The house was of red brick, large and square, with a green slate roof whose wide overhang gave the building an appearance of being too squat for its two stories; and it stood on a grassy hill, well away from the country road upon which it turned its back to look down on the Mokelumne River.

The Ford that I had hired to bring me out from Knownburg carried me into the grounds through a high steel-meshed gate, followed the circling gravel drive, and set me down within a foot of the screened porch that ran all the way around the house's first floor.

“There's Exon's son-in-law now,” the driver told me as he pocketed the bill I had given him and prepared to drive away.

I turned to see a tall, loose-jointed man of thirty or so coming across the porch toward me — a carelessly dressed man with a mop of rumpled brown hair over a handsome sunburned face. There was a hint of cruelty in the lips that were smiling lazily just now, and more than a hint of recklessness in his narrow gray eyes.

“Mr. Gallaway?” I asked as he came down the steps.

'Yes.” His voice was a drawling baritone. “You are —”

“From the Continental Detective Agency's San Francisco branch,” I finished for him.

He nodded, and held the screen door open for me.

“Just leave your bag there. I'll have it taken up to your room.”

He guided me into the house and — after I had assured him that I had already eaten luncheon — gave me a soft chair and an excellent cigar. He sprawled on his spine in an armchair opposite me — all loose-jointed angles sticking out of it in every direction — and blew smoke at the ceiling.

“First off,” he began presently, his words coming out languidly, “I may as well tell you that I don't expect very much in the way of results. I sent for you more for the soothing effect of your presence on the household than because I expect you to do anything. I don't believe there's anything to do. However, I'm not a detective. I may be wrong. You may find out all sorts of more or less important things. If you do — fine! But I don't

insist upon it.”

I didn't say anything, though this beginning wasn't much to my taste. He smoked in silence for a moment, and then went on, “My father-in-law, Talbert Exon, is a man of fifty-seven, and ordinarily a tough, hard, active, and fiery old devil. But just now he's recovering from a rather serious attack of pneumonia, which has taken most of the starch out of him. He hasn't been able to leave his bed yet, and Dr. Rench hopes to keep him on his back for at least another week.

“The old man has a room on the second floor — the front, right-hand corner room — just over where we are sitting. His nurse, Miss Caywood, occupies the next room, and there is a connecting door between. My room is the other front one, just across the hall from the old man's; and my wife's bedroom is next to mine — across the hall from the nurse's. I'll show you around later. I just want to make the situation clear.

“Last night, or rather this morning at about half-past one, somebody shot at Exon while he was sleeping — and missed. The bullet went into the frame of the door that leads to the nurse's room, about six inches above his body as he lay in bed. The course the bullet took in the woodwork would indicate that it had been fired from one of the windows — either through it or from just inside.

“Exon woke up, of course, but he saw nobody. The rest of us — my wife, Miss Caywood, the Figgs, and myself — were also awakened by the shot. We all rushed into his room, and we saw nothing either. There's no doubt that whoever fired it left by the window. Otherwise some of us would have seen him — we came from every other direction. However, we found nobody on the grounds, and no traces of anybody.”

“Who are the Figgs, and who else is there on the place besides you and your wife, Mr. Exon, and his nurse?”

“The Figgs are Adam and Emma — she is the housekeeper and he is a sort of handy man about the place. Their room is in the extreme rear, on the second floor. Besides them, there is Gong Lim, the cook, who sleeps in a little room near the kitchen, and the three farm hands. Joe Natara and Felipe Fadelia are Italians, and have been here for more than two years; Jesus Mesa, a Mexican, has been here a year or longer. The farm hands sleep in a little house near the barns. I think — if my opinion is of any value — that none of these people had anything to do with the shooting.”

“Did you dig the bullet out of the doorframe?”

“Yes. Shand, the deputy sheriff at Knownburg, dug it out. He says it is a thirty-eight-caliber bullet.”

“Any guns of that caliber in the house?”

“No. A twenty-two and my forty-four — which I keep in the car — are the only pistols on the place. Then there are two shotguns and a thirty-thirty rifle. Shand made a thorough search, and found nothing else in the way of firearms.”

“What does Mr. Exon say?”

“Not much of anything, except that if we'll put a gun in bed with him he'll manage to take care of himself without bothering any policemen or detectives. I don't know whether he knows who shot at him or not — he's a close-mouthed old devil. From what I know of him, I imagine there are quite a few men who would think themselves justified in killing him. He was, I understand, far from being a lily in his youth — or in his mature years either, for that matter.”

“Anything definite you know, or are you guessing?”

Gallaway grinned at me — a mocking grin that I was to see often before I was through with this Exon affair.

“Both,” he drawled. “I know that his life has been rather more than sprinkled with swindled partners and betrayed friends, and that he saved himself from prison at least once by turning state's evidence and sending his associates there. And I know that his wife died under rather peculiar circumstances while heavily insured, and that he was for some time held on suspicion of having murdered “her, but was finally released because of a lack of evidence against him. Those, I understand, are fair samples of the old boy's normal behaviour, so there may be any number of people gunning for him.”

“Suppose you give me a list of all the names you know of enemies he's made, and I'll have them checked up.”

“The names I could give you would be only a few of many, and it might take you months to check up those few. It isn't my intention to go to all that trouble and expense. As I told you, I'm not insisting upon results. My wife is very nervous, and for some peculiar reason she seems to like the old man. So, to soothe her, I agreed to employ a private detective when she asked me to. My idea is that you hang around for a couple of days, until things quiet down and she feels safe again. Meanwhile, if you should stumble upon anything — go to it! If you don't — well and good.”

My face must have shown something of what I was thinking, for his eyes twinkled and he chuckled.

“Don't, please,” he drawled, “get the idea that you aren't to find my father-in-law's would-be assassin if you wish to. You're to have a free hand. Go as far as you like, except that I want you to be around the place as much as possible, so my wife will see

you and feel that we are being adequately protected. Beyond that, I don't care what you do. You can apprehend criminals by the carload. As you may have gathered by now, I'm not exactly in love with my wife's father, and he's no more fond of me. To be frank, if hating weren't such an effort — I think I should hate the old devil. But if you want to, and can, catch the man who shot at him, I'd be glad to have you do it. But-”

“All right,” I said. “I don't like this job much, but since I'm up here I'll take it on. But, remember, I'm trying all the time.”

“Sincerity and earnestness” — he showed his teeth in a sardonic smile as we got to our feet — “are very praiseworthy traits.”

“So I hear,” I growled shortly. “Now let's take a look at Mr. Exon's room.”

Gallaway's wife and the nurse were with the invalid, but I examined the room before I asked the occupants any questions.

It was a large room, with three wide windows opening over the porch, and two doors, one of which gave to the hall and the other to the adjoining room occupied by the nurse. This door stood open, with a green Japanese screen across it, and, I was told, was left that way at night, so that the nurse could hear readily if her patient was restless or if he wanted attention.

A man standing on the slate roof of the porch, I found, could have easily leaned across one of the window-sills (if he did not care to step over it into the room) and fired at the man in his bed. To get from the ground to the porch roof would have required but little effort, and the descent would be still easier — he could slide down the roof, let himself go feet-first over the edge, checking his speed with hands and arms spread out on the slate, and drop down to the gravel drive. No trick at all, either coming or going. The windows were unscreened.

The sick man's bed stood just beside the connecting doorway between his room and the nurse's, which, when he was lying down, placed him between the doorway and the window from which the shot had been fired. Outside, within long rifle range, there was no building, tree, or eminence of any character from which the bullet that had been dug out of the doorframe could have been fired.

I turned from the room to the occupants, questioning the invalid first. He had been a raw-boned man of considerable size in his health, but now he was wasted and stringy and dead-white. His face was thin and hollow; small beady eyes crowded together against the thin bridge of his nose; his mouth was a colourless gash above a bony projecting chin.

His statement was a marvel of petulant conciseness.

“The shot woke me. I didn't see anything. I don't know anything. I've got a million enemies, most of whose names I can't remember.”

He jerked this out crossly, turned his face away, closed his eyes, and refused to speak again.

Mrs. Gallaway and the nurse followed me into the latter's room, where I questioned them. They were of as opposite types as you could find anywhere, and between them there was a certain coolness, an unmistakable hostility which I was able to account for later in the day.

Mrs. Gallaway was perhaps five years older than her husband; dark, strikingly beautiful in a statuesque way, with a worried look in her dark eyes that was particularly noticeable when those eyes rested on her husband. There was no doubt that she was very much in love with him, and the anxiety that showed in her eyes at times — the pains she took to please him in each slight thing during my stay at the Exon house — convinced me that she struggled always with a fear that she was about to lose him.

Mrs. Gallaway could add nothing to what her husband had told me. She had been awakened by the shot, had run to her father's room, had seen nothing — knew nothing — suspected nothing.

The nurse — Barbra Caywood was her name—told the same story, in almost the same words. She had jumped out of bed when awakened by the shot, pushed the screen away from the connecting doorway, and rushed into her patient's room. She was the first one to arrive there, and she had seen nothing but the old man sitting up in bed, shaking his feeble fists at the window.

This Barbra Caywood was a girl of twenty-one or—two, and just the sort that a man would pick to help him get well — a girl of little under the average height, with an erect figure wherein slimness and roundness got an even break under the stiff white of her uniform; with soft golden hair above a face that was certainly made to be looked at. But she was businesslike and had an air of efficiency, for all her prettiness.From the nurse's room, Gallaway led me to the kitchen, where I questioned the Chinese cook. Gong Lim was a sad-faced Oriental whose ever-present smile somehow made him look more gloomy than ever; and he bowed and smiled and yes-yes'd me from start to finish, and told me nothing.

Adam and Emma Figg — thin and stout, respectively, and both rheumatic — entertained a wide variety of suspicions, directed at the cook and the farm hands, individually and collectively, flitting momentarily from one to the other. They had nothing upon which to base these suspicions, however, except their firm belief that

nearly all crimes of violence were committed by foreigners.

The farm hands — two smiling, middle-aged, and heavily moustached Italians, and a soft-eyed Mexican youth — I found in one of the fields. I talked to them for nearly two hours, and I left with a reasonable amount of assurance that none of the three had had any part in the shooting.

Dr. Rench had just come down from a visit to his patient when Gallaway and I returned from the fields. He was a little, wizened old man with mild manners and eyes, and a wonderful growth of hair on head, brows, cheeks, lips, chin, and nostrils.

The excitement, he said, had retarded Exon's recovery somewhat, but he did not think the setback would be serious. The invalid's temperature had gone up a little, but he seemed to be improving now.

I followed Dr. Rench out to his car after he left the others, for a few questions I wanted to put to him in privacy, but the questions might as well have gone unasked for all the good they did me. He could tell me nothing of any value. The nurse, Barbra Caywood, had been secured, he said, from San Francisco, through the usual channels, which made it seem unlikely that she had worked her way into the Exon house for any hidden purpose which might have some connection with the attempt upon Exon's life.

Returning from my talk with the doctor, I came upon Hilary Gallaway and the nurse in the hall, near the foot of the stairs. His arm was resting lightly across her shoulders, and he was smiling down at her. Just as I came through the door, she twisted away so that his arm slid off, laughed elfishly up into his face, and went on up the stairs.

I did not know whether she had seen me approaching before she eluded the encircling arm or not, nor did I know how long the arm had been there; and both of those questions would make a difference in how their positions were to be construed.

Hilary Gallaway was certainly not a man to allow a girl as pretty as the nurse to lack attention, and he was just as certainly attractive enough in himself to make his advances not too unflattering. Nor did Barbra Caywood impress me as being a girl who would dislike his admiration. But, at that, it was more than likely that there was nothing very serious between them, nothing more than a playful sort of flirtation.

But, no matter what the situation might be in that quarter, it didn't have any direct bearing upon the shooting — none that I could see, anyway. But I understood now the strained relations between the nurse and Gallaway's wife.

Gallaway was grinning quizzically at me while I was chasing these thoughts around in my head.

“Nobody's safe with a detective around,” he complained.

I grinned back at him. That was the only sort of answer you could give this bird.

After dinner, Gallaway drove me to Knownburg in his roadster, and set me down on the doorstep of the deputy sheriff's house. He offered to drive me back to the Exon house when I had finished my investigations in town, but I did not know how long those investigations would take, so I told him I would hire a car when I was ready to return.

Shand, the deputy sheriff, was a big, slow-spoken, slow-thinking, blond man of thirty or so — just the type best fitted for a deputy sheriff job in a San Joaquin County town.

“I went out to Exon's as soon as Gallaway called me up,” he said. “About four-thirty in the morning, I reckon it was when I got there. I didn't find nothing. There weren't no marks on the porch roof, but that don't mean nothing. I tried climbing up and down it myself, and I didn't leave no marks neither. The ground around the house is too firm for footprints to be followed. I found a few, but they didn't lead nowhere; and everybody had run all over the place before I got there, so I couldn't tell who they belonged to.

“Far's I can learn, there ain't been no suspicious characters in the neighbourhood lately. The only folks around here who have got any grudge against the old man are the Deemses — Exon beat 'em in a law suit a couple years back — but all of them — the father and both the boys—were at home when the shooting was done.”

“How long has Exon been living here?”

“Four-five years, I reckon.”

“Nothing at all to work on, then?”

“Nothing I know about.”

“What do you know about the Exon Family?” I asked.

Shand scratched his head thoughtfully and frowned.

“I reckon it's Hilary Gallaway you're meaning,” he said slowly. “I thought of that. The Gallaways showed up here a couple of years after her father had bought the place, and Hilary seems to spend most of his evenings up in Ady's back room, teaching the boys how to play poker. I hear he's fitted to teach them a lot. I don't know, myself. Ady runs a quiet game, so I let 'em alone. But naturally I don't never set in, myself.

“Outside of being a cardhound, and drinking pretty heavy, and making a lot of trips to the city, where he's supposed to have a girl on the string, I don't know nothing much about Hilary. But it's no secret that him and the old man don't hit it off together very well. And then Hilary's room is just across the hall from Exon's, and their windows open out on the porch roof just a little apart. But I don't know —”

Shand confirmed what Gallaway had told me about the bullet being .38 calibre, about the absence of any pistol of that calibre on the premises, and about the lack of any reason for suspecting the farm hands or servants.

I put in the next couple of hours talking to whomever I could find to talk to in Knownbure, and I learned nothing worth putting down on paper. Then I got a car and driver from the garage, and was driven out to Exon's.

Gallaway had not yet returned from town. His wife and Barbra Caywood were just about to sit down to a light dinner before retiring, so I joined them. Exon, the nurse said, was asleep, and had spent a quiet evening. We talked for a while — until about half-past twelve — and then went to our rooms.

My room was next to the nurse's, on the same side of the hall that divided the second story in half. I sat down and wrote my report for the day, smoked a cigar, and then, the house being quiet by this time, put a gun and a flashlight in my pockets, went downstairs, and out the kitchen door.

The moon was just coming up, lighting the grounds vaguely, except for the shadows cast by house, outbuildings, and the several clumps of shrubbery. Keeping in these shadows as much as possible, I explored the grounds, finding everything as it should be.

The lack of any evidence to the contrary pointed to last night's shot having been fired — either accidentally, or in fright at some fancied move of Exon's — by a burglar, who had been entering the sick man's room through a window. If that were so, then there wasn't one chance in a thousand of anything happening to-night. But I felt restless and ill at ease, nevertheless.

Gallaway's roadster was not in the garage. He had not returned from Knownburg. Beneath the farm hands' window I paused until snores in three distinct keys told me that they were all safely abed.

After an hour of this snooping around, I returned to the house. The luminous dial of my watch registered 2:35 as I stopped outside the Chinese cook's door to listen to his regular breathing.

Upstairs, I paused at the door of the Figgs's room, until my ear told me that they were

sleeping. At Mrs. Gallaway's door I had to wait several minutes before she sighed and turned in bed. Barbra Caywood was breathing deeply and strongly, with the regularity of a young animal whose sleep is without disturbing dreams. The invalid's breath came to me with the evenness of slumber and the rasping of the pneumonia convalescent.

This listening tour completed, I returned to my room.

Still feeling wide-awake and restless, I pulled a chair up to a window, and sat looking at the moonlight on the river which twisted just below the house so as to be visible from this side, smoking another cigar, and turning things over in my mind — to no great advantage.

Outside there was no sound.

Suddenly down the hall came the heavy explosion of a gun being fired indoors! I threw myself across the room, out into the hall.

A woman's voice filled the house with its shriek — high, frenzied.

Barbra Caywood's door was unlocked when I reached it. I slammed it open. By the light of the moonbeams that slanted past her window, I saw her sitting upright in the centre of her bed. She wasn't beautiful now. Her face was twisted with terror. The scream was just dying in her throat.

All this I got in the flash of time that it took me to put a running foot across her sill.

Then another shot crashed out — in Exon's room.

The girl's face jerked up — so abruptly that it seemed her neck must snap — she clutched both hands to her breast — and fell face-down among the bedclothes.

I don't know whether I went through, over, or around the screen that stood in the connecting doorway. I was circling Exon's bed. He lay on the floor on his side, facing a window. I jumped over him — leaned out the window.

In the yard that was bright now under the moon, nothing moved. There was no sound of flight. Presently, while my eyes still searched the surrounding country, the farm hands, in their underwear, came running barefooted from the direction of their quarters. I called down to them, stationing them at points of vantage.

Meanwhile, behind me, Gong Lim and Adam Figg had put Exon back in his bed, while Mrs. Gallaway and Emma Figg tried to check the blood that spurted from a hole in Barbra Caywood's side.

I sent Adam Figg to the telephone, to wake the doctor and the deputy sheriff, and then I hurried down to the grounds.

Stepping out of the door, I came face to face with Hilary Gallaway coming from the direction of the garage. His face was flushed, and his breath was eloquent of the refreshments that had accompanied the game in Ady's back room, but his step was steady enough, and his smile was as lazy as ever.

“What's the excitement?” he asked.

“Same as last night! Meet anybody on the road? Or see anybody leaving here?”

“No.”

“All right. Get in that bus of yours, and bum up the road in the other direction. Stop anybody you meet going away from here or who looks wrong! Got a gun?”

He spun on his heel with nothing of indolence.

“One in my car,” he called as he broke into a run.

The farm hands still at their posts, I combed the grounds from east to west and from north to south. I realised that I was spoiling my chance of finding footprints when it would be light enough to see them, but I was banking on the man I wanted still being close at hand. And then Shand had told me that the ground was unfavourable for tracing prints, anyway.

On the gravel drive in front of the house I found the pistol from which the shots had been fired — a cheap .38-calibre revolver, slightly rusty, smelling freshly of burned powder, with three empty shells and three that had not been fired in it.

Besides that I found nothing. The murdere r— from what I had seen of the hole in the girl's side, I called him that — had vanished.

Shand and Dr. Rench arrived together, just as I was finishing my fruitless search. A little later, Hilary Gallaway came back — empty-handed.

Breakfast that morning was a melancholy meal, except to Hilary Gallaway. He refrained from jesting openly about the night's excitement, but his eyes twinkled whenever they met mine, and I knew he thought it a tremendously good joke for the shooting to have taken place right under my nose. During his wife's presence at the table, however, he was almost grave, as if not to offend her.

Mrs. Gallaway left the table shortly, and Dr. Rench joined us. He said that both of his

patients were in as good shape as could be expected, and he thought both would recover.

The bullet had barely grazed the girl's ribs and breast-bone, going through the flesh and muscles of her chest, in on the right side and out again, on the left. Except for the shock and the loss of blood, she was not in danger, although unconscious.

Exon was sleeping, the doctor said, so Shand and I crept up into his room to examine it. The first bullet had gone into the doorframe, about four inches above the one that had been fired the night before. The second bullet had pierced the Japanese screen, and, after passing through the girl, had lodged in the plaster of the wall. We dug out both bullets — they were of .38 calibre. Both had apparently been fired from the vicinity of one of the windows — either just inside or just outside.

Shand and I grilled the Chinese cook, the farm hands, and the Figgs unmercifully that day. But they came through it standing up — there was nothing to fix the shooting on any of them.

And all day long that damned Hilary Gallaway followed me from pillar to post, with a mocking glint in his eyes that said plainer than words, “I'm the logical suspect. Why don't you put me through your little third degree?” But I grinned back, and asked him nothing.

Shand had to go to town that afternoon. He called me up on the telephone later, and told me that Gallaway had left Knownburg early enough that morning to have arrived home fully half an hour before the shooting, if he had driven at his usual fast pace.

The day passed — too rapidly — and I found myself dreading the coming of night. Two nights in succession Exon's life had been attempted — and now the third night was coming.

At dinner Hilary Gallaway announced that he was going to stay home this evening. Knownburg, he said, was tame in comparison; and he grinned at me.

Dr. Rench left after the meal, saying that he would return as soon as possible, but that he had two patients on the other side of town whom he must visit. Barbra Caywood had returned to consciousness, but had been extremely hysterical, and the doctor had given her an opiate. She was asleep now. Exon was resting easily except for a high temperature.

I went up to Exon's room for a few minutes after the meal and tried him out with a gentle question or two, but he refused to answer them, and he was too sick for me to press him.

He asked how the girl was.

“The doc says she's in no particular danger. Just loss of blood and shock. If she doesn't rip her bandages off and bleed to death in one of her hysterical spells, he says, he'll have her on her feet in a couple of weeks.”

Mrs. Gallaway came in then, and I went downstairs again, where I was seized by Gallaway, who insisted with bantering gravity that I tell him about some of the mysteries I had solved. He was enjoying my discomfort to the limit. He kidded me for about an hour, and had me burning up inside; but I managed to grin back with a fair pretence of indifference.

When his wife joined us presently — saying that both of the invalids were sleeping — I made my escape from her tormenting husband, saying that I had some writing to do. But I didn't go to my room.

Instead, I crept stealthily into the girl's room, crossed to a clothespress that I had noted earlier in the day, and planted myself in it. By leaving the door open the least fraction of an inch, I could see through the connecting doorway — from which the screen had been removed — across Exon's bed, and out of the window from which three bullets had already come, and the Lord only knew what else might come.

Time passed, and I was stiff from standing still. But I had expected that.

Twice Mrs. Gallaway came up to look at her father and the nurse. Each time I shut my closet door entirely as soon as I heard her tiptoeing steps in the hall. I was hiding from everybody.

She had just gone from her second visit, when, before I had time to open my door again, I heard a faint rustling, and a soft padding on the floor. Not knowing what it was or where it was, I was afraid to push the door open. In my narrow hiding place I stood still and waited.

The padding was recognisable now — quiet footsteps, coming nearer. They passed not far from my clothespress door.

I waited.

An almost inaudible rustling. A pause. The softest and faintest of tearing sounds.

I came out of the closet — my gun in my hand.

Standing beside the girl's bed, leaning over her unconscious form, was old Talbert Exon, his face flushed with fever, his nightshirt hanging limply around his wasted legs.

One of his hands still rested upon the bedclothes he had turned down from her body. The other hand held a narrow strip of adhesive tape, with which her bandages had been fixed in place, and which he had just torn off.

He snarled at me, and both his hands went toward the girl's bandages.

The crazy, feverish glare of his eyes told me that the threat of the gun in my hand meant nothing to him. I jumped to his side, plucked his hands aside, picked him up in my arms, and carried him — kicking, clawing, and swearing — back to his bed. Then I called the others.

Hilary Gallaway, Shand — who had come out from town again — and I sat over coffee and cigarettes in the kitchen, while the rest of the household helped Dr. Rench battle for Exon's life. The old man had gone through enough excitement in the last three days to kill a healthy man, let alone a pneumonia convalescent.

“But why should the old devil want to kill her?” Gallaway asked me.

“Search me,” I confessed, a little testily perhaps. “I don't know why he wanted to kill her, but it's a cinch that he did. The gun was found just about where he could have thrown it when he heard me coming. I was in the girl's room when she was shot, and I got to Exon's window without wasting much time, and I saw nothing. You, yourself, driving home from Knownburg, and arriving here right after the shooting, didn't see anybody leave by the road; and I'll take an oath that nobody could have left in any other direction without either one of the farm hands or me seeing them.

“And then, tonight, I told Exon that the girl would recover if she didn't tear off her bandages, which, while true enough, gave him the idea that she had been trying to tear them off. And from that he built up a plan of tearing them off himself — knowing that she had been given an opiate, perhaps — and thinking that everybody would believe she had torn them off herself. And he was putting that plan into execution — had torn off one piece of tape — when I stopped him. He shot her intentionally, and that's flat. Maybe I couldn't prove it in court without knowing why, but I know he did. But the doc says he'll hardly live to be tried; he killed himself trying to kill the girl.”

“Maybe you're right” — Gallaway's mocking grin flashed at me — “but you're a hell of a detective. Why didn't you suspect me?”

“I did,” I grinned back, “but not enough.”

“Why not? You may be making a mistake,” he drawled. “You know my room is just across the hall from his, and I could have left my window, crept across the porch, fired at him, and then run back to my room, on that first night.

“And on the second night — when you were here — you ought to know that I left Knownburg in plenty of time to have come out here, parked my car down the road a bit, fired those two shots, crept around in the shadow of the house, run back to my car, and then come driving innocently up to the garage. You should know also that my reputation isn't any too good — that I'm supposed to be a bad egg; and you do know that I don't like the old man. And for a motive, there is the fact that my wife is Exon's only heir. I hope” — he raised his eyebrows in burlesqued pain — “that you don't think I have any moral scruples against a well-placed murder now and then.”

I laughed. “I don't.”

“Well, then?”

“If Exon had been killed that first night, and I had come up here, you'd be doing your joking behind bars long before this. And if he'd been killed the second night, even, I might have grabbed you. But I don't figure you as a man who'd bungle so easy a job — not twice, anyway. You wouldn't have missed, and then run away, leaving him alive.”

He shook my hand gravely.

“It is comforting to have one's few virtues appreciated.”

Before Talbert Exon died he sent for me. He wanted to die, he said, with his curiosity appeased; and so we traded information. I told him how I had come to suspect him and he told me why he had tried to kill Barbra Caywood.

Fourteen years ago he had killed his wife, not for the insurance, as he had been suspected of doing, but in a fit of jealousy. However, he had so thoroughly covered up the proofs of his guilt that he had never been brought to trial; but the murder had weighed upon him, to the extent of becoming an obsession.

He knew that he would never give himself away consciously — he was too shrewd for that — and he knew that proof of his guilt could never be found. But there was always the chance that some time, in delirium, in his sleep, or when drunk, he might tell enough to bring him to the gallows.

He thought upon this angle too often, until it became a morbid fear that always hounded him. He had given up drinking — that was easy — but there was no way of guarding against the other things.

And one of them, he said, had finally happened. He had got pneumonia, and for a week he had been out of his head, and he had talked. Coming out of that week's delirium, he had questioned the nurse. She had given him vague answers, would not tell him what he had talked about, what he had said. And then, in unguarded moments, he had

discovered that her eyes rested upon him with loathing — with intense repulsion.

He knew then that he had babbled of his wife's murder; and he set about laying plans for removing the nurse before she repeated what she had heard.

For so long as she remained in his house, he counted himself safe. She would not tell strangers, and it might be that for a while she would not tell anyone. Professional ethics would keep her quiet, perhaps; but he could not let her leave his house with her knowledge of his secret.

Daily and in secret, he had tested his strength until he knew himself strong enough to walk about the room a little, and to hold a revolver steady. His bed was fortunately placed for his purpose — directly in line with one of the windows, the connecting door, and the girl's bed. In an old bond box in his closet — and nobody but he had ever seen the things in that box — was a revolver; a revolver that could not possibly be traced to him.

On the first night, he had taken this gun out, stepped back from his bed a little, and fired a bullet into the doorframe. Then he had jumped back into bed, concealing the gun under the blankets — where none thought to look for it — until he could return it to its box.

That was all the preparation he had needed. He had established an attempted murder directed against himself, and he had shown that a bullet fired at him could easily go near — and therefore through — the connecting doorway.

On the second night, he had waited until the house had seemed quiet. Then he had peeped through one of the cracks in the Japanese screen at the girl, whom he could see in the reflected light from the moon. He had found, though, that when he stepped far enough back from the screen for it to escape powder marks, he could not see the girl, not while she was lying down. So he had fired first into the doorframe — near the previous night's bullet — to awaken her.

She had sat up in bed immediately, screaming, and he had shot her. He had intended firing another shot into her body — to make sure of her death — but my approach had made that impossible, and had made concealment of the gun impossible; so, with what strength he had left, he had thrown the revolver out of the window.

He died that afternoon, and I returned to San Francisco.

But that was not quite the end of the story.

In the ordinary course of business, the Agency's bookkeeping department sent Gallaway a bill for my services. With the check that he sent by return mail, he

enclosed a letter to me, from which I quote a paragraph:

I don't want to let you miss the cream of the whole affair. The lovely Caywood, when she recovered, denied that Exon had talked of murder or any other crime during his delirium. The cause of the distaste with which she might have looked at him afterward, and the reason she would not tell him what he had said, was that his entire conversation during that week of delirium had consisted of an uninterrupted stream of obscenities and blasphemies, which seem to have shocked the girl through and through.