

# Murder on Parade

by  
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**I**T WAS RAINING at Fort Ramsey, one of those very wet and thorough rains that can come to the Great Lakes region in the spring. Gray sheets of water spun across the sandy expanse of the parade ground, rain dripped steadily from the trees and beat down on the sloping roofs of the wide barracks buildings where the enlisted men lived. It formed broad puddles in front of the double rank of gray stone houses that constituted Officers' Row. The sentry in front of the guard house walked his beat in soggy silence, with water streaming from his slicker and dripping from the sodden brim of his campaign hat, but no one on the entire army post was out without urgent reason.

It was quite cozy in the living room of Colonel Preston's house, at the head of Officers' Row, where a fire burned on the hearth and the beat of the rain on the windows only accentuated the atmosphere of comfort and security. Jimmy Doyle—First Lieutenant James Doyle, of the 93rd U. S. Infantry—sat

sprawled on the divan with his long legs stretched out toward the fire.

"We now come to a very important subject," he said, breaking a drowsy and companionable silence that had held for a few minutes.

The girl beside him, who had been staring into the fire, her chin resting on her hands, sat back with a certain wariness, as though she knew what was coming. Marion Preston was an inch or so over five feet tall in her spike heels and with her lustrous black hair worn loose and curly, but she looked only about half the size of Jimmy Doyle's six-foot-two of khaki-clad bone and muscle.

"Now, Jimmy," she said, "you're not going to bring that subject up again, are you?"

"What subject?" he grinned.

"You know what I mean! Apple blossoms and wedding bells."

"You took the words right out of my mouth," Jimmy said. "How did you guess it?"

"I know that look in your eye. Let's talk

about the Chinese situation instead." Then her oval face became serious and she put out one hand in a friendly gesture. "Don't feel hurt, Jimmy! I like you a lot, and I consider you one of my best friends, but I don't want to marry you. Matter of fact, I'm not sure I want to marry an army man at all."

"And why not an army man?" he demanded indignantly.

"Oh, don't get in a huff about it," she laughed. "You know that army life is, in many ways, hard on the women. Always moving from place to place—never a permanent home—buying food at commissaries—living mostly in government antiques like this one!" Her hand swept out in an impatient gesture that indicated the comfortable but old-fashioned and ugly house that was her father's quarters. Then she checked herself and laughed again. "Don't worry about me, Jimmy—I only get this way now and then. But please don't ask me to marry you any more—not for a while."

"Oh, all right," he growled.

**J**IMMY GOT UP and stalked over to the chair where his hat and slicker were piled, his broad, freckled face unusually somber.

"You'll be sorry if I go and marry someone else!" he said darkly.

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

"Nuts! Anyway, I suppose I can take you to the usual Saturday night dance at the club?"

Marion hesitated. She seemed embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy," she said, "but I've promised to go with Harold Gray."

"That sap!"

"You are speaking of a fellow officer and gentleman, Lieutenant Doyle!" she said.

"To me," Jimmy said, "Second Lieutenant Harold Gray is a red-faced idiot who talks too much."

"Father says he is a very bright young man."

"Bright, my ear! I'm going to cut in every

time he tries to dance with you. Also, consider yourself invited to all future hops within twenty miles of here, from now on."

"I'm not accepting blanket invitations!" she said. "As the Colonel's daughter, I'm obliged to be polite to every—"

"You'd be a lot better off if you'd alter your position to the wife of a certain young First Lieutenant. So—good by!"

Jimmy put on his hat and stalked out into the rain. His puttees were already spattered with mud, and he splashed heedlessly through the puddles as he walked down Officers' Row to the bachelor quarters he shared with Tom Morley, of the Artillery. He found Tom bent over a table strewn with sheets of paper bearing figures and computations.

"Nice day," Jimmy growled, as he came in.

His friend grunted, without looking up, "Yeah—nice day for a murder."

"You think of the most cheerful things! What are you up to now?"

"Oh, working out some firing schedules for the summer's training period. This business of being Plans and Training Officer is no fun."

"You hairy-eared artillerymen have too much mathematics to do. You should have stuck to the infantry."

"Only the dumb-bells stick in the doughboy outfits," Tom said absently, still not looking up from his figuring.

"You go to hell! I've been insulted enough for one afternoon already."

"Row with the girl friend?"

"Not exactly. But she shows a lamentable lack of appreciation of my good points. I need a drink."

"There's rye, but no ginger ale."

Jimmy filled a small flask and slipped it in his pocket, then again went out and headed toward the Officers' Club, across the parade ground. The bar at the club handled only soft drinks. As he crossed the wind-swept and rain-drenched expanse of the parade ground,

plodding along with his head bent against the stinging drive of the rain, Jimmy returned the salute of an enlisted man crossing the parade ground in the direction of the woods that led down to the lake. He recognized him as a man from his own battalion, Staff Sergeant Wells.

Jimmy hesitated, turning to stare after the stocky figure of the sergeant, who was striding along toward the woods with a grim and intent expression on his weatherbeaten face. He wondered where the man was going. It was Wednesday afternoon, and nearly everybody was off duty, so that the sergeant's time was his own, but it was not the sort of day a man would pick for a pleasure stroll. Then Jimmy shrugged and went on. None of his business, anyway.

**T**HE OFFICERS' CLUB was a bare and Spartan frame building, an ugly structure built during the war; that served its purpose, but had no eye appeal. Jimmy crossed the screened veranda, waved to some friends playing billiards in the pool room, and skirted the dance floor to avoid dripping on the waxed boards. He hung his hat and slicker in the cloakroom, then went into the bar.

Pop Schwartz, the grizzled, middle-aged civilian steward who served as general factotum around the club, looked up at Jimmy with a wry, somewhat sour smile.

"Afternoon, Lieutenant," he said.

"Afternoon, Pop. How's the rheumatics?"

"Why ask, in this wet weather, Lieutenant—why ask?" The steward limped around the bar, and looked inquiringly at Jimmy, his under-lip thrust out, bulldog fashion.

"Set me up a glass of ginger ale, Pop!"

Jimmy fixed himself a drink and sipped it slowly. By the time he was halfway through, he felt better. He was still depressed by Marion's answer, but by this time he was beginning to get used to her refusals. One of these days he would catch her off guard. It was hard for one of Jimmy Doyle's volatile

temperament to remain depressed for long, and after a while he began to whistle softly to himself as he leaned on the bar. Through the nearby window he could see that the rain had at last stopped and the skies gave some signs of clearing.

From an adjoining room came a low murmur of conversation, and by glancing at a mirror on the wall Jimmy could see the couple who sat at a small table just beyond the partition. The thin and dark-haired young infantry officer was Second Lieutenant Peter Preston, the colonel's son and Marion's brother. Jimmy's lips twitched slightly. Young Pete Preston would probably make a good enough officer when he was out of the Point another year and had some more of the paint knocked off him. Right now he was in the know-it-all stage, and rather a pain in the neck to some of the older officers in the regiment. His blonde companion was Grace Johnson, the daughter of a certain bluff and genial major in the cavalry squadron stationed at the Fort.

From the tone of their voices, Jimmy deduced that they were having a quarrel. Then the girl raised her voice a trifle, and he heard her say:

"It's perfectly ridiculous for you to be jealous of Major Byron, Peter. He's married, and old enough to be my father, and his interest in me is purely paternal. Anyway, I don't want to marry you or anyone else, just yet."

Peter Preston's reply was not audible, but Jimmy grinned.

"The whole damn regiment is trying to get married!" he muttered. "Guess I'll get out of here and go for a walk."

**J**IMMY SWUNG across the parade ground in the direction of the path to the lake. The air was still as he entered the woods, and he heard all about him the sound of small forest creatures beginning to stir again and the steady drip-drip of water from the leaves. He went through to the shore and sat down on a

rock, and lit his pipe. He sat there awhile, smoking, and looking out over the vast expanse of gray water.

At last he stood up and knocked out his pipe. Then suddenly he heard, somewhere in the woods between the lake and the Fort, the sound of a single shot. It was a heavy report, more like that of a service automatic than a rifle, and it seemed to travel slowly on the damp air.

Jimmy frowned, listening intently, but he did not hear anything more. The shot puzzled him. This was all government property, and there was no reason or excuse for anyone to be shooting off firearms in the vicinity. Then he shrugged and started back up the path. After all, it was probably no worry of his.

The path through the woods was winding but wide, and Jimmy strode along it at a brisk gait. He was watching his footing to avoid the puddles, or he might never have seen the thing that was just visible through a clump of bushes off to the right. Then he saw it, and halted abruptly. A man's foot, clad in the regulation shoes and leggings, was protruding from under a bush a little way off the path!

Stepping cautiously through the underbrush, Jimmy parted the bushes and looked down. The man lay sprawled on his back, left arm outflung and right hand still gripping the butt of his heavy service .45. There was a bullet-hole in his temple, and he was dead beyond question, but the blood was not yet congealed and death could not have taken place more than a few minutes previously. So that was the shot he had heard! The dead man was Staff Sergeant Wells, the man he had passed on the parade ground a little earlier in the afternoon.

Jimmy pursed his lips in a soundless whistle, and pushed his campaign hat to the back of his head. The thing had all the outward signs of suicide, and yet he wondered. Wells had not looked like a man bent on suicide when Jimmy had seen him go striding purposefully through the rain toward

this belt of woodland an hour or so before. Then Jimmy noticed two other things. In the dead man's outstretched left hand was a strange, grotesque little clay figure. In the mud beside him were two clear footprints—the prints of a woman's high-heeled shoe.

Wells dead—!

Suddenly Jimmy thought of Tom Morley's ironic remark a little earlier in the afternoon: "Nice day for a murder!" That grim jest had now the unpleasant ring of truth. As a matter of fact, Tom would be upset when he heard the news, for he and Wells had served in the same outfit in the Philippines a few years ago. Well—he had better get back to headquarters and make a report.

**J**UST OUTSIDE the door of the long frame building that housed regimental headquarters, Jimmy encountered Lt. Colonel Wilson, the second in command, and regimental executive. Wilson was a tall, gaunt, ascetic-looking man with white hair and a grim face. He was not popular. A stickler for the letter of regulation and the minutiae of discipline, he kept to himself, except for official contacts.

"Just a minute, Lieutenant," he said in his cold, toneless voice. "I find you have not yet completed getting out those orders I asked for."

"Sorry, sir," Jimmy said, "I didn't think that, on a Wednesday afternoon, you would want—"

"The Wednesday half holiday is given to help the morale of the enlisted men, Lieutenant, but we do not expect staff officers to neglect their duties. I am afraid Colonel Preston made a mistake in appointing you acting adjutant during the absence of the regular adjutant."

"Sorry, sir," Jimmy said again, his face expressionless. "I will get out the orders as soon as—"

"As soon as what? Have you something more important to do?"

Jimmy kept his voice even:

"I think so, sir. I have just discovered the body of Sergeant Wells, lying near the path that leads to the lake."

"Wells! Dead?"

"Yes, sir. Either a suicide, or murdered. I'm not sure which."

"Wells dead!" Wilson repeated; "Why, he served under me for years! The outfit won't seem the same without him." The lines in his face deepened, and suddenly Jimmy almost liked Lt.-Colonel Wilson. It seemed that there was some human warmth back of the mask after all! Then Wilson shook his shoulders, and his voice took on its normal staccato quality. "We will go at once. Get a medical officer and two stretcher-bearers. And Major Byron. And—er—that young Lieutenant Gray."

Jimmy nodded and hurried into headquarters, sending orderlies after the men named by Wilson. In a few minutes they were all gathered together. Bad news spreads fast, and already little knots of men were beginning to cluster in front of barracks doors, talking in low tones and glancing out across the parade ground toward the dark belt of woodland that had now become the scene of tragedy.

A messenger had been sent to give the news to Colonel Preston, but he returned with the word that the Colonel was not on the Post at the moment. Wilson grunted.

"All right, gentlemen," he said, "let's go."

They strode off across the parade ground in a compact group, Wilson's gaunt figure in the lead, and beside him a stocky man whose shoulder straps bore golden leaves. Major Harry Byron was dark-haired and swarthy, with a close-cropped mustache. He was handsome, in a heavy sort of way, and was a very efficient officer. Unfortunately, his private life did not measure up to his professional qualifications. He was one of those men who are utterly incapable of leaving the women alone, and probably everyone on the Post, except his quiet and colorless wife,

knew of his philandering. It was an even bet that he would some day get himself thrown out of the army for too much of that sort of thing.

Walking along just behind him, watching the Major's broad back and the jaunty swing of his stride, Jimmy remembered what he had overheard Grace Johnson saying that afternoon. He wondered if there was anything in it. Now that he had thought of it, he did recall seeing the Johnson girl, on several occasions, driving along with Byron in his car.

Harold Gray was walking with Jimmy, while the bespectacled medical officer and the pair of enlisted stretcher-bearers brought up the rear.

"How did you happen to discover the body?" Gray asked.

Jimmy shrugged. "I was just taking a walk, and saw one of his feet sticking out from under the bushes."

"Kind of a funny day to take a walk. How did you happen to—"

"Because I felt like it!" Jimmy snapped.

Gray shrugged. "Well, no need to get huffy about it!"

Jimmy strode on ahead, exasperated.

**A**T LAST they came to the spot where the dead man lay. The clouds were breaking up now, and just at that moment a pale beam of sunlight struck through, so that the dead man lay in a little patch of brightness. They were all silent for a moment, and then Major Byron shook his heavy shoulders.

"That's a hell of a way to die!" he muttered. "It seems—well, a strange end for a soldier."

"I guess it's a clear case of suicide," Wilson said slowly. Harold Gray went forward a minute. "No doubt of it, sir," he said officiously. "You can easily see the powder burns around the bullet-hole where he held the gun against his head."

Jimmy Doyle, standing back a little, his thumbs hooked in his belt, shook his head.

"I'm not so sure it's suicide," he said.

The others turned to face him.

"Why not?" someone demanded.

"Just a hunch. I passed Wells an hour before, and he looked more as if he was on his way to have a fight with somebody than like a man intending to kill himself. I know it looks like suicide, but maybe someone just set the stage that way."

"But those powder burns!" Gray said.

"They would still be there if someone else had held the pistol against Wells' head. Then there's the matter of that little clay figure in his left hand."

Gray was the nearest to the body, but his face twitched a little and he showed no desire to remove the image from the dead man's hand. Major Byron bent down and picked it, holding it between two fingers and examining it carefully.

"Funny little gadget," he said. "I've seen something like it among some of the Moro hill-tribes. Their witch doctors make them. But what it's doing here in the U. S. A. is more than I can possibly imagine."

"Or why there are a woman's footprints beside the body," Jimmy added.

"Why should a quiet, stable man like Wells have any enemies who would want to kill him?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Maybe he made some enemy in the line of duty. Court-martials, things like that. Once I was on a Board of Officers that caught a man stealing from an arsenal. He swore to get the lot of us."

"There are no signs of any struggle," Gray put in, with a patronizing glance at Jimmy. "I still think it is an obvious suicide."

"I agree with you, Lieutenant," Wilson said, with an air of finality. "We will take the body back to camp with us. I do not doubt that pistol will prove to be Wells' own weapon."

Jimmy Doyle sighed. He was probably sticking his neck out again, but he still couldn't believe this thing was as simple as the others seemed to think. "I don't think we

should dismiss the matter so readily, sir," he said.

Lt. Colonel Wilson's head went back. "And why not? You seem to have a lot of ideas about this case, Lieutenant—perhaps we had better ask you to explain just how you happened to be wandering around here on a rainy afternoon and discovered the body."

"Do you mean to imply that I had anything to do with this, sir?" Jimmy asked, white with anger. .

"That may be a matter for an investigating board to ascertain, sir. Meanwhile, I shall make a point of reporting your attitude to Colonel Preston. And can you tell me any good reason for your fantastic belief that this is murder?"

"I sure can!" Jimmy's jaw jutted forward stubbornly, and his freckled face was flushed. "The gun is in Wells' right hand. Look at the location of the bullet-hole. It is not a place where a man would ordinarily shoot himself. How about it, Doc?"

The medical corps man rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You may be right, but I would have to perform an autopsy first to determine the exact track of the bullet."

"Very well, gentlemen," Wilson said. "We will take the body back with us and inform the civil authorities that the circumstances are at least suspicious. Lieutenant Gray, you will stay here to make sure that nothing about this spot is disturbed, until we can send an enlisted sentry. The civil authorities may wish to make casts of those footprints."

"Yes, sir," Gray gulped, but his face showed that he did not relish his task of keeping vigil in this place of death.

"And bring along the pistol, Major," Wilson added. "But"—he threw Jimmy a venomous glance—"Carry it in your handkerchief, to avoid disturbing any fingerprints that may be on it."

**J**UST AS he finished his dinner in the Officers' Mess that night, Jimmy was called away by a message to report to Colonel Preston at once. As he left the mess hall, a car passed him, going quite fast in the direction of Officers' Row. It was already dark, but Jimmy recognized the car and knew that the officer at the wheel was Major Byron. The woman beside him was veiled. Whoever she might be, Jimmy had a hunch that it was not Mrs. Byron.

Marion Preston came to the door as Jimmy walked up to the Preston house. She looked very small but stately in a semi-formal black gown, with her dark curls high on her head.

"Hello, little girl, is your father home?" he said.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Don't use that tone to me, Jimmy Doyle!"

He grinned, and said:

"Still sore at me?"

"I'm never angry with you, Jimmy, only there are times when you can be the most irritating soul alive."

Colonel Charles Preston was a tall and dignified soldier of the old school, veteran of many campaigns and a lifetime spent in the army. His gray mustache and pointed beard had led the men of the 93rd Infantry to refer to him as Old Whiskers, but the nickname was one of affection and not derision.

"The civilian State Police are now investigating the death of Sergeant Wells," he said, "and I want you and Captain O'Neill to go over to the club, where they have made their headquarters, and give them what assistance you can."

"Yes, sir."

"Also, my daughter and I are having a few people in for the evening tomorrow and would be glad to have you come."

"It will be a pleasure, sir."

"And—er—Lieutenant—I hope you will make sure that all your routine work as adjutant is done before coming. Our regimental executive likes everything to be in

order."

Jimmy was grinning to himself as he left the house. Old Whiskers was a sport. It was evident that Wilson had been complaining about him and that Colonel Preston's sense of proportion had kept him from taking it too seriously. Then Jimmy turned up the walk to the little cottage that was allotted to Captain O'Neill of Company D. Through the open door he could see the captain and his dark-haired Spanish wife in the living room. She wore a hat with a dark veil, which she had just thrown back, and Jimmy whistled soundlessly through his teeth. So Mrs. O'Neill had been Major Byron's companion in the car!

The gestures of the couple before him suggested that they were having a quarrel. Jimmy was sure of it a moment later when O'Neill's voice came to his ears.

"I don't care where you were, Amalia, I still say this is a hell of an hour for a married woman to come home!"

"If you don't like it, do something about it!" she flared back.

"Maybe I will."

"You haven't the nerve!"

Jimmy knew that, in the heat of their quarrel, they had not heard him outside the door, so he tiptoed back down the walk to the main sidewalk. Then he again walked toward the O'Neill house, only this time he was whistling cheerfully and scuffing his feet, making sure that they heard him come. When he came to the door Mrs. O'Neill had gone upstairs and the captain was alone.

"Come in, Lieutenant," he said in a toneless voice.

Captain John O'Neill was thin and blond, and rather quiet. He was that comparatively rare type of Irishman who is very restrained, but Jimmy did not doubt that if pushed far enough, he could break out in a fierce tempest of anger. The look in his eyes and the strained lines about his mouth indicated that he was not far from the breaking point now. He seemed to welcome Jimmy's summons, which

took him away from home awhile.

**I**N ONE of the small rooms at the club they found a laconic, sharp-eyed man, named Branner, who was a detective attached to the State Police.

"Your doctor has completed his examination of the body," he said, "and he reports that, though it is possible for the man to have shot himself at that angle, it would be very improbable."

"Just what I thought," Jimmy said.

Branner smiled thinly. "From what they tell me, Lieutenant, I gather that you're the regimental detective. But here's something you may not have thought of. Your doctor—or whatever you call a medical officer in the army—also believes that the bullet was fired into the man's head after he was dead."

"What?"

"Just that. He believes that someone fired that shot into Wells' head after he had died from other causes."

"But then what could have killed him?"

"That," Branner said, "we still do not know. We are taking the body to the city for a more scientific and thorough autopsy than is possible here."

The other questions he asked were mainly routine, matters concerning regulations and customs and life at the army post, with which he was not familiar. They had already determined from the serial number of the gun found with the dead man that it was the government weapon regularly assigned to him. Of course it should have been in its place in the rack of the battalion headquarters company, but, it would not have been hard for so high ranking an N.C.O. as Sergeant Wells to get it.

"It looks to me," Branner said, "as though Wells went out to keep a secret appointment with someone he did not trust, and took the gun along, ready for trouble. He ran into it—but the gun did not save him."

Next day life at Fort Ramsey resumed the

smooth and normal routine customary at a peace-time army post. Nevertheless, the shadow of Sergeant Wells' death seemed to hang over all of them. Whenever men had a few minutes of leisure, they gathered together, talking in low tones. No one knew how the news got out, for the report of the medical officer's findings had supposedly been kept secret, but every man on the Post knew there was a suspicion of foul play, and every man seemed to have his own fantastic view of how it might have happened.

The detectives attached to the State Police were quietly browsing around, but they mostly kept their own counsel, and no one knew what conclusions they were reaching. The General in command at Fort Ramsey had appointed Colonel Preston in charge of a Board of Inquiry, to look into the case from the military point of view, but they could not do very much until they received the report of the autopsy.

Jimmy was in his quarters late in the afternoon, climbing into his full dress uniform, when Tom Morley strolled in with a pair of field cases and a map case bumping against his chest, and a good coating of dust all over him.

"Lord, I'm tired!" he said, slumping down in a chair and putting his feet upon the table. "I must have covered thirty miles, spotting possible observation posts for the maneuvers this spring. Well—solved the mystery of the Wells murder yet?"

"Sure," Jimmy said. "You did it."

"Right the first time. Say—how come the fancy feathers?"

"The Old Man insists on a full formal ceremony at Retreat this evening. It's probably not a bad idea, with half the regiment on the verge of the jitters."

**A**S HE HAD a little time on his hands, he strolled over to the club and sat down with a magazine. Leaning on the bar, staring moodily into a tall glass, was an officer whose

dress uniform also bore the light blue facings of the infantry. When he half turned his head, Jimmy recognized young Peter Preston. Though he was far from being tipsy, he seemed to have been drinking heavily. Jimmy shrugged. Young Peter had better watch his step, or his father would come down on him like a ton of brick. The Colonel was likely to lean over backward in being the stern disciplinarian, where his son was concerned.

Now that he thought of it, Jimmy recalled having seen Major Byron sitting on the veranda talking to Grace Johnson when he came in. That might account for Peter's hitting the bottle. Half the regiment, he reflected gloomily, seemed to be getting itself into a swell emotional mess.

From across the parade ground the bugles gave tongue in a silvery cascade of notes—"First Call" for Retreat. Peter Preston gulped down his drink and hurried away, holding his saber to keep it from banging against his legs. Jimmy tossed aside the magazine and stretched.

He had a few minutes more. As the bugles began to blow Assembly, he, strolled into the bar.

"Evening, Pop," he said.

"Evening, Lieutenant."

"How's the rheumatics, Pop?"

"What do you want to know for?" the steward growled.

Jimmy smiled; the steward was such a testy fellow. "Did—er—Lieutenant Preston drink much tonight, Pop?" he said.

"Too much, sir. I tried to get him to go easy, but he seemed to resent that."

"Yes, I suppose he would," Jimmy said. Sometimes he wished Peter Preston were not Marion's brother. He could not help feeling a certain responsibility for the younger man on that account, even though he knew it was foolish and would not be appreciated.

A little later Jimmy stood alone, with drawn saber, in the center of the sandy parade ground. The massed battalions of the regiment

were drawn up before him, long blue lines that stood rigid and motionless. Colonel Preston and the rest of the staff stood a little way behind him. Then, at the proper moment, Jimmy barked an order that brought a thousand rifles up to Present Arms, and turned about to salute the Colonel, his saber flashing in the sun.

"Sir, all present or accounted for."

"Take your post, sir."

The ceremony went on, the flag crept down its pole, and then the long blue line changed to a moving column and began to pass in review by companies. Another day had ended at Fort Ramsey, life went on as usual—only there was an empty bunk in the non-commissioned officer's quarters, and men were wondering if anybody else was to go. As Jimmy passed under a barracks window on his way to the Officers' Mess, he overheard a grizzled old private saying to his cronies:

"I tell ye, lads, there's blood on the moon. Such deaths come in threes. Remember what I'm tellin' ye!"

**T**HERE WAS quite a sizeable party at Colonel Preston's house that night. Most of the senior officers of the regiment, such as Byron and O'Neill, were present with their wives, as well as some of the juniors and a few from the allied arms, such as Major Johnson, of the cavalry. A round of cocktails had been passed, and Jimmy was just beginning to help Marion set up some card tables, when there came a sudden interruption.

"Why—it's Harold Gray!" Marion exclaimed, as she recognized the newcomer.

"The pride of the army!" Jimmy muttered, and she shook her head in reproof.

"Don't be like that, Jimmy!"

Gray stood just inside the door, bowing to the assembled company with jerky bobs of his head, as though embarrassed at intruding on a social gathering to which he had not been invited.

"Very sorry to bother you, Colonel," he

said, "but I thought you would like to hear the report of the autopsy on Sergeant Wells' body."

"Oh, yes." Colonel Preston stepped forward. "What is it?"

"The bullet was fired into his head after he was already dead. He died from having been pricked with a nail or a thorn dipped in a deadly poison, a form of datura known in the Philippines."

"Then it was murder, after all!"

"Yes, sir. Cold-blooded murder."

**F**OR A LONG moment there was silence. Then someone gasped, and one of the women cried out and instantly covered her mouth with her hand. Colonel Preston sighed.

"Thank you very much for bringing me the news, Lieutenant," he said. For a moment he stood motionless, then he softly smote one clenched fist into the other palm and turned to face his guests.

"After all, we can do nothing tonight. I wish all the officers I have named on the Board of Inquiry to meet me immediately after mess tomorrow morning. Meanwhile—who would like to play some bridge?"

By means of a little sleight of hand with the tallies, Jimmy managed to draw Marion as his partner. As the game began, Jimmy watched the other players at the three tables. Perhaps because his observation was sharpened by his knowledge of some of the hidden emotional currents that motivated these people, he noticed occasional bits of by-play that escaped the others.

Major Byron was being attentive to Grace Johnson, in a heavily playful sort of way. She was enjoying it, and was glancing provocatively across at Peter Preston, who had turned sulky. Amalia O'Neil was watching Byron, though trying to avoid appearing to do so, and her eyes were stormy. On the other hand, the flabby and placid face of Mrs. Byron showed no emotion at all, and not even much interest in anything, except the cards in her

hand.

Someone had run out of cigarettes, and Byron was leaning back, fumbling through his pockets for his own pack. Then he pulled something out of his pocket, and stared at it with a puzzled smile on his heavy face.

"Hello!" he said. "I wonder where this came from!"

It was a small, crudely made clay image. Most of those present glanced at it with only idle curiosity, but Colonel Preston and O'Neill and Jimmy—those who had seen the thing in Sergeant Wells' dead hand, out there in the rain-wet woods—exchanged quick glances. Then the same thought came to Byron himself, and the smile faded from his face.

"Why, it's just like the thing Wells had!" he exclaimed. "I wonder what damn fool slipped it in the pocket of my uniform!"

He laid the thing gingerly down on the table and instinctively wiped off his fingers. Grace Johnson, who was beside him, laughed nervously and edged away from the image. Jimmy picked it up.

"Yes, it's just like the other one," he said musingly. "Except that—" He hesitated, and Byron smiled wryly.

"Yes, I know; except that it has what looks like major's leaves on the shoulders. It was meant for me, all right—but I'm not going to be scared by a stupid practical joke like that."

The incident broke up the game. They all agreed that the finding of the image meant nothing, and that there was nothing to worry about, but their protestations lacked any convincing ring. They all seemed a little nervous. Byron had resumed playing, but the other tables stopped. Both Mrs. Byron and Mrs. O'Neill wandered off somewhere, and a little later Captain O'Neill also disappeared. The night had turned warm, and the windows were open. Peter Preston had been drinking quietly and sulkily by himself, and now he too got up and walked unsteadily out onto the veranda.

THINGS HAD become quiet in the living room. Colonel Preston was talking with his second in command, the dour-faced Wilson. Jimmy and Marion were talking near the fireplace. The people at the table with Major Byron were still playing bridge, but most of the other guests had wandered to other parts of the house or out on the veranda, or even into the little garden.

From where Jimmy sat, Major Byron was silhouetted squarely against the open window that was directly behind him.

Against the darkness, the open window was simply a black oblong, but Jimmy thought he saw something move outside. He bent forward, peering, but he could not see anything. An instant later Byron frowned and slapped at the back of his neck, as though slapping at a mosquito, though it was too early in the spring for mosquitoes, so early that the screens had not yet been placed in the windows.

Byron pulled a card from his hand and played it, then again he reached for the back of his neck and seemed to tug at something. His hand came back into sight, and between thumb and forefinger he held a sharp-pointed thorn. His eyes widened, and then all the color drained from his handsome, florid face, leaving it a ghastly chalk-white.

Jimmy met Byron's horror-filled eyes, and suddenly realizing what had happened, bounded across the room and took the thorn from the Major's shaking fingers. He sniffed at the gummy substance that still adhered to the point.

"Datura," he said grimly.

Byron jumped up, kicking his chair back. His cards went spilling across the floor.

"Where's the kitchen?" he gasped. "Get a knife and cut the poison out! If you cut deep enough, it may work. Hurry, before—" His voice trailed off, he faltered in mid-stride, and then fell heavily to the floor.

Jimmy dropped on one knee beside Byron's writhing body and turned him over on

his back. The dying man looked up at him with a ghastly smile.

"It's a hell of a way—for a soldier to die!" he gasped, through lips that were bleeding from where he had bitten them in his pain.

The whole thing had taken place in so few seconds—since Byron slapped at what he thought was an insect bite and found the poisoned thorn in his neck—that none of the others in the room yet understood just what was happening. Even those who had been playing with Byron still sat motionless in their chairs; staring and puzzled. They had watched, in startled surprise, Jimmy Doyle's swift leap across the room, and then Byron's frantic rush away from the table. Not till the Major collapsed on the floor did they all realize that something was seriously wrong.

As Colonels Preston and Wilson came rushing across the room to kneel beside the dying man, Jimmy jumped to his feet.

"Shot through the window by a poisoned dart from a blow-gun!" he snapped, in response to their inquiring and horrified glances. "Somebody send for a doctor. I'm going to take a look outside."

AS HE CHARGED across the porch, Jimmy collided heavily with Major Johnson. The shock nearly threw both of them off their feet.

"Hold on there!" the cavalry officer grunted angrily.

"Sorry, sir," Jimmy panted. "Byron's just been killed by someone outside the living room window. Come on!"

Halfway around to the side of the house they encountered Peter Preston, walking slowly toward them and swaying uncertainly on his feet.

"What's going on?" he muttered thickly, stepping in front of them.

Jimmy pushed him aside. "Get back in the house, you young fool!" he snapped.

They found no clues of any sort outside the fatal window. The ground around Officers'

Row was very open and the night was clear. The killer must have run very fast, to get out of sight in the thirty seconds or so that had elapsed since the dart was shot in at Byron—but there was no trace of any fugitive. O'Neill brought them out a flashlight, but they could not even find any footprints. The ground under the living room window did show some slight signs of having been disturbed, but the sandy soil had dried out during the clear weather of the past day and was too hard to take footprints.

"No trail here," Johnson muttered. "Looks like he got clean away."

As Jimmy and Major Johnson came back into the Prestons' living room, they saw that the end had already come. Byron's twisted body now lay motionless in the center of the floor, the blue tunic of his dress uniform open at the throat and one of his hands twisted into the rug, which he had gripped in his death struggle. His wife had returned to the room and was seated at a card table, slumped down with her head on her arms, and sobbing convulsively. Amalia O'Neill stood beside her.

The Spanish woman's face was so deathly pale that the rouge on her cheeks was glaring, and grotesque against her skin, but she had dropped a comforting hand on the older woman's shaking shoulders.

Grace Johnson also seemed on the verge of hysteria, though Jimmy did not believe her agitation was due to anything deeper than the shock of this gruesome killing. Marion, sitting on the divan beside her, one arm about Grace's shoulders, looked up at Jimmy with a worried smile as he came back. Her father was standing before the fireplace, hands clasped behind his back and shoulders drooping. There was pain in his eyes, and his face looked as though he had aged ten years in the space of a few minutes.

Peter Preston still stood near the door, where he had abruptly halted on entering the room. After one look at his gray face, Jimmy

knew that the fire of the liquor had been drained out of him, the emotional shock had sobered him. Peter squared his shoulders then, and walked across the room, to sit on the arm of the divan where Grace was huddled. The girl rested her blond head against his arm, and he stroked her hair.

**S**LOWLY Mrs. Byron lifted her head and slowly glanced about the room. Her face was tear-stained, her eyes were puffed. Some strands of hair, become loosened, were straggling across her face.

"He's dead. Harry's dead," she said in a horrible, flat voice. It was as though she could not believe the words she spoke. "He's dead. Who killed him?"

She looked from one to another.

"Someone outside the window," Colonel Preston said gently. "We don't know who did it yet, but we'll find out."

Mrs. Byron did not appear to have heard him at all. She slowly turned her head from side to side, still looking about the room.

"He's dead," she repeated. "He was no angel, and he wasn't always a gentleman, but he was gallant in his own way, and he was my husband."

She paused, looking at them all with those pale, tragic eyes, but no one said anything. There wasn't anything to say. Suddenly she pointed one shaking hand at Captain O'Neill.

"Who killed him, Captain? Didn't you kill him? He had won your wife away from you, you know. Or *you*?" Her finger suddenly shifted, to point accusingly at Peter Preston. "Didn't *you* kill him? He was running after your yellow-haired girl there. Harry always liked yellow hair. Mine was that way once—years ago. I suppose you people all thought I never knew about the things that Harry did. Just plain, colorless Agnes Byron, who sticks to her knitting and her bridge games. Funny isn't it? You see—I loved him."

Suddenly her head dropped forward on her arms again, and her whole body shook with a

wild sobbing.

"Somebody take care of her!" Major Johnson said in a strangled voice. "Marion—can't you—?"

Marion stood up and beckoned to one of the other women. Together they lifted the weeping widow to her feet and led her away toward one of the bedrooms at the back of the house. Colonel Preston squared his shoulders.

"I think the rest of us had better stay right here until the State Police arrive," he said. "I have sent for them. This, beyond question, is a matter for the civil authorities."

**B**Y A SORT of unspoken mutual consent, they all moved out on the veranda while they waited, leaving Byron's body alone in the living room. The medical corps officer who examined the body was careful to disturb things as little as possible. The deadly thorn had been placed in a small cardboard pill box and now lay on the center table, beside the grotesque clay image Byron had found in his pocket.

They sat around on the veranda, dim shapes in the gloom, saying little. The glowing tips of their cigarettes were the most active and living things about them—tiny pin-points of fire that glowed and flickered nervously. Marion came out after a while and crossed over to sit beside Jimmy.

"She is resting now," she told them, speaking of Mrs. Byron. "Helen Burns is still with her, and the medical officer has given her a sedative. She'll sleep soon."

Try as he would, Jimmy could not make any sense of the two murders that had taken place within a little over twenty-four hours. They must both be the work of the same person—the similarity in the method of death left that beyond question—but otherwise the case was beyond him. He could not imagine what connection there could be between two men so dissimilar as Sergeant Wells and Captain Byron that would cause the killer to mark them both for death.

Well, motive was the thing for which detectives looked in cases like this. Of course there were plenty of people who might have had a reason for hating Harry Byron. Popular with his subordinates, and among men with whom he had only military and official contacts, he nevertheless had had a singular gift for making enemies in his private life. Captain O'Neill might well have hated him, or young Peter Preston, or even his own wife. For that matter, there were doubtless many other men and women who had come into contact with Byron in past escapades and had lived to regret it. But surely none of the people Jimmy actually knew, people present at this party tonight, would stoop to murder.

And then Jimmy began to wonder. He had not been an army officer for seven years, accustomed to handling all types of men, without learning that the human mind is a strange, complex thing, and that a person may do many improbable and unpredictable things when pushed hard enough by circumstances. Now that he thought of it, most of those people who had the really valid reasons for disliking Byron had been out of the living room at the time of the murder. Perhaps they would all be able to account for their movements—but, on the other hand, it would not have been hard for one of them to have slipped around to that open window and—

Suddenly Jimmy thought of young Peter Preston, who had been reeling around the corner of the house at the very moment when Jimmy and Major Johnson dashed around to try and head off the killer. Jimmy shook his head savagely. No, he could not believe anything of that sort. Marion's brother was headstrong, and doggedly opinionated, but he was certainly not a murderer.

**A**T LAST a car rolled slowly up to the house, a watchful infantry sentry riding one of the running boards until he made sure that Colonel Preston had actually sent for the State Police. Branner, the laconic and hard-

eyed detective attached to the constabulary, was again in charge. His eyes were sunken in his head, and he looked as though he had slept none at all since first entering into the Wells case the day before.

“Bad,” he said shortly, rubbing his chin as he looked down at the body. “Very bad. With your permission, Colonel, I’d like to have our fingerprint men go over this place and also the window frame outside. And, if possible, I would like a sentry placed outside the window for tonight, to make sure the ground there is not disturbed until we have a chance to examine it closely tomorrow.”

“Certainly. Call upon me for any help you need,” Preston said.

“Major Johnson and I hunted around outside the window with flashlights immediately after the murder,” Jimmy said.

Branner’s lips twitched. “Well meant—but perhaps unfortunate,” he said. “All right, it can’t be helped now. One thing more, Colonel. I suggest that you have all the guests of tonight’s party present tomorrow afternoon, to reenact the events that took place just before the killing.”

“Certainly. I know they will all be glad to give what help they can.”

“In the meantime, I want them to think over carefully everything that was said or took place tonight, so they can give as exact a report as possible tomorrow.”

“I think you all heard that,” the Colonel said with a quick glance around. “Consider it an order.”

At last peace and quiet again came to the Preston house. The State Police had completed their preliminary investigation and had removed the body for a formal autopsy. The last of the guests had departed. Marion had gone to bed. Jimmy had remained to the last, because he felt that his position as regimental adjutant—which is a sort of confidential executive assistant to the Colonel—required it.

“Well, sir, I guess I’ll run along,” he said.

Preston sighed, and looked at his watch. “Don’t be in a hurry to rush off, Lieutenant. After all,” he added with a faint smile, “you don’t have to get up for reveille.”

“I’m in no hurry, sir. I simply—”

“Stick around and keep me company for a while. I don’t feel like going to bed yet. Help yourself to another drink, and get a cigar out of the mahogany box on the bookcase.”

“Thank you, sir.”

It was evident, Jimmy reflected, that the Old Man was jittery and wanted to talk to someone. Well, he couldn’t blame him. He didn’t think that he would sleep well tonight himself, with the memory of Harry Byron’s pain-distorted face still before him—and the murder had not taken place in *his* house.

**F**OR A WHILE the two men smoked in companionable silence, both of them staring into space. Much of the time the Colonel’s gaze was fixed somberly upon the central rug, where Byron’s body had lain when he died. At last he squared his shoulders and leaned back.

“It’s a queer world, Doyle,” he said in a voice as old and heavy as his face had become; “a mad world. I used to think of our regiment as not only an efficient and smoothly running organization, but also a happy family. I suppose I deliberately shut my eyes and ears to the signs and rumors of sub-surface trouble and scandal, because I just didn’t want to believe them.”

“I can understand that, sir.”

“Yes. And this whole ghastly mess has suddenly made me realize that I am getting old.”

“I wouldn’t say that, sir,” Jimmy protested. “

Preston grinned at him through the drifting cigar smoke, and then grew somber.

“Don’t kid me, Jimmy! I’m getting very near the retirement age. Y’know, I think the reason this—this murder business hits me so hard is that the killer must be somebody on the

Post—one of our own people. I don't think we can escape that conclusion, do you?"

"I'm afraid not," Jimmy answered slowly, "particularly in the case of Major Byron. The killer had to be someone in a position to know pretty intimate details of life among the officer personnel at the Post, in order to know that Byron would be here tonight. The killer might even be—"

He paused, suddenly hesitant. His voice trailed off.

Preston's lips twitched. "Go ahead," he said. "Say it! The killer may well have been one of the guests in this house tonight! "

**J**IMMY STAYED there for an hour more before Colonel Preston finally let him go. They said little of importance, but whenever Jimmy started to go the older man insisted on his staying a little longer. Not until Jimmy had finally said goodbye and left did he suddenly realize just what it was that shadowed Colonel Preston's fine eyes and made him anxious to avoid being left alone.

"That's it!" Jimmy muttered to himself.

"The Old Man is afraid his son is the murderer, and he urged me to stick around because he wanted to put off the time when he would be left alone and would have to think about it!"

Jimmy turned down toward his own quarters. Then, on a sudden thought, he crossed to the opposite side of the wide and unpaved street that formed Officers' Row and stood looking back. It was still difficult to understand how the killer had managed to get out of sight so quickly on a clear night. The only possible explanation was that he had ducked into or behind one of the nearest houses—which again indicated someone very sure of his ground. The houses were allotted in order of rank within the regiment, so that the next one was that of Lt. Colonel Wilson, and the one beyond had been Major Byron's.

Then, from the patch of shadow under a clump of trees just behind Jimmy, a quiet

voice said, "Yes, Lieutenant, I agree with you."

"Huh?" Jimmy exclaimed, spinning around.

A man stepped out of the shadows—Branner, of the State Police.

"I agree with you that the killer must have taken refuge in or behind one of those adjoining houses. That's what you were thinking, wasn't it?"

"Yes—but how did you know?"

"Just a good guess. I have been doing a little prowling around. Tell me, what grade of officer is it that wears one gold bar on his shoulder straps?"

"Second Lieutenant. Why?"

"I saw such an officer prowling around the Preston house a little while ago. Wasn't able to make out his face, though. Good night."

**J**IMMY WALKED back to his own quarters slowly. He hated to admit the fact, even to himself, but things were beginning to look bad for Peter Preston. Peter had hated Byron for the older man's attentions to Grace Johnson. He had been drinking heavily. He had been out of the room at the time of the killing. Jimmy had found him lurching back around the corner of the house a few seconds later. The suspicious facts lined up in cold array.

It was, of course, hard to conceive of any tie-up between Peter and Wells that would have led him to kill the sergeant. That was one thing in Peter's favor. But for that matter, it was just as hard to imagine any motive that anyone else could have had for killing two men so dissimilar. And there seemed to be no doubt that both murders had been done by the same hand.

Jimmy hoped Peter Preston was not guilty—not so much for Peter's sake, for they had never been very friendly, but because he was Marion's brother. He knew how terribly a tragedy of that sort would hurt the girl. Also, he had become very fond of Colonel Preston,

and realized what it would mean to Old Whiskers if his son should turn out to be a murderer. The whole thing was a very nasty mess.

Suddenly, conviction came to Jimmy Doyle. He felt certain that, in spite of the growing amount of circumstantial evidence against him, Peter was innocent of the murders. It just wasn't in the cards. Peter wasn't that sort. Somehow Jimmy felt better after reaching that conclusion.

Tom Morley was asleep on his cot when Jimmy belatedly came into the bedroom of their quarters. Normally Tom was a sound sleeper, but tonight he awoke when Jimmy was half undressed. He raised himself up on one elbow and peered sleepily across the room.

"Hello!" he muttered drowsily. "How's the demon detective tonight? Hawkshaw in khaki!"

"Didn't you hear the news?" Jimmy said.

"I've heard nothing since nine o'clock. Turned in early. What's the dirt?"

"Major Harry Byron, of my regiment, was killed. Poison. Killed the same way as Sergeant Wells."

"Oh—I didn't know!" Morley sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Who did it?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"I've no idea—yet."

Jimmy was very busy the next morning, between the routine work that had to be one at Regimental Headquarters and his attempts to cooperate with Branner. The Commanding General of Fort Ramsey had instructed Colonel Preston to give the civilian authorities—more experienced with mysteries of this sort, and better equipped to handle the scientific side of crime detection—a free hand. The area of the reservation occupied by the 93rd Infantry seemed to be swarming with State Troopers. It was not until nearly noon that Jimmy found time to go over to the Preston house.

Marion met him at the door, looking very

youthful in a dark skirt and white sweater, with a black chiffon kerchief knotted loosely about her throat. Her normally cheerful face was rather woe-begone, and there were dark circles under her eyes.

"Hi 'yah, Toots," he greeted her, with a cheerfulness he did not feel.

She smiled faintly, but her voice was strained and unsteady. "Not so good, Jimmy. I want to talk to you. Let's sit out on the porch. It's about the only part of the house that isn't overrun with police, looking for fingerprints and hunting for clues."

**T**HEY SAT DOWN on the faded old swinging seat that hung from the roof at one end of the porch. Jimmy waited for the girl to speak. For once, his easy wisecracking failed him completely.

For a long moment Marion was silent, hands clasped in her lap and dark eyes staring unseeing across the porch. Then she turned, faced him with what was almost an air of defiance.

"Jimmy," she said, "do you think Peter killed Major Byron?"

"What—what did you say?" he gasped.

"You heard me, Jimmy. Don't let's kid ourselves. Some of the circumstances look bad for Peter, and he is bound to be suspected. I can tell that Father fears it too, though of course he won't admit anything of the sort. It's the first time I have ever seen him afraid of anything. Jimmy, I'm worried sick. What do *you* think?"

"I don't believe he had anything to do with it," Jimmy said with conviction.

"Do you really mean that, or are you just trying to relieve my mind?"

"I really mean it," he said. "I believe Peter is as innocent as I am. His jealousy of Byron wasn't that serious. As far as that goes, Captain O'Neill had more motive for killing Byron than your brother did. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

"Well, anyway, I'm glad to hear you say

that." She sighed and leaned back. "Still, I dread this inquest, this reenactment of the crime which that civilian detective wants this afternoon."

"The idea strikes me as gruesome," he said, "but it shouldn't be bad."

"I know that," she said. "But I'm afraid something is going to happen to someone else. The killer may not be through even yet!"

**T**HEY WERE a subdued group as they gathered in the Preston living room that afternoon. The shadow of the tragedy hung over all of them, and the air of tenseness increased when Byron's widow came into the room. She was in heavy mourning, and though her nerves now appeared to be under control, her sunken eyes were blank and ghastly. The others who had been guests on the previous evening came. The last to arrive were the O'Neills.

Captain O'Neill himself looked haggard. He seemed shaken, and his mouth twitched nervously. He had the appearance of a man whose whole world was crumbling into disintegration. Amalia was more controlled, but her pale skin looked ghastly against the plain black of her dress. They came in together and they sat down together, but Jimmy noticed that they neither spoke to each other nor even looked at each other.

It was the gloomiest gathering Jimmy Doyle had ever been in. The tension was too much for even his normally effervescent temperament, and he quietly leaned against the wall by the door, fervently hoping the affair would not last long.

At a nod from Colonel Preston, Branner took charge. He began by ascertaining the order in which the various people had arrived the night before, noting down the information in a leather-covered notebook. The atmosphere seemed to become more tense with every passing moment, and many of the replies Branner received indicated a sort of hostile defiance on the part of many of the

witnesses. Lt. Colonel Wilson, in particular, seeming to resent any sort of catechism from the civilian authorities, snapped his replies in ill-tempered monosyllables. Branner's square jaw began to jut forward a little further.

At last he asked to have the card tables placed as they had been the night before. Glad of the opportunity for physical action to offset the emotional strain, Jimmy hurried to help Marion get them. When the tables were set up, the guests slowly took their places. Mrs. Byron had not yet moved, and when Branner turned toward the somber figure of the widow, Amalia O'Neill leaped to her feet, eyes flashing.

"This is a ridiculous farce!" she cried in a shrill voice. "Agnes Byron has been through enough, without being subjected to this idiotic play-acting. Surely, my man, there is no necessity for the women present to take part in your little game! You can't suspect any of us of having anything to do with the crime!"

Branner looked at her with a sort of grim patience. "I suspect everyone until proven innocent, Madame," he said. "That's my job. Women have been known to kill before this. Don't forget that feminine footprints were found in the mud beside the body of Sergeant Wells."

"But in the case of Major Byron—"

"We have carefully examined the ground outside that window by a new scientific process," he interrupted, "and we found a woman's footprints outside. They must have been made last night. Have you any *further* objections to my continuing this investigation in my own way, Mrs. O'Neill?"

**A**MALIA dropped back into her chair without another word. The others took their places at the tables. The minor events of the early part of the evening were briefly outlined, and the finding of the clay image in Byron's pocket was described in detail. Branner studied his notebook a moment.

"We have found your fingerprints on that

image, Lieutenant Doyle," he said without looking up.

Jimmy shrugged. "Very likely. I took it from Byron, to look at it."

Then they came to the movements of the different people after the bridge games began to break up. Again Branner turned to Amalia O'Neill.

"And what did you do after you got up from the card table?" he asked.

She shrugged irritably, still resentful. "You can't expect me to remember every time I lifted a finger or puffed a cigarette or took a breath! I guess I just sat around."

"Oh, no—you went out of the room!" Grace Johnson interrupted eagerly. Apparently she had thrown off the shock of the tragedy and was now quite intrigued and excited by this investigation. "Don't you remember, Mrs. O'Neill? You went out of the room with Mrs. Byron and didn't come back until a few minutes after the murder."

"Is that correct, Mrs. O'Neill?" Branner said.

For an instant Amalia looked at Grace Johnson with an utterly expressionless face.

Then she turned to Branner.

"That is correct," she said slowly. "I had forgotten."

"Were you with Mrs. Byron the whole time?" "No—I was not." There was a definite hesitation about Amalia's reply. "We separated in the hall. I went to Marion's room to fix my shoulder strap, and Agnes Byron went somewhere else."

"And where did you go, please?" Branner asked, turning to the widow.

She drew her black veil a little more closely about her face. "I just went out on the front walk and stood there a little while, to get some fresh air," she said.

Branner made some notes in his book and studied them thoughtfully a moment. He tilted one heavy eyebrow upward. Then he sighed, and turned to Colonel Preston.

"We might as well get on with this, sir. May I ask where you were?"

"I stayed in the room the whole time," the Colonel answered promptly. "I sat over there in that corner and talked with Lt. Colonel Wilson."

"Can you recall who else was in the room at the time of the murder?"

"I think so." Preston tugged at his beard a moment. "My daughter and Lieutenant Doyle were over near the fireplace. Mrs. Johnson and Captain Harkness were playing at the table with Major Byron. There was no one else in the room. Grace Johnson, who had been Byron's partner and was dummy, had left the room."

"I went out to the kitchen to look for Peter," the girl said.

"Did you find him there?"

"No."

"What did you do?"

"I just stayed out there a few minutes, and got myself a drink of water. I was on my way back when I heard a lot of noise in here and it—it had happened."

**J**IMMY STUDIED Branner's square, ruddy face. There was no way of telling what went on behind that imperturbable mask. He wondered if the detective had any real suspicions, and if he was following some definite course in his questioning or simply proceeding on a hit-or-miss basis. The man gave an impression of relentless thoroughness, and Jimmy was heartily glad that his own conscience was clear. He would hate to have a man like Branner on his trail.

"And you, Major Johnson?" Branner asked, his pencil busy.

The cavalry officer cleared his throat. "I was standing on the porch, just outside the door. I stayed there until Doyle came charging out and told me Byron had been murdered. Then the two of us ran around to the south side of the house."

“Was anyone else there on the porch with you?”

“O’Neill was there a little while, then he went off around the side of the house.”

“Which side?” Branner asked, glancing up sharply. He did not look at the fatal window, but everyone knew what he meant.

“The north side,” Johnson said hastily. “The side opposite the window through which Byron was killed.”

“Did he leave you very long before Doyle came out?”

“Two or three minutes.”

“Why don’t you ask him what you really mean, Inspector?” O’Neill said sharply, his lips twitching. “You want to know if I had time to go all the way around the house, don’t you? Well, I had plenty of time. I leaned there near the end of the porch while I smoked a cigarette, and I was just starting back when I heard Doyle and Johnson rush out and slam the porch door behind them. I didn’t see anyone else, and nobody saw me. But I didn’t kill Harry Byron. I hated his guts and I’m glad he’s dead, and I might have killed him myself if I’d known what I know now, but I didn’t do it.”

“No one has accused you of anything yet,” Branner said drily.

O’NEILL’S VOICE had risen almost to a shout at the end of his harangue, the shrill voice of a man whose nerves are near the breaking point. Branner’s calm, matter-of-fact comment brought him up short. O’Neill stopped, took a deep breath, and then sat down.

“Sorry—very sorry,” he muttered, and dropped his head in his hands. After a few moments he folded his arms and sat back, his nerves again apparently under control.

Only Peter Preston remained to be questioned, and now Branner turned to him. As though he knew he was about to face an unpleasant ordeal, Peter stood up and squared his shoulders.

“And where were you at the time of the murder, Lieutenant?” Branner asked.

“I am sorry, but I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Branner said sharply. “What do you mean?”

“Just that, Inspector. I had been drinking quite heavily, and things are quite hazy toward the end. I know that I went out and wandered around awhile, hoping the air would clear my head, but I don’t remember anything very clearly until I came back and saw Major Byron’s body lying on the floor.” Branner sighed and closed his notebook, placing it in his pocket. He looked tired.

“One of the unpleasant things about this case,” he said almost plaintively, “is that nearly all of you people seem to have been out of the room and wandering around alone at the time of the killing, so that almost any of you might have done it.”

“I resent that! Ridiculous!” Wilson snapped.

Branner saluted him with a mocking gesture. “All right, Colonel, we’ll except you, and concede that your reputation is unsmirched and your innocence unquestioned. Now there is one thing more.”

Reaching into the side pocket of his coat, Branner pulled out a silver cigarette case. The thing did not look familiar to Jimmy, but he heard the quick intake of Marion’s breath.

“This case bears the initials P.P., and the owner should not be hard to identify,” Branner said slowly. He held the case up.

Peter took a step forward. “Why—that’s my case,” he said. “I lost it some time last night.”

“Interesting, but unfortunate.” Branner’s lips twitched sardonically. “This case, Lieutenant, was found by one of my men—early this morning—just outside the window through which Major Byron was killed.”

For an instant there was silence. Then Marion gasped, and her hands closed upon Jimmy’s arm with a tense grip. Colonel Preston’s face had gone gray, and Grace

Johnson was biting her nails. Peter threw back his head and was about to say something, but Jimmy jumped to his feet.

"That's quite impossible, Inspector," he said. "Major Johnson and I searched the ground outside that window last night with a flashlight, just after the killing occurred, and there was no cigarette case there."

"It lay in the tall grass a few feet away, and you might easily have missed it at night," Branner said.

"But even if it was found there, that does not prove that Peter had anything to do with the crime," Marion pointed out.

Branner nodded. "I realize that, Miss Preston, but it is a circumstance that can only be described as very suspicious. Colonel—if I might suggest—"

Branner hesitated, wondering just how he could best put his thought in words, but Colonel Preston understood him and nodded.

"Certainly, sir," he said. "Lieutenant Preston, you will go to your quarters and remain there, and for the present you will consider yourself under arrest."

**J**IMMY HAD TO hurry to headquarters to complete some routine work. After all, as regimental adjutant, he was one of the executives of a highly complicated and specialized organization of over a thousand men. There was work to be done. It was late in the afternoon, just before evening mess, before Jimmy finally returned to his quarters.

Tom Morley was not around, but the infantry recruit who acted as their "striker," or general handyman, and kept the place in order, was there. He was a red-cheeked, tow-headed, not overly bright youth whose Polish name was so long that Morley had rechristened him Scroopy, which was something like his name, only shorter, and much easier to say.

The striker was vigorously sweeping out the living room when Jimmy tramped in and tossed his campaign hat on the table in the corner.

"Hi" Scroopy," Jimmy said.

"Evening, Lieutenant."

"Isn't Lieutenant Morley around?"

"No, sir. He hasn't come in."

"Any excitement?"

"No, sir. Oh, yes—there was a lady in to see you a little while ago."

"Glad you mentioned it," Jimmy said drily, sitting down and beginning to pull off his boots. "A lady to see me? Who was she?"

"I don't know, sir. She wouldn't leave her name."

"What did she look like?"

"I couldn't exactly say, sir."

"Why not? Did she dazzle you?" Jimmy grinned.

"No, sir. It was the veil. I couldn't see her face very well through it."

Jimmy tossed aside his boots and sat back, fumbling in his pockets for a match. This began to sound a little complicated. Was it possible that Marion had been looking for him, and that for some reason she had wished to conceal her identity?

"At least you can tell me her general size and type," he said. "Would you say she was a young girl—slender—and about as high as my shoulder?"

"No, sir. This was quite a large woman, nearly as tall as the lieutenant himself. From the slow way she walked, and from her voice, I would say she was about middle-aged."

Well, it wasn't Marion then. He couldn't imagine who else it could possibly have been. Women living on army posts do not usually seek out bachelor officers in their quarters, and none of such girls as he knew in the nearby towns were likely to have a burning and irresistible desire to see him all of a sudden.

"What did she do?" he asked.

"She just came in and asked for you. When I told her you weren't around, she said she'd wait. I went into the bedroom to clean up, and when I came back she had gone."

"So she took a run-out powder!" Jimmy

mused. "Well, maybe she'll come back again. I'm not going to worry about her, anyway."

**Y**ET HE did worry about the mysterious woman while he was dressing for dinner. There was something funny going on. No ordinary, normal errand could have brought a strange woman to his quarters. Therefore there was something queer about the whole affair, perhaps something even sinister. Jimmy shook his shoulders irritably.

"Those two murders have got me jittery," he muttered.

He finished dressing, and transferred the contents of his pockets to the uniform he was now wearing. He tossed aside his half-empty tobacco pouch, and picked up the full one he usually carried in the evening. Then, after a glance around the room, he turned to the closet to get the cap of his dress uniform.

The cap was upside-down on the shelf, which was not the way he usually kept it. He supposed that Scroopy must have turned it over while he was cleaning up. Then he noticed that there was something in the cap, some small object that had been placed there where he could not miss finding it when he changed to his dress uniform for the evening. Jimmy picked it up—and immediately lost all his appetite for dinner.

In his hand lay a small clay image, one of those grotesque little figures that had been connected with the deaths of Sergeant Wells and Major Byron. Only it was not quite a duplicate. On each shoulder there was a single straight scratch, a crude representation of a lieutenant's bar. There seemed to be no doubt that the figure was meant for him.

"Cripes!" he said softly. "It looks like I'm next on the list!"

Jimmy wrapped the clay figure in a piece of paper and stowed it in his pocket. Then he went to his locked trunk and took out his service automatic. He inspected the piece, loaded it, and pushed up the safety catch. He thrust the weapon into the waistband of his

trousers, but it was too bulky under the closely fitting uniform coat, so he dropped it in his hip pocket. It made quite a bulge there as well, but that couldn't be helped. He might be slated to be the third victim of the deadly poisoned darts, but at least he would not be caught napping, if he could help it.

**B**RANNER, of the State Police, was not in the room he was using as his base of operations when Jimmy arrived at the Officers' Club. Pop Schwartz told him that the detective was expected back in half an hour or so. Now that the first unpleasant shock of finding that warning image had passed, Jimmy's normally vigorous appetite had returned, so he went across to the Officers' Mess and ate a substantial dinner.

"The condemned man ate heartily!" he said under his breath as he finished his pie and reached for his second cup of coffee.

It wasn't really so funny, though. He stood in what was probably the most deadly peril of his somewhat reckless and varied career. He would almost rather face an enemy machine-gun nest than this unknown assailant who slew in the shadows with swift and silent death. He felt so helpless! He found that he had developed a tendency to turn around and look over his shoulder every few seconds.

When he went back to the Officers' Club, Branner had returned. He listened in grim silence while Jimmy told his story and handed over the little image.

"Hmmm! this was made by the same hand, all right," he said after a brief pause.

"Yeah, I noticed that too," Jimmy said drily. "I only wish I could believe it just a practical joke on the part of some friend with a dumb sense of humor, but it's no soap. That thing is the McCoy."

"I'm afraid you're right."

"Well, so I'm next on the list!" Jimmy said.

Branner did not smile. "It would seem so. This is serious. Can you send someone to ask

the members of Colonel Preston's Board of Inquiry to meet with us here at once?"

Out in the reading room, Jimmy found Howard Gray bent over the latest copy of the *Infantry Journal*.

"All right, Ambition," he said. "Hustle around and get the Board of Inquiry here as soon as possible. I'll send a note to Colonel Preston himself, and you take care of the others."

"Some new development in the case?" Gray asked eagerly. "I've been working on it all day myself without learning anything. Last night I went out and made another search under that window, to see if you and Major Johnson might have missed anything, but—"

"So you were the Shavetail Branner saw wandering around the house late last night!" Jimmy said. "I think that's one of the things that made him put Peter Preston in hock. Didn't see any signs of a silver cigarette case in the grass, did you?"

"No."

"Don't you think you would have seen one if it had been lying there?"

"Yes."

"So do I!" Jimmy said grimly. "I think it was planted there later. Well—go see if you can locate the members of the board."

**J**IMMY RETURNED to Branner's room to wait for the others to arrive. First he went across and closed the window.

"Hope you don't mind," he said. "It makes me feel a little more comfortable. I wonder why in heaven's name some woman wants to kill me!"

"Some woman!"

"Sure. The mysterious gal who visited my quarters. She must be the one who left the image there, and therefore must be the murderer of Wells and Byron."

"Possibly a confederate," Branner said. "However, your reasoning is logical—if there really *was* a woman in your rooms this afternoon."

"You mean that—er—Scroopy might have planted the image himself and made up the rest of the story?"

"No, but that's a possibility, although, from what you tell me, this Scroopy doesn't sound bright enough to be the brains behind this thing. I meant how do you know it wasn't a man in woman's clothing? Female garments and a wig and veil are a pretty good disguise for a man. Your friend Scroopy doesn't sound like a particularly discerning chap, and he would probably fall for a good disguise. Possibly the high-heeled footprints found in both cases were deliberately planted to throw us off the real scent, too. I always did feel that, in the Wells case, they were a little too obvious to ring true. They may have been planted, just as someone planted young Preston's cigarette case outside the window to throw suspicion on him."

Jimmy stared at the detective in amazement. Branner grinned at him, for the moment a very human and likable person, instead of the impersonal machine he usually appeared to be.

"Then you don't think Peter is guilty?" Jimmy asked at last.

Branner laughed. "Of course not! Never did. I let Colonel Preston know that as soon after this afternoon's little drama as I could, so as not to worry the old boy any more than necessary."

"Then why—?"

"Why did I have young Preston placed under arrest? Because I had searched the ground around the window the night before myself, and I'm damn sure the cigarette case was not there at the time. *Ergo*—someone planted it later, to throw suspicion on young Preston. I always pretend to be taken in by any string of red herring that someone has planted in a case like this. It makes the guilty party think his little scheme is working, makes him confident, and therefore more likely to make a slip that will give him away."

"Then who do you really suspect?" Jimmy

asked.

"Suspect?" Branner echoed with a shrug. "I suspect at least half a dozen people. But I have no definite conclusions as to who the guilty party may be, if that is what you mean."

"But I wonder why I am being picked on," Jimmy said. "I never did anybody any harm. Who the devil would have a grudge against me?"

"You can't tell how the mind of the killer may be working. Perhaps some entirely innocent action on your part has embittered him against you. Perhaps you are merely being singled out because you are regimental adjutant and therefore one of the leaders in this investigation. It is hard for you or me to understand or prophesy the twisted mental processes of a killer like this. Anyway, we will have to guard you closely until this thing is over, and you yourself will have to be very careful."

"You're telling me!" Jimmy said feelingly.

COLONEL PRESTON arrived a few minutes later, walking briskly into the room. Jimmy was pleased to see how much better the Old Man looked. The grayness was gone from his face, and he was himself again. It was evident that Branner's assurance that Peter was not really under suspicion had taken a great load off the Colonel's mind.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said. "What's up?"

"Another clay figure," Jimmy said, pointing to the image on the table. "My number is up now."

For a moment the Colonel looked at the ominous little figure. Then he said a few things under his breath, some choice remarks picked up in a lifetime of soldiering that would have done credit to an old time cavalry drill sergeant and that aroused the admiration of Jimmy Doyle, who had a pretty vitriolic vocabulary of his own. Preston put the image back on the table.

"Well?" he said. "Now what are we going

to do?"

"We're going to keep Doyle alive, I trust," Branner said grimly. "As soon as the others come, I would like to outline a plan that may solve the whole case."

Jimmy pulled his pipe from his pocket and then drew out his full tobacco pouch. He slid back the zipper, but before he could fill his pipe, the door opened and Lt. Colonel Wilson came in. Jimmy laid the pouch down on the table and pulled up a chair for the older man. He went outside and brought in a couple of other chairs, then closed the door.

The new development was briefly outlined for Wilson's benefit. He shook his head grimly, and looked at Jimmy with more sympathy than the younger officer would have thought possible. They talked for a few minutes, and then Jimmy again reached for his pouch, which still lay open on the table. Wilson, who had pulled out his own battered briar, held out his hand.

"May I borrow some tobacco, Lieutenant?"

Jimmy leaned over to hand the pouch to Wilson, but his fingers slipped just before the older man grasped it and the pouch fell to the floor, turning over as it dropped and spilling a pile of tobacco on the bare boards. Jimmy grunted at his clumsiness and bent down, intending to scoop the tobacco back into the pouch. Then he hesitated, seeing an odd-looking object lying amid the brown grains. An instant later Branner, who had also bent over to peer down at the spilled tobacco, reached forward and grasped Jimmy's forearm with a viselike grip.

"Leave it alone!" he snapped. "Don't touch that, if you value your life!"

THE OTHERS STARED at him in puzzled surprise, not yet understanding. The detective pulled a pencil from his pocket, and with its point he gingerly pushed the piled up tobacco away from the grisly little object that had been concealed in the pouch and had

spilled out on the floor. Then they all saw it clearly, and Jimmy Doyle felt the short hairs prickle all along the back of his scalp.

The thing at which they looked was made of several thorns fastened together, so that there were sharp points sticking out in all directions. On each of the points was a tiny globule of a dark and gummy substance!

“Whew!” said Jimmy slowly. “And I nearly reached into that pouch to fill my pipe!”

“Which is, of course, what you were expected to do.”

“And *I* was going to borrow it to fill my own pipe!” Wilson muttered. “Brrrr!” He put his pipe back in his pocket and reached for a cigarette pack lying on the table. Branner jumped to his feet.

“I’ve got an idea, Colonel Preston!” he said excitedly. “Could you possibly go out and leave word for someone to tell the others of your Board that the meeting is called off? It is best that we keep the knowledge of this incident among just the four of us.”

Colonel Preston nodded and stepped outside. He came back a moment later.

“I posted a man outside with those instructions,” he said.

Jimmy sighed, and ran one finger around inside his collar. “So that’s what that woman was doing in my quarters!” he said. “Charming girl, what?”

“It was evidently someone who knows you pretty well,” Branner said, after Jimmy had given a more detailed description of everything he had done while changing his clothes and of how he habitually carried that oiled silk pouch in the evening, as distinguished from the battered leather pouch he used during the day. “It’s at least someone who has had a good opportunity to observe your habits. Now I think we can lay a trap,” Branner ended.

“And I’m to be the bait?” Jimmy said drily.

“Well, yes, you are.”

“Thanks. I only hope I don’t end up as a museum piece in the morgue. Please omit flowers. Well, go ahead. What’s your plan?”

“Just this. Let’s make the killer think his plan has miscarried, but that we have not caught on to what he intended. Suppose you were inclined not to take the warning of the image too seriously, and had simply forgotten to take that tobacco pouch with you tonight—how would you probably spend the evening?”

“Well,” Jimmy said, glancing at his watch, “I would probably go out in the next room and shoot a game or two of pool with someone. Then—” He paused, and looked across at Colonel Preston with a sudden grin. “Then I would probably call up the Colonel’s daughter and see if she felt like having me drop in for awhile.”

“Good,” Branner said. “Then I suggest that you spend your evening in just that way. Go back to your quarters fairly early. When the killer learns his plan has miscarried, he may try to get you during the night, but he’s not likely to attempt anything before that. Meanwhile, we’ll have your place surrounded by concealed men. Who shares your quarters?”

“Thomas Morley, of the Artillery. But he won’t be around at all tonight. He told me he was going to spend the night with friends over in Hilltown.”

“So much the better. That’s one less we will have to take into our confidence. Since it seems evident that the murderer is either in or connected with your regiment, Colonel, I suggest that we use my troopers tonight, to avoid any chance of a leak.”

The Colonel nodded. “Good,” he said.

In the pool room of the club, Jimmy found an acquaintance looking for a game, and they played for half an hour or so. Jimmy was usually pretty good at the game, but tonight he found it hard to keep his mind on matters of clicking balls and figuring angles. He was wondering about the latter part of the night, and what was going to happen. For all the fact

that he would know that many hidden men were watching, it would be pretty horrible to sit alone in his darkened bedroom, as the slow hours crept by, and wonder if anything was going wrong, and if a poisoned dart would find him after all. This was likely to be a long, tough night.

When the game ended, with Jimmy on the wrong end of the score and his opponent both surprised and triumphant, Jimmy strolled out to one of the phone booths and called the Prestons' number. Marion's voice answered.

"Why, Lieutenant Gray!" she said. "It's a pleasure to hear your voice. I was hoping you would call me."

"Nuts!" Jimmy said. "Doing anything in particular?"

"Oh, it's *you*," she said. "Yes. I'm reading the evening paper."

"Suppose I toddle around for a while."

"Listen, Jimmy," she said, and suddenly all the banter dropped from her voice. "Come as soon as you can. I'm lonesome and nervous, and I want to talk to you."

"All right, kid," he said, "I'll be over in about half an hour. Goodby."

Jimmy was whistling quietly to himself as he walked up to the end of Officers' Row and turned in at the Preston house. There was a light in the living room, and the front door stood open. He knocked on the screen door of the porch.

There was no reply, though he waited several minutes and knocked a couple of times and whistled softly once. Well, Marion was probably in the back of the house and couldn't hear him. He crossed the porch and stood at the front door itself as he rang the bell.

Still Marion didn't come, though he could hear the bell ring loudly whenever he pressed the button. Well, probably Marion had stepped over to one of the neighbors' for a moment. The open front door was an invitation, and he took a couple of steps inside and glanced around to see if the girl had left a note for him. His eye caught a piece of white paper propped

on the seat of a chair across the room. She had left him a note!

Jimmy crossed the room and picked up the paper. It was a plain white envelope, addressed to him. He stared down at it, frowning, and faintly worried. The writing on the envelope was certainly not in Marion's handwriting. His name was printed in block letters in pencil, as though done by someone who wished to avoid any trace of individuality in that severe script. Then he opened the envelope and unfolded a single piece of paper.

The entire note was printed in those same crude block letters. Its message was brief and plain:

IF YOU EVER WANT TO SEE MISS PRESTON ALIVE AGAIN, COME AT ONCE TO COTTAGE TWENTY-FOUR. COME ALONE. I WILL BE WATCHING, AND IF THERE IS ANYONE WITH YOU OR FOLLOWING YOU IT WILL MEAN INSTANT DEATH FOR THE GIRL.

There was no signature, but none was needed. Thrust through the lower corner of the paper was one of the sharp-pointed thorns that were the weapons of the killer!

Not all the cottages along Officers' Row were in use, and several of the least desirable places at the far end were closed and boarded up. Cottage number twenty-four was the last of all, a little place that stood very near the woods that surrounded the cleared land of the reservation. Evidently the killer had broken into the place and was using it for the trap he had just laid.

That he would be walking squarely into a trap if he obeyed instructions and went alone to the cottage, Jimmy did not for a minute doubt. Yet he was tempted to obey. There was always the chance that he might wriggle out of the noose some way, that something would come up that he could turn to his advantage. To go directly to the cottage in search of Marion was the quickest and most direct way of meeting the situation.

His other possible plan of action was to get in touch with Branner and have the house surrounded. That plan had two serious drawbacks. For one thing, it would take too much time, and there was no telling what might happen to the girl while she was in the hands of that killer. For another, it was entirely probable that the man or woman who had already killed two people so ruthlessly would make good his threat against Marion if he saw anyone else come near the house.

There was only one thing to do. Jimmy laid the paper back on the chair, where it would be readily seen by anyone coming into the house. Then he went out and walked briskly down toward the far end of the double row of cottages.

The die was cast, he would take his chance.

**T**HE LAST COTTAGE in the row was dark and silent. As far as anyone could tell from out front, there was no life behind its boarded windows and no one had been near the place for months. For an instant Jimmy reached back, making sure that the automatic was loose and handy in his hip pocket. Then he set his teeth and walked up toward the house.

He moved slowly across the porch in the darkness, straining his ears to listen. The boards creaked noisily under his feet but he heard nothing else. Then he reached the front door and tried the knob. The door was unlocked and gave easily swinging open, without a sound, on hinges that must have been well and recently oiled. The interior was a cavern of utter blackness in which he could see nothing at all.

"Anyone there?" he called softly.

"Come in, Lieutenant," a sibilant whisper answered from somewhere inside.

Jimmy stepped boldly inside. If the mysterious assassin meant to kill him out of hand, there was nothing he could do about it. Meanwhile, he would stall for time and hope

for a break. Two steps inside he took, three, and then suddenly something cold and hard was pressed against the back of his neck. He knew it for the muzzle of a large-calibre revolver.

"Do not make any noise! Stand still!" that husky whisper commanded.

Jimmy shrugged and stood still, wondering if the passage of time would sufficiently accustom his eyes to this dense darkness to let him see anything. A groping hand prodded his pockets and removed his automatic.

"Put your hands behind you!" the whisper commanded, and as Jimmy obeyed, the cold steel of a pair of handcuffs closed around his wrists. He set his jaw a little tighter. There was no hope of wriggling out of those! His unseen captor pushed him into the next room, and then clicked on a flashlight.

The light was a sort of small lantern motivated by a dry battery, and it shed a faint illumination around the whole room. For an instant Jimmy thought its glow might be visible to someone outside, then his hopes faded, for he saw that the boarded window had been additionally sealed by a heavy blanket nailed up on the inside. And then he saw Marion.

She stood erect in the center of the bare and dusty room, her bound hands held high above her head by a rope that passed up over a hook set in one of the ceiling beams. She was gagged with a twisted handkerchief. She was unable to move or speak.

**T**HEIR CAPTOR was a man, or at least wore man's clothes. The baggy suit and the broad-brimmed hat made it difficult to tell much about their wearer. A black mask covered the face, and dark gloves concealed the hands. He had bent down to open a suitcase, and now he straightened up with a long and very thin tube in his hand: the blow-pipe with which he projected the poisoned darts.

"All right, you have me. Now let the girl go," Jimmy said.

"Oh, no—she has seen too much. I will be far away before anyone thinks to look here and finds your bodies!"

Jimmy realized now that he had made a serious mistake in dashing over here so hastily. He should have phoned Branner first, and then come. In that way his arrival alone would probably have thrown the killer off guard, and meanwhile the others would have been closing in. Well—the mistake was probably fatal, but it could not be undone. He felt and tested the handcuffs with his fingers, but they were secure.

Dropping a thorn into the blow-pipe, the killer turned toward Marion and started to lift the tube to his mouth. So he was going to kill the girl first! Jimmy leaned slightly forward, the weight on the balls of his feet, gathering himself for a leap. With his hands chained behind him, he could not do much, but a swift plunge might knock the killer off his feet, and if Jimmy held his own balance, a kick in the head might stun the other man. Then, before he could act, a pistol-shot rang out from the doorway behind him!

The masked assassin dropped the blowpipe with an oath, as his shattered left arm fell to his side. He spun around and reached for a gun in his coat pocket, but Branner fired again from a few feet inside the doorway and the killer crumpled to the floor.

"Boy!" Jimmy shouted, as Branner came storming in, half a dozen state troopers behind him, "your ugly pan is the best thing I ever saw in my life!"

When Jimmy's hands were freed a few seconds later, and Marion was loosed from her bonds, he swept the girl into his arms. Meanwhile Branner stalked across to the crumpled figure on the floor and turned it over on its back. He stripped off the black mask, and revealed the distorted face of—Pop Schwartz, steward of the Officers' Club!

"**B**UT HOW did you come to arrive when you did?" Jimmy asked a little later. They had moved back to the Preston living room, and Marion, who was rapidly recovering from the shock of her experience, was curled up on the divan beside him. Branner grinned at them over the top of his highball glass.

"You owe your life to the fact that I was suspicious of you," he said. "After all, you *might* have planted that cluster of thorns in your own tobacco pouch and intended Lt. Colonel Wilson to get himself killed when you passed it to him. I told you I trust nobody. You found Wells' body and might easily have been the one who killed him. You were the first to reach Byron's side, before anyone else really knew what was going on, and could easily have been guilty in that case also. Because of all that, I was secretly having you closely followed, and we were ready to close in as soon as you entered that cottage."

"Thank God you were!" Jimmy muttered. "But why do you suppose Schwartz pulled this stunt tonight?"

"That's not hard to understand. When you went out to buy a new can of tobacco, you bought it from him, and he knew that his plan to get rid of you had miscarried. With all the going and coming and excitement from my room, he probably suspected that we had found what he had hidden in your pouch and would be watching your quarters in case he made any more attempts on you. After all, seeing you around the club every day, he knew your habits pretty well, and also knew that, if he abducted the girl, you would follow. It was a fantastic sort of scheme, but the man was bent on carrying out his purpose."

"Then who was the woman in the case?" Jimmy asked.

Branner grinned. "Schwartz himself. He has small feet, and had bought a pair of high-heeled woman's shoes that fitted him. He wore them while committing the murders, just to throw us off the scent. In a suitcase in that

empty cottage we found a complete outfit of female clothing he wore when he visited your quarters, including an ingenious rubber mask, which was convincing enough behind a veil.”

“Well, that clears it all up except one thing,” Jimmy said, reaching out for a highball from the tray Peter Preston was passing around. “I still don’t see why Schwartz chose to bump me off. I never did him any harm.”

“You think that—but *he* didn’t.”

Branner took from his pocket a battered leather wallet that had been found on Schwartz’s body. The detective took out several faded and creased papers and studied them with a smile.

“The key to the whole thing lies far away, in the Philippines. The use of the poisoned darts and the clay figures indicated that at the start. You and Byron and Wells were all in the same outfit in the Philippines some six years ago, weren’t you?”

“Why, yes. As a matter of fact, we were.”

“This clipping relates to the prosecution and conviction of a civilian caught robbing

government arsenals. A man named Schwartzbaum. You three—you, Byron and Wells—clinched the case against him.”

Jimmy nodded slowly. “Yeah—Schwartzbaum. Changed his name, I suppose, and we never recognized him in the rheumatic, middle-aged civilian named Schwartz we found working in the Officers’ Club here. Never thought of him—he seemed just a grumpy guy, harmless enough. But evidently he’d brooded over the past, and came here to get revenge.”

Branner nodded. “And you’d made him do time. A bird like that never forgets.”

It was good to have all this over with, Jimmy thought, without any threatening shadow left. He glanced at Marion.

“How you feeling now, Toots?”

“Fine.”

“Let’s step out on the porch. I want to ask you something.”

“The answer’s yes,” she said, but they went out anyway.