?”

The younger man raised his head and looked Alec Rush in the eye — held his gaze with brown eyes that were doggedly level.

“The fact is,” he said quietly, “that I asked Sara Falsoner to marry me the day she left.”

“Yeah. And she—?”

“And she — I suppose it was my fault. I was clumsy, crude, whatever you like. God knows what she thought — that I was asking her to marry me out of pity, that I was trying to force her into marriage by discharging her when I knew she was over her head in debt! She might have thought anything. Anyhow, it was — it was disagreeable.”

“You mean she not only refused you, but was — well — disagreeable about it?”

“I do mean that.”

Alec Rush sat back in his chair and brought fresh grotesqueries into his face by twisting his thick mouth crookedly up at one corner. His red eyes were evilly reflective on the ceiling.

“The only thing for it,” he decided, “is to go to Landow and give him what we've got.”

“But are you sure he —?” Millar objected indefinitely.

“Unless he's one whale of an actor, he's a lot in love with his wife,” the detective said with certainty. “That's enough to justify taking the story to him.”

Millar was not convinced.

“You're sure it would be wisest?”

“Yeah. We've got to go to one of three people with the tale — him, her, or the police. I think he's the best bet, but take your choice.”

The younger man nodded reluctantly.

“All right. But you don't have to bring me into it, do you?” he said with quick alarm. “You can handle it so I won't be involved. You understand what I mean? She's his wife, and it would be —”

“Sure,” Alec Rush promised; “I'll keep you covered up.”

Hubert Landow, twisting the detective's card in his fingers, received Alec Rush in a somewhat luxuriously furnished room in the second story of the Charles-Street Avenue house. He was standing — tall, blond, boyishly handsome — in the middle of the floor, facing the door, when the detective — fat, grizzled, battered, and ugly — was shown in.

“You wish to see me? Here, sit down.”

Hubert Landow's manner was neither restrained nor hearty. It was precisely the manner that might be expected of a young man receiving an unexpected call from so savage-visaged a detective.

“Yeah,” said Alec Rush as they sat in facing chairs. “I've got something to tell you. It won't take much time, but it's kind of wild. It might be a surprise to you, and it might not. But it's on the level. I don't want you to think I'm kidding you.”

Hubert Landow bent forward, his face all interest.

“I won't,” he promised. “Go on.”

“A couple of days ago I got a line on a man who might be tied up in a job I'm interested in. He's a crook. Trailing him around, I discovered he was interested in your affairs, and your wife's. He's shadowed you and he's shadowed her. He was loafing down the street from a Mount Royal Avenue apartment that you went in yesterday, and he went in there later himself.”

“But what the devil is he up to?” Landow exclaimed. “You think he's —”

“Wait,” the ugly man advised. “Wait until you've heard it all, and then you can tell me what you make of it. He came out of there and went to Camden Station, where he met a young woman. They talked a bit, and later in the afternoon she was picked up in a department store — shoplifting. Her name is Polly Bangs, and she's done a hitch in Wisconsin for the same racket. Your photograph was on her dresser.”

“My photograph?”

Alec Rush nodded placidly up into the face of the young man, who was now standing.

“Yours. You know this Polly Bangs? A chunky, square-built girl of twenty-six or so, with brown hair and eyes — saucy looking?”

Hubert Landow's face was a puzzled blank.

“No! What the devil could she be doing with my picture?” he demanded. “Are you sure it was mine?”

“Not dead sure, maybe, but sure enough to need proof that it wasn't. Maybe she's somebody you've forgotten, or maybe she ran across the picture somewhere and kept it because she liked it.”

“Nonsense!” The blond man squirmed at this tribute to his face, and blushed a vivid red beside which Alec Rush's complexion was almost colourless. “There must be some sensible reason. She has been arrested, you say?”

“Yeah, but she's out on bail now. But let me get along with my story. Last night this thug I've told you about and I had a talk. He claims he has been hired to kill your wife.”

Hubert Landow, who had returned to his chair, now jerked in it so that its joints creaked strainingly. His face, crimson a second ago, drained paper-white. Another sound than the chair's creaking was faint in the room: the least of muffled gasps. The blond young man did not seem to hear it, but Alec Rush's bloodshot eyes flicked sidewise for an instant to focus fleetingly on a closed door across the room.

Landow was out of his chair again, leaning down to the detective, his fingers digging into the ugly man's loose muscular shoulders.

“This is horrible!” he was crying. “We've got to —”

The door at which the detective had looked a moment ago opened. A beautiful tall girl

came through — Sara Landow. Her rumpled hair was an auburn cloud around her white face. Her eyes were dead things. She walked slowly toward the men, her body inclined a little forward, as if against a strong wind.

“It's no use, Hubert.” Her voice was as dead as her eyes. “We may as well face it. It's Madeline Boudin. She has found out that I killed my uncle.”

“Hush, darling, hush!” Landow caught his wife in his arms and tried to soothe her with a caressing hand on her shoulder. “You don't know what you're saying.”

“Oh, but I do.” She shrugged herself listlessly out of his arms and sat in the chair Alec Rush had just vacated. “It's Madeline Boudin, you know it is. She knows I killed Uncle Jerome.”

Landow whirled to the detective, both hands going out to grip the ugly man's arm.

“You won't listen to what she's saying, Rush?” he pleaded. “She hasn't been well. She doesn't know what she's saying.”

Sara Landow laughed with weary bitterness.

“Haven't been well?” she said. “No, I haven't been well, not since I killed him. How could I be well after that? You are a detective.” Her eyes lifted their emptiness to Alec Rush. “Arrest me. I killed Jerome Falsoner.”

Alec Rush, standing arms akimbo, legs apart, scowled at her, saying nothing.

“You can't, Rush!” Landow was tugging at the detective's arm again. “You can't, man. It's ridiculous! You —”

“Where does this Madeline Boudin fit in?” Alec Rush's harsh voice demanded. “I know she was chummy with Jerome, but why should she want your wife killed?”

Landow hesitated, shifting his feet, and when he replied it was reluctantly.

“She was Jerome's mistress, had a child by him. My wife, when she learned of it, insisted on making her a settlement out of the estate. It was in connection with that that I went to see her yesterday.”

“Yeah. Now to get back to Jerome: you and your wife were supposed to be in her apartment at the time he was killed, if I remember right?”

Sara Landow sighed with spiritless impatience.

“Must there be all this discussion?” she asked in a small, tired voice. “I killed him. No one else killed him. No one else was there when I killed him. I stabbed him with the paper-knife when he attacked me, and he said, 'Don't! Don't!' and began to cry, down on his knees, and I ran out.”

Alec Rush looked from the girl to the man. Landow's face was wet with perspiration, his hands were white fists, and something quivered in his chest. When he spoke his voice was as hoarse as the detective's, if not so loud.

“Sara, will you wait here until I come back? I'm going out for a little while, possibly an hour. You'll wait here and not do anything until I return?”

“Yes,” the girl said, neither curiosity nor interest in her voice. “But it's no use, Hubert. I should have told you in the beginning. It's no use.”

“Just wait for me, Sara,” he pleaded, and then bent his head to the detective's deformed ear. “Stay with her, Rush, for God's sake!” he whispered, and went swiftly out of the room.

The front door banged shut. An automobile purred away from the house. Alec Rush spoke to the girl.

“Where's the phone?”

“In the next room,” she said, without looking up from the handkerchief her fingers were measuring.

The detective crossed to the door through which she had entered the room, found that it opened into a library, where a telephone stood in a corner. On the other side of the room a clock indicated 3:35. The detective went to the telephone and called Ralph Millar's office, asked for Millar, and told him:

“This is Rush. I'm at the Landows'. Come up right away.”

“But I can't, Rush. Can't you understand my —”

“Can't hell!” croaked Alec Rush. “Get here quick!”

The young woman with dead eyes, still playing with the hem of her handkerchief, did not look up when the ugly man returned to the room. Neither of them spoke. Alec Rush, standing with his back to a window, twice took out his watch to glare savagely at it.

The faint tingling of the doorbell came from below. The detective went across to the

hall door and down the front stairs, moving with heavy swiftness. Ralph Millar, his face a field in which fear and embarrassment fought, stood in the vestibule, stammering something unintelligible to the maid who had opened the door. Alec Rush put the girl brusquely aside, brought Millar in, guided him upstairs.

“She says she killed Jerome,” he muttered into his client's ear as they mounted.

Ralph Millar's face went dreadfully white, but there was no surprise in it.

“You knew she killed him?” Alec Rush growled.

Millar tried twice to speak and made no sound. They were on the second-floor landing before the words came.

“I saw her on the street that night, going toward his flat!”

Alec Rush snorted viciously and turned the younger man toward the room where Sara Landow sat.

“Landow's out,” he whispered hurriedly. “I'm going out. Stay with her. She's shot to, hell — likely to do anything if she's left alone. If Landow gets back before I do, tell him to wait for me.”

Before Millar could voice the confusion in his face they were across the sill and into the room. Sara Landow raised her head. Her body was lifted from the chair as if by an invisible power. She came up tall and erect on her feet. Millar stood just inside the door. They looked eye into eye, posed each as if in the grip of a force pushing them together, another holding them apart.

Alec Rush hurried clumsily and silently down to the street.

In Mount Royal Avenue, Alec Rush saw the blue roadster at once. It was standing empty before the apartment building in which Madeline Boudin lived. The detective drove past it and turned his coupe in to the curb three blocks below. He had barely come to rest there when Landow ran out of the apartment building, jumped into his car, and drove off. He drove to a Charles Street hotel. Behind him went the detective.

In the hotel, Landow walked straight to the writing-room. For half an hour he sat there, bending over a desk, covering sheet after sheet of paper with rapidly written words, while the detective sat behind a newspaper in a secluded angle of the lobby, watching the writing-room exit. Landow came out of the room stuffing a thick envelope in his pocket, left the hotel, got into his machine, and drove to the office of a messenger service company in St. Paul Street.

He remained in this office for five minutes. When he came out he ignored his roadster at the curb, walking instead to Calvert Street, where he boarded a northbound street car. Alec Rush's coupe rolled along behind the car. At Union Station, Landow left the street car and went to the ticket-window. He had just asked for a one-way ticket to Philadelphia when Alec Rush tapped him on the shoulder.

Hubert Landow turned slowly, the money for his ticket still in his hand. Recognition brought no expression to his handsome face.

“Yes,” he said coolly, “what is it?”

Alec Rush nodded his ugly head at the ticket-window, at the money in Landow's hand.

“This is nothing for you to be doing,” he growled.

“Here you are,” the ticket-seller said through his grille. Neither of the men in front paid any attention to him. A large woman in pink, red, and violet, jostling Landow, stepped on his foot and pushed past him to the window. Landow stepped back, the detective following.

“You shouldn't have left Sara alone,” said Landow. “She's —”

“She's not alone. I got somebody to stay with her.”

“Not—?”

“Not the police, if that's what you're thinking.”

Landow began to pace slowly down the long concourse, the detective keeping step with him. The blond man stopped and looked sharply into the other's face.

“Is it that fellow Millar who's with her?” he demanded.

“Yeah.”

“Is he the man you're working for, Rush?”

“Yeah.”

Landow resumed his walking. When they had reached the northern extremity of the concourse, he spoke again.

“What does he want, this Millar?”

Alec Rush shrugged his thick, limber shoulders and said nothing.

“Well, what do you want?” the young man asked with some heat, facing the detective squarely now.

“I don't want you going out of town.”

Landow pondered that, scowling.

“Suppose I insist on going,” he asked, “how will you stop me?”

“Accomplice after the fact in Jerome's murder would be a charge I could hold you on.”

Silence again, until broken by Landow.

“Look here, Rush. You're working for Millar. He's out at my house. I've just sent a letter out to Sara by messenger. Give them time to read it, and then phone Millar there. Ask him if he wants me held or not.”

Alec Rush shook his head decidedly.

“No good,” he rasped. “Millar's too rattle-brained for me to take his word for anything like that over the phone. We'll go back there and have a talk all around.”

Now it was Landow who balked.

“No,” he snapped. “I won't!” He looked with cool calculation at the detective's ugly face. “Can I buy you, Rush?”

“No, Landow. Don't let my looks and my record kid you.”

“I thought not.” Landow looked at the roof and at his feet, and he blew his breath out sharply. “We can't talk here. Let's find a quiet place.”

“The heap's outside,” Alec Rush said, “and we can sit in that.”

Seated in Alec Rush's coupe, Hubert Landow lighted a cigarette, the detective one of his black cigars.

“That Polly Bangs you were talking about, Rush,” the blond man said without preamble, “is my wife. My name is Henry Bangs. You won't find my fingerprints anywhere. When Polly was picked up in Milwaukee a couple of years ago and sent over, I came east and fell in with Madeline Boudin. We made a good team. She had brains in chunks, and if I've got somebody to do my thinking for me, I'm a pretty good

worker myself.”

He smiled at the detective, pointing at his own face with his cigarette. While Alec Rush watched, a tide of crimson surged into the blond man's face until it was as rosy as a blushing school-girl's. He laughed again and the blush began to fade.

“That's my best trick,” he went on. “Easy if you have the gift and keep in practice: fill your lungs, try to force the air out while keeping it shut off at the larynx. It's a gold mine for a grifter! You'd be surprised how people will trust me after I've turned on a blush or two for 'em. So Madeline and I were in the money. She had brains, nerve, and a good front. I have everything but brains. We turned a couple of tricks — one con and one blackmail — and then she ran into Jerome Falsoner. We were going to give him the squeeze at first. But when Madeline found out that Sara was his heiress, that she was in debt, and that she and her uncle were on the outs, we ditched that racket and cooked a juicier one. Madeline found somebody to introduce me to Sara. I made myself agreeable, playing the boob—the shy but worshipful young man.

“Madeline had brains, as I've said. She used 'em all this time. I hung around Sara, sending her candy, books, flowers, taking her to shows and dinner. The books and shows were part of Madeline's work. Two of the books mentioned the fact that a husband can't be made to testify against his wife in court, nor wife against husband. One of the plays touched the same thing. That was planting the seeds. We planted another with my blushing and mumbling — persuaded Sara, or rather let her discover for herself, that I was the clumsiest liar in the world.

“The planting done, we began to push the game along. Madeline kept on good terms with Jerome. Sara was getting deeper in debt. We helped her in still deeper. We had a burglar clean out her apartment one night — Ruby Sweeger, maybe you know him. He's in stir now for another caper. He got what money she had and most of the things she could have hocked in a pinch. Then we stirred up some of the people she owed, sent them anonymous letters warning them not to count too much on her being Jerome's heir. Foolish letters, but they did the trick. A couple of her creditors sent collectors to the trust company.

“Jerome got his income from the estate quarterly. Madeline knew the dates, and Sara knew them. The day before the next one, Madeline got busy on Sara's creditors again. I don't know what she told them this time, but it was enough. They descended on the trust company in a flock, with the result that the next day Sara was given two weeks' pay and discharged. When she came out I met her — by chance — yes, I'd been watching for her since morning. I took her for a drive and got her back to her apartment at six o'clock. There we found more frantic creditors waiting to pounce on her. I chased them out, played the big-hearted boy, making embarrassed offers of all sorts of help. She refused them, of course, and I could see decision coming into her face. She knew this was the day on which Jerome got his quarterly check. She

determined to go see him, to demand that he pay her debts at least. She didn't tell me where she was going, but I could see it plain enough, since I was looking for it.

“I left her and waited across the street from her apartment, in Franklin Square, until I saw her come out. Then I found a telephone, called up Madeline, and told her Sara was on her way to her uncle's flat.”

Landow's cigarette scorched his fingers. He dropped it, crushed it under his foot, lighted another.

“This is a long-winded story, Rush,” he apologised, “but it'll soon be over now.”

“Keep talking, son,” said Alec Rush.

“There were some people in Madeline's place when I phoned her — people trying to persuade her to go down the country on a party. She agreed now. They would give her an even better alibi than the one she had cooked up. She told them she had to see Jerome before she left, and they drove her over to his place and waited in their car while she went in with him.

“She had a pint bottle of cognac with her, all doped and ready. She poured out a drink of it for Jerome, telling him of the new bootlegger she had found who had a dozen or more cases of this cognac to sell at a reasonable price. The cognac was good enough and the price low enough to make Jerome think she had dropped in to let him in on something good. He gave her an order to pass on to the bootlegger. Making sure his steel paper-knife was in full view on the table, Madeline rejoined her friends, taking Jerome as far as the door so they would see he was still alive, and drove off.

“Now I don't know what Madeline had put in that cognac. If she told me, I've forgotten. It was a powerful drug — not a poison, you understand, but an excitant. You'll see what I mean when you hear the rest. Sara must have reached her uncle's flat ten or fifteen minutes after Madeline's departure. Her uncle's face, she says, was red, inflamed, when he opened the door for her. But he was a frail man, while she was strong, and she wasn't afraid of the devil himself, for that matter. She went in and demanded that he settle her debts, even if he didn't choose to make her an allowance out of his income.

“They were both Falsoners, and the argument must have grown hot. Also the drug was working on Jerome, and he had no will with which to fight it. He attacked her. The paper-knife was on the table, as Madeline had seen. He was a maniac. Sara was not one of your corner-huddling, screaming girls. She grabbed the paper-knife and let him have it. When he fell, she turned and ran.

“Having followed her as soon as I'd finished telephoning to Madeline, I was standing

on Jerome's front steps when she dashed out. I stopped her and she told me she'd killed her uncle. I made her wait there while I went in, to see if he was really dead. Then I took her home, explaining my presence at Jerome's door by saying, in my boobish, awkward way, that I had been afraid she might do something reckless and had thought it best to keep an eye on her.

“Back in her apartment, she was all for giving herself up to the police. I pointed out the danger in that, arguing that, in debt, admittedly going to her uncle for money, being his heiress, she would most certainly be convicted of having murdered him so she would get the money. Her story of his attack, I persuaded her, would be laughed at as a flimsy yarn. Dazed, she wasn't hard to convince. The next step was easy. The police would investigate her, even if they didn't especially suspect her. I was, so far as we knew, the only person whose testimony could convict her. I was loyal enough, but wasn't I the clumsiest liar in the world? Didn't the mildest lie make me blush like an auctioneer's flag? The way around that difficulty lay in what two of the books I had given her, and one of the plays we had seen, had shown: if I was her husband I couldn't be made to testify against her. We were married the next morning, on a license I had been carrying for nearly a week.

“Well, there we were. I was married to her. She had a couple of million coming when her uncle's affairs were straightened out. She couldn't possibly, it seemed, escape arrest and conviction. Even if no one had seen her entering or leaving her uncle's flat, everything still pointed to her guilt, and the foolish course I had persuaded her to follow would simply ruin her chance of pleading self-defence. If they hanged her, the two million would come to me. If she got a long term in prison, I'd have the handling of the money at least.”

Landow dropped and crushed his second cigarette and stared for a moment straight ahead into distance.

“Do you believe in God, or Providence, or Fate, or any of that, Rush?” he asked. “Well, some believe in one thing and some in another, but listen. Sara was never arrested, never even really suspected. It seems there was some sort of Finn or Swede who had had a run-in with Jerome and threatened him. I suppose he couldn't account for his whereabouts the night of the killing, so he went into hiding when he heard of Jerome's murder. The police suspicion settled on him. They looked Sara up, of course, but not very thoroughly. No one seems to have seen her in the street, and the people in her apartment house, having seen her come in at six o'clock with me, and not having seen her — or not remembering if they did — go out or in again, told the police she had been in all evening. The police were too much interested in the missing Finn, or whatever he was, to look any further into Sara's affairs.

“So there we were again. I was married into the money, but I wasn't fixed so I could hand Madeline her cut. Madeline said we'd let things run along as they were until the

estate was settled up, and then we could tip Sara off to the police. But by the time the money was settled up there was another hitch. This one was my doing. I — I — well, I wanted to go on just as we were. Conscience had nothing to do with it, you understand? It was simply that — well — that living on with Sara was the only thing I wanted. I wasn't even sorry for what I'd done, because if it hadn't been for that I would never have had her.

“I don't know whether I can make this clear to you, Rush, but even now I don't regret any of it. If it could have been different — but it couldn't. It had to be this way or none. And I've had those six months. I can see that I've been a chump. Sara was never for me. I got her by a crime and a trick, and while I held on to a silly hope that some day she'd — she'd look at me as I did at her, I knew in my heart all the time it was no use. There had been a man — your Millar. She's free now that it's out about my being married to Polly, and I hope she — I hope — Well, Madeline began to howl for action. I told Sara that Madeline had had a child by Jerome, and Sara agreed to settle some money on her. But that didn't satisfy Madeline. It wasn't sentiment with her. I mean, it wasn't any feeling for me, it was just the money. She wanted every cent she could get, and she couldn't get enough to satisfy her in a settlement of the kind Sara wanted to make.

“With Polly, it was that too, but maybe a little more. She's fond of me, I think. I don't know how she traced me here after she got out of the Wisconsin big house, but I can see how she figured things. I was married to a wealthy woman. If the woman died — shot by a bandit in a hold-up attempt — then I'd have money, and Polly would have both me and money. I haven't seen her, wouldn't know she was in Baltimore if you hadn't told me, but that's the way it would work out in her mind. The killing idea would have occurred just as easily to Madeline. I had told her I wouldn't stand for pushing the game through on Sara. Madeline knew that if she went ahead on her own hook and hung the Falsoner murder on Sara I'd blow up the whole racket. But if Sara died, then I'd have the money and Madeline would draw her cut. So that was it.

“I didn't know that until you told me, Rush. I don't give a damn for your opinion of me, but it's God's truth that I didn't know that either Polly or Madeline was trying to have Sara killed. Well, that's about all. Were you shadowing me when I went to the hotel?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought so. That letter I wrote and sent home told just about what I've told you, spilled the whole story. I was going to run for it, leaving Sara in the clear. She's clear, all right, but now I'll have to face it. But I don't want to see her again, Rush.”

“I wouldn't think you would,” the detective agreed. “Not after making a killer of her.”

“But I didn't,” Landow protested. “She isn't. I forgot to tell you that, but I put it in the

letter. Jerome Falsoner was not dead, not even dying, when I went past her into the flat. The knife was too high in his chest. I killed him, driving the knife into the same wound again, but downward. That's what I went in for, to make sure he was finished!”

Alec Rush screwed up his savage bloodshot eyes, looked long into the confessed murderer's face.

“That's a lie,” he croaked at last, “but a decent one. Are you sure you want to stick to it? The truth will be enough to clear the girl, and maybe won't swing you.”

“What difference does it make?” the younger man asked. “I'm a gone baby anyhow. And I might as well put Sara in the clear with herself as well as with the law. I'm caught to rights and another rap won't hurt. I told you Madeline had brains. I was afraid of them. She'd have had something up her sleeve to spring on us — to ruin Sara with. She could out-smart me without trying. I couldn't take any chances.”

He laughed into Alec Rush's ugly face and, with a somewhat theatrical gesture, jerked one cuff an inch or two out of his coat-sleeve. The cuff was still damp with a maroon stain.

“I killed Madeline an hour ago,” said Henry Bangs, alias Hubert Landow.