

RIDDLE OF THE PLUCKED PEACOCK

By GEOFFREY NORTH



As he crossed the lawn, something sprang abruptly from the shadows and hit him.



Maitland met his client for the first time—only to find him dead! He had taken the man's money for a routine job, now, as a detective, he decided to earn his money by sweating out a case that was far from routine

CHAPTER I

The Dapper Killer

SIZING him from the waist up, seeing the way his shoulders bulged at the seams of his coat, one had the impression Maitland would scale about one hundred and eighty. He had a square, bony face. His tawny eyes, set too closely together, gave him a shifty truculent look.

Maitland pocketed the money that had come with the letter, fifty dollars in bills, and reread the missive. It was typed on a printed letterhead:

AMOS LOCKHART
Rare Violins
FERNWOOD, OHIO

May 2

Mutual Investigators, Cincinnati,

Dear Sirs:

If there's anyone on your staff that can stand for a lot of fiddle music, send him down to me. It's a routine shadowing job and I'll want him here on Thursday, May 4. Don't bother to answer this letter yes or no. If you accept the commission, the train from your town gets here at four in the afternoon. Let your man stay at the Harrison House and I'll contact him by phone.

Consider the enclosed as a retainer. If the business doesn't interest you, keep some for your trouble and I'll pick up the rest when I'm in Cincinnati.

Under no circumstances communicate with me by mail.

Sincerely,
A. Lockhart.

Maitland noticed that the postmark on the envelope bore a different address from the one on the letterhead. The envelope was stamped Parkersburg, West Virginia. Amos Lockhart had taken care to post the letter away from the prying eyes of his fellow townsmen.

FERNWOOD was a somnolent town, standing on a high bluff above the river. Spring comes early in southern Ohio and the hills back of the place were lushly green. The air was redolent of lilacs and freshly cut grass.

Maitland wiped the cinders out of his eyes, sauntered up Main Street. A ramshackle Ford rattled over the cobbles. A mule-drawn cart loaded with eggplant and rhubarb creaked amiably by. A yellow cur darted in a crazy, zig-zag pattern beside the mule's legs, then suddenly ran up the curb and capered across a lawn.

The wooden houses flanking the street were weather-beaten, with gingerbread scroll work on the porch gables. The town was old, cozy and picturesque.

Only the Harrison House seemed out of place in this peaceful setting. The hotel was of yellow brick, two stories high, new, brash and ugly. Maitland went through its shiny revolving door.

Back of the desk, a squat, thick-set man in a salmon pongee shirt with purple rosetted sleeve garters was looking into a mirror and running a clipper down his freckled neck.

As Maitland came up, the clerk put the clippers away, blew some pinkish hairs off the register leaf and handed the detective a pen. Maitland signed it. He said to the clerk, "I'm with the Mutual Outfit of Cincinnati. I'm expecting a phone call. Shall I take the message down here, or have you a room with phone?"

"This is a modern hostelry, sir," the squat man replied with ruffled dignity. "The finest between Wheeling and Chillicothe. Our rates are two dollars a day. With phone, fifty cents extra." He skittered a key at Maitland. "Room twenty-two. At the head of the stairs, to your right." The squat man picked up the clippers and turned to his mirror. Maitland went up to his room.

The cubicle he entered was like an oven. The sun blazed hurtfully through the closed window. There was a brass poster bed, child's size, with a sway mattress and patched quilt; a wormy dresser with a pitcher of water; and a cane chair with a thin towel draped over it.

The walls were depressing, newly plastered a buttery yellow with cracks already showing. A phone box had been loosely bracketed against one wall.

Maitland winced. "Rustic simplicity! Hogwash!" He made a bee-line to the window to get it open when the phone began jangling. Maitland picked up the receiver and said:

"Maitland speaking, from—"

A voice at the other end, a high-pitched, oldish man's voice broke in: "Louder, please. I'm hard of hearing."

Maitland spoke close to the mouthpiece. "I'm Maitland with the Mutual Outfit of Cincinnati."

The voice at the other end said, "I hear you all right now. This is Amos Lockhart talking, your client. I live at corner of Fremont Street and Second. The house with the red roses climbing the porch. Got the address?"

"Yes."

"It's a ten-minute jog from the hotel." Over the wire Maitland heard a sound as if a door was banging. Then the voice at the other end said, "Hold the wire a minute, please. Some one's come in." Maitland kept his ear glued to the receiver. There was silence for thirty seconds. Then came a

sound like the finger of a glove snapping. The snapping sound was repeated. Then a voice started wailing over the wire, beginning on a high-pitched note and getting weaker with each successive word: "Maitland, I've been shot. One of them—the one that did it—carried a peacock feather—"

Maitland could hear, over the wire, the sound of a body hitting the floor. Then all was silence.

Maitland jammed the receiver on the hook, burst through the door and raced down the stairs. The squat clerk was bending over his mirror, squeezing out a blackhead from his chin.

"Which way to Second Street?" snapped Maitland.

The squat man didn't look up. "Turn right as you go out."

"Rout up a doctor," barked Maitland, "and send him to Amos Lockhart's house."

The squat man asked, "What's ailing old Amos?"

"Lead poisoning. Get somebody that can take a bullet out of a gut," cried Maitland and ran through the lobby. The squat clerk leaped across the desk and pounded after the detective.

A BURST of red roses hugging a porch-railing spotted Amos Lockhart's place, a green-shingled cottage surrounded by lilac bushes. It was the only dwelling on that side of the street. As Maitland came toward the house, he saw a man pressing the bell under the lintel of the front door.

The sartorial elegance of the man at the doorway told Maitland the caller was not a native. He was tall and thin in a pinch-back suit of green gabardine. He was wearing chocolate-brown suede shoes and a rakish soft hat of the same shade. A Roman-stripe hatband gave the fellow a sort of gypsyish appearance, which was further emphasized by the long, greasy black hair that splayed

over his purple shirt collar, and the swarthy complexion of his horsy face.

The swarthy man was carrying a violin case under his arm, and evidently had been ringing the bell for some time. Maitland, concealed by the trunk of a sycamore, saw the swarthy man glance at his wrist watch, shrug, turn and depart.

Maitland crossed the street and mounted the rose-covered porch. He found the front door locked, but the window near the door was open a few inches. He raised the sash and vaulted over the ledge. From somewhere came a cry, harsh and vibrant, the brassy jungle call of a peacock.

The man on the floor had been shot at close range. Maitland could see the powder marks where the bullets had plowed through the oldster's chest. A cursory look was enough to tell the detective that his client was dead.

Alongside the body was a smashed tabouret and a phone-stand that had been knocked from its place. Maitland, covering his palm with his kerchief, hooked up the phone. Then he made a rapid survey of the situation.

Amos Lockhart had departed from this life somewhere in his late fifties. His face was tanned, leathery, with thin ascetic features. His eyes small, round and faded had the exact dull-lead look of the eyes of a pickled herring.

There was a locked cabinet against the wall. Its three shelves were crammed with fiddles of various sizes and hues. In one corner of the room was an open rolltop desk on which were some of Lockhart's letterheads. A diary-calendar with the fly-leaf at May 4 had one notation written on it: "Biz with St. C. Contact H. H. first."

The rest of the furniture consisted of two upholstered chairs in a state of scrofulous decrepitude and a coat-rack holding an oil-stained mackinaw.

MAITLAND left the room, went to the kitchen. On the uncovered pine table was a plate with the heel of a beef tongue, and a half-eaten, seeded roll. A pot of mustard completed this unfinished repast.

In the back yard, a vegetable plot showed onions and radishes peeping above the soil. Maitland went through the garden, climbed the picket fence that separated the yard from a scabrous mead. To the left of the scrubby plain, defiled a rank growth of underbrush, tall enough to conceal anyone that had a motive for skulking into and out of Lockhart's property with murderous intent.

The meadow was pitted with gullies, and out of one of these crevices, situated some fifty feet from the barn, a man began crawling. The man saw Maitland and advanced unsteadily toward the detective. He was a curly-haired, blondish fellow about twenty-five, in mechanic's overalls, holding a cardboard box in one hand.

The man stopped a few feet in front of Maitland and bowed with drunken courtesy. He said, "Do I address a fellow automologist? Hah! Why need I ask? Your raiment tells me otherwise. You're not dressed for the chase." He peered up at Maitland with sharp, blue eyes. "I myself am a hunter, sir."

"And how has the game been running?" asked Maitland.

"I've had spirited going," guffawed the curly-haired man. "I quarry the quarry. Do I make myself reasonably clear?"

Maitland grinned. "You unearth the prey. I'll make one guess. You're a mole-trapper."

"A plausible surmise. But, not so. I'm strictly a spider man. I have several interesting specimens in this box. And why do I collect spiders, so assiduously, my friend?" He gave Maitland a look of smiling triumph.

"You've got connections in Wall Street," said Maitland. "Someone tipped you off about the fly paper shortage."

Curly-hair held up an admonitory finger. "No. The reason is this: Spider-web is destined to be the silk of the future. As soon as I perfect a certain fixative which will make the webbings impervious to atmospheric changes, I'll have the beginnings of a fortune. Would you care to invest—"

Maitland cut in. "See me about that later. I've strolled out of my path, friend. Can you direct me to the courthouse?"

"It's the stone building near the bridge on Main Street: The one with the dovecote on the roof."

MAITLAND knocked on the door that was lettered, "Office of Sheriff." From behind the partition came a sound like a siphorn falling a minor third. Maitland rattled the knob and walked through the door.

A fat red-faced man opened mucous-rimmed eyes, slid his legs slowly, off the table, plucked out a saturated quid of tobacco from his spongy gums. He appraised the wet blob critically, then popped it back into his mouth. "What'll it be, bub?"

"Are you the sheriff?" asked Maitland.

"I'm Deputy Hayhurst. Sheriff's to his room with one of them there migraine heady-aches. Been there all afternoon. If it's important, best go there. He rooms with Amantha Withers. Her place is across from the post office. Just a block away."

The deputy put his feet up on the table, closed his eyes. Maitland hurried off.

THE Withers' rooming house was easy to find. The square tin sign planted on the lawn plainly said: "Setting hens for sale. Rooms to let."

Maitland went up the neat, graveled path, twisted the brass chime handle in the center of the door. In a few seconds a skinny female of about forty-two stood before the detective. She had a stringy, wattled neck.

Her bony cheeks were over-rouged and she reeked generously of Woolworth perfume. But there was something impish and gay about her snappy black eyes, and the gallant way in which she held herself intrigued Maitland.

She gave him a complete appraisal from crown to toe. "If you be a-lookin' for rooms, you won't find better in all Fernwood," she said silkily.

"Sorry ma'am, but it's the sheriff I'm seeking," said Maitland. "Where is he?"

"Ordinarily, at this time of the day," said Amantha Withers, fixing Maitland with a possessive eye, "sheriff might be a-playin' pool, or fishin' for cat. Or if the sheriff were a courtin' man, sheriff might be a-courtin'." Her eyes narrowed invitingly.

Maitland broke in: "It's important that I see him at once."

"As I was a sayin'," she replied, "ordinarily sheriff would be away at this hour, But today he's been in his room. He's got himself a megrim. Went to bed at noon and when I came back home five minutes ago, sheriff was still there." She slanted her eyes coquettishly. "You can set in my livin' room until he fixes to get up."

"This can't wait. I'll see him now. Rouse him, please."

Miss Withers clicked her tongue. "My, my. Such a hurry! Follow me."

She led him down a musty hallway to a door, upon which she knocked. "Theodore, there's a stranger here with important business. He's insistin' to see you."

Maitland heard the bedsprings creak. A voice called, "One minute, please," There was a noise that went clopp-clopp. Sheriff was putting on his shoes. A minute later the door swung back.

The sheriff was a paunchy man in flannel bathrobe, rubbing pain-harassed eyes. He had a ruddy complexion, thick prematurely gray hair. Maitland judged him to be in his middle thirties.

The sheriff blinked at Maitland. "Don't recollect ever having seen you around, sir. What's on your mind?"

"It's about a client of mine. A resident of this town. He's been murdered."

Amantha Withers gasped, "Fernwood's got a killer!"

"Come in, come in, sir," said the sheriff, shooin' Maitland through. He nodded to the old maid, "Thank you, Amantha," closed the door after her.

THE sheriff's quarters were clean and cozy. The setting sun filtered drowsily through the lace curtains. Open shelves packed tight with books hugged an entire wall of the room. On the mantel was a bamboo fishing rod, a first-baseman's mitt, and a small silver trophy cup.

A gray cat leaped down off a settee, strolled lazily across the carpet and rubbed its spine against Maitland's ankles.

The sheriff said, "A client of yours has been murdered? What's the man's name?"

"Amos Lockhart. You know him?"

The sheriff's face whitened. He swayed, held on to the bedstead. "My God!" he cried. "That's my father." He looked about wildly, threw off his robe. He stood in trousers and undershirt, made a grab for his hat on the dresser. He jerked a drawer open. "I've got to go to him right away." He looked up with haggard eyes at Maitland. "Where is he?"

Maitland took the sheriff's arm. "There's nothing more you can do for him," he said gently, "I've sent the hotel clerk for a doctor. Your father's past helping now. If you don't mind, there are a few questions I'd like to ask you."

The sheriff stood up, began buttoning on his shirt. There were lines in his face Maitland hadn't noticed before. Sheriff Lockhart looked somberly at the detective. "Maybe it's time for asking questions. I'll start asking *you*. How come father was one of your clients? What are you, a lawyer?"

Maitland took out the letter that Amos Lockhart had sent him and handed it to the sheriff. "My name's Maitland. I'm a private detective. This will explain it."

The sheriff read the missive. "When did you hit town?"

"On the afternoon train. I went to the hotel. Your father reached me by phone, gave me his address. While I was talking to him, he was interrupted. I heard two shots over the wire. Your father managed to reach the phone and get the message through that he'd been fired at."

"And what did you do then?"

"I ran to his house after ordering the hotel clerk to get a doctor as I told you. Your father was dead when I arrived. Now sheriff, I still consider your father as my client. He sent me money, which I haven't earned yet. I'd like to work out the debt by helping you track down his killer."

A grim smile creased the sheriff's mouth. "I'll consider it. You had some questions, I believe?"

"Yes. How does it happen that your father conducts such a specialized business from such an out-of-the way place as Fernwood?"

"He started making violins for the country fiddlers roundabout. They were top-notch. His fame spread over the valley. He got interested in rare instruments of old masters, and began trading in them."

"I gathered that he prospered?"

THE sheriff finished knotting his tie. "For a while, until some sharpers from New York came here and trimmed him. Dad made other bad deals. Finally he got in debt to the bank. The bank took over his business. That is, he couldn't trade with anyone without the bank's permission." The sheriff flushed. "What I'm saying to you now is strictly between us. The reason he didn't want any mail, I guess, was that he had a clandestine deal brewing. You understand? He shrugged

deprecatingly. "In a small town like Fernwood, anybody's affairs are everybody's business."

"I suppose," said Maitland. "He mentioned a shadowing job. I take it he didn't trust the fellow he was about to trade with. But why did he go to the expense of hiring outside help? Couldn't you keep your eye peeled—?"

"That would hardly be ethical. After all, the county pays me. Then again, that would be tipping dad's hand."

"You've made everything clear. Tell me how I can help you?"

Something like relief came into the sheriff's eyes. "I'm going over to dad's house now. You can do me a mighty big favor, Maitland." The sheriff rubbed his hands nervously along his thighs. "Would you break the news to my brother? He lives round the corner from the hotel, the house with the grape arbor out front. And please wait for me there."

Maitland agreed and they went outside. The sheriff turned riverward, Maitland angled toward the hotel.

A breeze began blowing over the hills from the east. Far off a steamboat tooted mournfully. Some pearly clouds, rose-rimmed, began banking up in the western horizon. The street was mute and melancholy.

MAITLAND went up through the arbor to the screened porch and rang the bell. A woman, wide-hipped and narrow-waisted, came to the door. She was wearing a skimpy gingham dress, her muscularly plump legs were bare from knee to moccasin. A ray of sunlight beamed through the cloud bank and lighted up the woman's features. Maitland saw that she was sweet-mouthed and had gray-blue eyes, reddish brown hair, and was buxom as a ripe peach.

"Sheriff sent me here," said Maitland. "I have a message for his brother."

She said, "I'm Nancy Lockhart, Edmund's wife. Come in. We're just about to have a snack, please join us." She held the door open, then yoo-hooed musically, "Ed, you got company."

There was the sound of a pump going in the back yard. The pump stopped and the man Maitland had seen back of Amos Lockhart's house strolled into the front room.

His curly hair was dripping with water. He'd evidently sobered up by putting his head under the pump. He recognized Maitland with a discreet wink, smiled broadly, and gave the detective a warm grip.

Nancy Lockhart explained to her husband: "Your brother sent this gentleman here.

Maitland announced with purposeful brutality, "Your father's been murdered."

Edmund Lockhart's jaw dropped. He stared incredulously at Maitland a long minute, then slumped in a chair and buried his face in his hands. Nancy went over to her husband, put her arms around his shoulders. She stood silently, comforting him.

Finally Edmund Lockhart asked, "Where is my brother now?"

"He'll be in soon," said Maitland. "He asked me to wait here for him."

Nobody said anything until some minutes later the sheriff came in with the hotel clerk.

The brothers gripped hands silently, then Edmund Lockhart asked huskily, "How did it all happen?"

The sheriff explained how Maitland had first discovered the body and went on: "When I got to dad's place," he nodded toward the squat man, "Gelway was already there with Doc Oakes."

Gelway said: "I'm terribly sorry. Call on me if there's anything I can do. I guess I better get back to the hotel now."

Nancy ushered Gelway to the door. The squat clerk pressed her hand, looking at her

with devoted calf-brown eyes, and departed. Nancy rejoined the others.

"There's one thing that might throw some light on this business," said Maitland. "Something your father said in his last message that came over the wire," He paused dramatically.

The others eyed him fixedly. "What was it he said?" asked the sheriff.

"I remember plainly," replied Maitland. "Here are the words—'The one who did it carried a peacock feather.'"

The three members of the bereaved family exchanged glances. Maitland at once felt the tenseness in the room. His words had generated a gloom as thick as peasoup fog. The sheriff's features were bleak, dour. Nancy's mouth was no longer sweet, tight lines gathered at her jaw. Edmund Lockhart's fingers drummed rapidly across the edge of his chair.

"What could that message mean?" asked Maitland.

Edmund Lockhart laughed awkwardly. "A peacock feather. Wore it in his hat, no doubt. The killer was a dapper man."

CHAPTER II

No Help Wanted

THE sheriff sighed and said to his brother, "I better start making the arrangements." He turned to the detective, "We'll be getting along."

Outside on the street, Sheriff Lockhart said, "You've been mighty considerate, Maitland. I thank you in the name of the family. That retainer my father sent you—don't worry about it further." He gripped Maitland's hand, "I'll see you in Cincinnati sometime."

"What's this? The brush-off?"

The sheriff crimsoned. "The purpose for which my father hired you no longer exists. Why stay in Fernwood? We won't ask you

to refund any of the retaining fee.”

Maitland glowered. “That’s not the idea, and you know it. For the present, I’m counting myself in. I don’t intend to let it be bruited around that a client of mine was murdered while I was working for him and I ran out on the case. Let such a story get about and my license wouldn’t be worth a plugged nickel.”

The sheriff’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I don’t need your help and I don’t want it. Your presence in Fernwood from now on is a personal affront. I’m warning you!” He turned abruptly and strode off.

Maitland watched him as he swung away in the direction of the hotel. After he’d traveled some twenty yards, the sheriff suddenly pivoted about and came back to Maitland. “I suppose,” said the sheriff, “every man’s got his price. What’s yours to take the night train out of town?”

Maitland laughed, “Speak to me about that after we find out who murdered your father.” He wheeled about and trotted away.

In the chop-house near the station, Maitland wolfed a meat-pie supper, then set out for his hotel.

A line of cawing crows streaked across the fading sky and disappeared into the northern hills. Dusk glow purpled the cobbles of Main Street. Night had fallen when Maitland got back to the Harrison House.

Squat Gelway was behind the desk, reading a *True Love* magazine. He gave Maitland a nod as he came up, then resumed his literature.

Maitland scanned the open register page. Room 25 had been assigned to “Ivan St. Clair, Chicago.” The name “St. Clair” seemed familiar to the detective. Two minutes of concentration and he had the name tagged. He recalled the wording of the notation on Amos Lockhart’s calendar leaf: “Biz with St. C. Contact H. H. first.”

“St. C.” was an abbreviation for “St.

Clair” who had had a date to do business with old Amos. Had Amos Lockhart transacted this business with St. Clair? Maitland decided to find out. However, that matter could wait a few minutes until he swapped some talk with Gelway.

Maitland coughed politely and Gelway looked up irritably from his reading. “I suppose,” began the detective, “all the kin of old Amos will be at the funeral. Probably no chance for an outsider to view the burial?”

“Kin folk of old Amos are few,” snapped Gelway, eager to cut the talk short. “Three of ‘em you’ve met. The only other one is Amos’ brother.”

“Poor fellow, he’ll take the news hard—”

“Poor fellow!” exclaimed Gelway. “Why, Amos’ brother is the richest man in Fernwood. Owns half the real estate in town. He’s got a mansion that’s a sight for sore eyes. The place is on top of that high hill on the West side.” Gelway took up his magazine, “Don’t pity that man!”

Maitland mounted the stairs. When he got to the head of the landing he heard a fiddle going. The music was coming from Room 25. Maitland knocked on the door.

The music stopped. The door swung open and a man holding a violin and bow in one hand bowed with casual grace at his visitor. The occupant of Room 25 was the man Maitland had seen on Amos Lockhart’s porch.

The detective said, “I came here to talk about Amos Lockhart.”

“Come on,” St. Clair closed the door, put his fiddle away. He combed long fingers through his greasy hair, gave Maitland a suspicious stare. “Well, what about Amos Lockhart?”

“He was a client of mine. I believe he had an appointment with you this afternoon. Was that appointment kept?”

“It was not. No one answered his bell when I came there.” St. Clair asked testily, “In what capacity are you interrogating me?”

"I'm a private detective. Maitland is my name. I'm trying to find out what's behind the killing of my client. Do you mind telling me just what business you were contemplating with Amos Lockhart?"

"I'll explain it. I'm a left-handed violinist. That is, I bow with the left hand, the opposite of the usual way. I came to see Lockhart about making me something special for my—"

"Nuts!" cut in Maitland. "I've known left-handed fiddlers before. They fiddle with the same kind of instruments as everybody else. It's all a matter of string shifting."

St. Clair grinned broadly. He thrust out his hand. "Shake, brother. I see you know something about fiddles. You want the real low-down about my visit?"

Maitland held out his hand. "I sure do."

They grasped palms and St. Clair came up fast with his free arm and rammed his elbow under Maitland's jaw. Maitland hit the floor. When he came to, St. Clair was bending over him and fussing through his pockets.

St. Clair straightened up, dusted his hands. "My mistake, brother," he said to Maitland as the detective arose stiffly. "I spotted you wrongly for a guy I ran into once in Milwaukee. Slickest switch man in the racket. You see, just fifteen minutes before you came in, the sheriff questioned me about old Lockhart's killing. I didn't think there'd be two detectives working on the same case. But from your papers I see you represented yourself truthfully."

ST. CLAIR extended his horsy jaw and leaned over. "Turn about's fair play. Now you take a whack at my kisser. I don't want any hard feelings about this." He touched his left cheek. "Make it this side, brother, I got a new gold inlay on the other."

Maitland laughed sourly, showing wolfish teeth. "Tell me about your business with Lockhart and we'll call it all even."

"Check," agreed St. Clair. He slid a chair at the detective, plopped down on the bed and started talking: "Amos Lockhart and I were in the same queer racket. Trading in rare fiddles is like horse-swapping. One gets rooked as often as he puts over a fast one. You don't get rich, but that ain't the idea—there's always a chance you'll run across some specimen of the ancient masters' craft, snap it up for a song and retire on your profits. It's like—"

"Look here," interrupted Maitland, "I know a fellow in Columbus that's got a genuine Hobbema. He's been behind the eight ball for some time now, maybe he'd sacrifice it. Would you be interested in my asking him about selling it?"

"Why not contact him when you get the chance? I'd like to know about it. Well, to continue about Amos Lockhart. Frankly, I got a sucker in Pittsburgh who wants a genuine 'Amati.' I came to see Lockhart about making an imitation that we could dispose of to my client." St. Clair winked. "Do you get the idea?"

Maitland nodded, arose. "I'll be on my way." As the detective edged through the door, St. Clair said, "Thinking it over, better forget that Hobbema in Columbus." He laughed. "I doubt if I'd find a place to hang it. For your information, Hobbema was a painter, a seventeenth-century master. Good evening, sir."

Maitland crossed over to his room, chuckling to himself. He was satisfied that St. Clair was what he purported to be. The Hobbema business had proved that the swarthy man knew what he was talking about.

MAITLAND went into his room, turned on the bilious light. The air was humid, stifling. He yanked open the window, sat on the edge of the bed and let the breeze riffle under his armpits.

He heard somebody out in the hallway

walking decorously, then came a discreet knock on his door.

“Who is it?” growled Maitland.

A woman’s voice said softly, “Please, I must talk to you.” He opened the door and Nancy Lockhart came in. She had decked herself out in her fanciest raiment. Her dress of powder blue silk reached precisely to the center of her dimpled knees. She wore open-lace stockings and high-heel pumps. A necklace of amber beads nestled against her lovely throat and a silver slave bracelet jangled about her wrist. She was out to make an impression.

“Please pull the shade down,” she began, “I’d hate to have anyone see me here.”

Maitland gave the blind a tug. “What about Gelway? Doesn’t he know about this visit?”

“Oh, Matt,” she smiled. “Matt can keep a secret.

He gave her a chair. She gazed up at him with pleading wide eyes. He could smell the sweet muskiness of her artfully waved hair. “You’re a private detective, aren’t you?” She gave him a forced, artificial smile. “Well, I’ve got some immediate business for you.”

She took out a rolled-up handkerchief from her sleeve, unrolled the square of lace and disclosed a wad of money. “Twenty-seven dollars. Let’s call it a down payment.”

Maitland picked up the well-worn, folded bills. “Been saving this a long time? Insurance money, I suppose,” he remarked.

She said impatiently, “Never mind that. Don’t you want to hear about the job?”

Maitland nodded. She went on breathlessly.

“I’ve got a dear friend of mine, her name’s Dorothy Ingolsby. She left Fernwood two years ago. I think she went to Cincinnati. I haven’t heard from her, though she promised to write regularly. Could you sort of—well, check up on her? You can start at once. As I said, the money here is just partial payment.” She gave him a come-

hither look. “I could run up to Cincinnati in a few days to see how you are doing and bring you the rest of the fee.”

Maitland mentally summed up her speech; a pretty hammy effort.

“My dear child,” he said paternally handing her back the bills, “I intend to stick in Fernwood for a few days. After I’m through here, I’ll be glad to hunt up your friend Dorothy. Forget about the fee. It will be a pleasure to help you.”

She stood up, said agitatedly: “I want you to start now. It’s important.”

“You’ve waited two years. You can wait a few days more.” He bowed her toward the door. “A pleasant evening.”

She gave him a harried look, bit a trembling lip and started out. He called her back. He said insolently, “Don’t you find it creepy business to live with a man that collects spiders?”

She whirled on him, flushing angrily. The words tumbled out of her mouth. “Some people are afraid of mice, some fear cats, others, snakes. None of them bother me, spiders neither. But what I detest and loathe is a prying rat that sticks his nose into other people’s business and makes himself obnoxious to decent folk. I hope you get my drift.” She eyed him defiantly, turned about and clicked out of the room.

Maitland grinned: “High-bred and high-strung. A gal after my own heart!” He sighed, jammed his hat a-slant his brow, and left the room.

Across the corridor, the door of Number 25 clicked open and St. Clair’s horsy face appeared. He ogled Maitland lewdly, began an insinuating whistle. The tune was “In the Good Old Summer Time.”

Maitland stepped over, snorted: “Your attitude is quite offensive!” He clipped the swarthy man with a left uppercut and as St. Clair swayed, Maitland followed up with a right to the same spot. St. Clair buckled, slumped down and went to sleep. Maitland

dragged him over the threshold and shut the door.

In St. Clair's room he made a hurried search of the violinist's things. He couldn't find anything that faintly resembled a peacock's feather. There was some bourbon in a dresser drawer. Maitland took a healthy nip from the bottle, then flung the remainder into St. Clair's face. Something between a sniff and snore issued from St. Clair's throat. Maitland went out.

Downstairs, Gelway was going over a tally sheet with a downy-lipped youth. The night clerk was about to take over.

A PORCH light flickered through the grove of giant beeches and Maitland made out the silhouette of a veranda. He went up the graveled path that circled the ancient trees and then he got a good view of the big house on the hill with its Doric columns standing mournful and austere.

Maitland stepped up on the porch, pulled the brass knob. A bell clanged. The door was opened by an old, thin, mummy-faced man. He had a ridged, bulgy cranium spotted all over with freckles. His nose was pinched, hooked. His red-veined little eyes looked at Maitland with disapproval. He piped up in a reedy voice:

"I'm Jabez Bourne. I don't know you, sir. And by the looks of you I don't regret it."

Maitland said: "Your crotchets don't interest me. I came to see Mr. Lockhart."

"Oh, the sheriff. What's the purpose of this visit?"

"Not sheriff Lockhart. I want to see Amos Lockhart's brother."

"I'm Amos' brother."

"You said your name was Bourne."

"I'm Amos' *half* brother. What's on your mind?"

"My name's Maitland. Your brother was my client."

The old man sucked in his thin lips. "Know all about you. You're a private

detective." He glared. "There's no chance of filching a fee out of me! I'm not interested in your talents. My nephew can handle this."

"While I'm here, let me tell you one thing about this business you may not know."

The sheriff's figure loomed in the doorway beside Jabez Bourne. Maitland said to Bourne: "Your brother's last words were, 'The one who did it carried a peacock feather.' Does that mean anything to you?"

Bourne and the sheriff exchanged glances. The old man said to Maitland: "I haven't the slightest idea."

"Now, answer me this," Maitland added.

"Good night," piped Bourne.

Sheriff Lockhart broke in: "Uncle, let him talk to you." There was a sneering strain in his voice, "I don't want him to think he's being intimidated. I'll be off now. See you in the morning." The sheriff went out, giving Maitland a venomous glance as he passed.

"Step in," hissed old Bourne to Maitland, "speak your piece." It was a gloomy cavern of a room that Maitland was ushered into. A dull light cast a sickly pall over timbered walls. Crossed muskets hung above the portrait of a man with mutton-chop whiskers. A large family bible with gold clasp lay on the tile mantel. The black leather chairs were pre-century.

Bourne thrust a skinny hand into a glass of water on the table, fished out a brace of dental plates and fitted them into his gums.

"Tell me," asked Maitland, "why has the sheriff been reluctant to accept my help in this unfortunate business?"

The old man bridled. "That's my nephew's affair." Suddenly he dropped his curt tone. He looked perplexed. "Surely, you don't think he's trying to obstruct justice." Bourne cackled. "Put it down to pride, maybe. Theodore was never keen about teaming up with anyone."

"I guess that explains it. Tell me, sir, who inherits your brother's estate?"

Jabez Bourne wheezed scornfully. "There is nothing to inherit. Actually, Amos died in debt. I was over to the bank today, going over Amos' affairs. My brother departed from this world owing over three thousand dollars. I'm liquidating all his obligations, bringing over his stock of fiddles here, tomorrow, for safe-keeping." The old man laughed ghoulishly. "Now, if it had been me that died first, Amos would have been rich. I left him everything. I'm having a new will drawn up in the morning."

Maitland stood up. "I'll not infringe on your hospitality any longer."

Suddenly Jabez Bourne glared balefully at the detective: His little eyes were pin points of hate. His voice rose shrill and hysterical: "Now I get the gist of your questions about the inheritance! You dare insinuate that some member of my family had financial interest in my brother's death. An odious assumption. Out! Out of my house—you slanderer!"

MAITLAND went down past the beech grove. Back of him the porch light went off. Maitland sifted through scurrying clouds. On his left the detective could make out a rolling, sloping lawn. He cut across the turf and a gigantic four-legged shadow came out of nowhere and tailed behind. Maitland whirled about. The fawn trotted by and blended into the shadows.

Something hit Maitland back of his knees and the taste of dirt was in his teeth.

Maitland's belly was flat to the ground. His assailant was astride him beating fists on his skull. Maitland's muscles tensed. He gave a great heave and was free of the man. His attacker clinched with him. The moon had hidden behind the clouds and Maitland couldn't see the man's features.

Maitland hit him in the face four times at close quarters, and followed up with his knee against the fellow's belly. The man went down for an instant. Then, sprang up and

darted across the turf.

Maitland found the road that led to town.

He walked with buoyant steps. The workout had exhilarated him.

Back in the hotel, the downy-lipped clerk was snoring behind the desk. Maitland got to his room, took the mattress off the bed, pounded it into some sort of shape and spread it in the corner of the room. He wheeled the bed against the door, locked himself in, stripped to his shorts, flung himself on the mattress and went to sleep.

CHAPTER III

The Indians in West Virginia

IT WAS close to ten o'clock when Maitland stopped by the desk for his mail. Gelway, wearing smoked glasses, was reclining behind the counter, scraping the dirt from a horny thumbnail. The clerk tilted back his chair, took an envelope from a pigeon-hole and tossed it to the detective.

Maitland slit open the envelope. Inside was a note from Edmund Lockhart: "Please see me at my brother's place, after the funeral. About one o'clock."

Gelway broke in: "Mr. Bourne wants to see you. He's sitting out front."

Maitland walked through the lobby. Near the entrance, Jabez Bourne in black serge and stiff collar sat talking earnestly with Ivan St. Clair. The old man had two bony fingers jabbed into the fiddler's knees. Maitland heard the oldster say: "It's the opportunity of a life-time."

St. Clair said, "I'll consider it. I'll let you know tomorrow," edged through the door.

Jabez Bourne greeted the detective: "I owe you an apology." He tucked a cigar into Maitland's pocket. "I acted over-hastily last night." He said with shrewd affability, "I'm not an easy mark, but nobody's ever called me a piker. I'll hire you on a contingency basis. Be the first to find out who killed my

brother and you've earned five hundred dollars,"

"I'll take your proposition. What made you change your mind about me?"

The old man jiggled a finger around in his ear. "Fact is, Amos and I had an altercation some years back about a piece of land. It went to court. Amos won. I never held any grudge against him account of that. As I told you, I had made Amos my heir. But you know how folks will gossip. They'll think back to that quarrel and point the finger at me."

"You've hired yourself a detective."

The oldster slowly unhinged his knees, stood up. "I'm a liberal man when I'm well served. I'm footing the bill for Amos' funeral. Just with the family and my servants attending, it's costing me a pretty penny."

EXCEPT for the pet fawn browsing on the lawn and a bull frog croaking somewhere, the estate of Jabez Bourne was deserted. Maitland, taking advantage of the absence of master and servants had jimmied a kitchen window and started on a tour of the house.

In a bedroom he came upon the violin cabinet that he had seen the day before in Amos Lockhart's place. But the thing he was seeking was in the library. The sheet of paper was in plain sight, in the typewriter that stood by the safe. It read:

I, Jabez Bourne, being of sound mind, do declare this my last will and testament. I give, devise and bequeath to my nephews Theodore Lockhart and Edmund Lockhart, share and share alike, all my personal and real property; to be divided equally and amicably between them, providing each agrees to—

The will was unfinished. Evidently old Bourne had left the document in the

typewriter to be completed when he returned from the funeral.

There was nothing remarkable in what Maitland had read, yet his pulse quickened. The case was beginning to crack. The preliminaries were over. The detective grinned foxily. "Brother Maitland, you're not going to miss the finale—*not if the killer has anything to say about it!*" His visit was ended. He ambled back to town in high, good humor.

The clock was striking one as Amantha Withers opened the door in answer to Maitland's ring. "Please step in," she urged him, "I've got strict orders that you're to wait here until Mr. Ed returns."

She ushered him into her living room. Two love-birds were cooing in a gilded cage that hung in the window alcove. The old maid settled herself on the couch, made room coyly for the detective. "Here we can be as snug as a bug in a rug."

He seated himself gingerly beside her. Her eyes lighted up. "Oh, Mr. Maitland," she simpered, "don't you believe in premonition and presentiment? Or do such feminine thinkin' ways seem silly to a cold man of science?"

Maitland said cagily: "Sometimes, yes. Sometimes, no. I'd have to know the specific details."

She fidgeted, gave him an arch look. "Well, it's nothin' I can put my finger on." She colored. "It's just that things are happenin' that never happened before. Fernwood's got a real honest-to-goodness killer. And then cousin Fred Newmarch says the Indians over in West Virginia are a-cuttin' up. And then, you a-comin' to town—a real, genuine detective. I declare, it's all got me in a dither!" She looked at him coquettishly. "I suppose you think me a silly little fool?"

"What's that about the Indians in West Virginia?"

“Some red men have been living across the river, ever since the wild west show disbanded at that camp near Parkersburg. Cousin Fred was in town this morning. He’s got a poultry farm on the river bank, a mile south of the levee. He keeps fancy chickens and peacocks. Last night, cousin Fred said, one of the Indians swam the river, killed one of his peacocks, plucked out some of the bird’s feathers and swam back across.”

“A very enlightening tale.” He leaned toward her confidentially. “I’m going to let you in on a secret. Jabez Bourne has hired me to find out who killed his brother. Just between you and me, how did Amos get along with his boys?”

“Well—” She gave him a knowing look. “Don’t think I’m catty, but what I’m a-tellin’ you is common gossip. Old Amos never did hit it off with his sons. Stands to reason, sheriff wouldn’t be livin’ here if he and his father had got along.” She threw up her hands. “But that’s nothin’ alongside of how Edmund and his father used to quarrel. Like two fish-wives. About young Ed’s drinkin’ ways and about his marryin’ Nancy.”

“What objection did the father have against the girl? She looks like a thoroughbred to me.”

“So I always said,” agreed Amantha Withers. “I’m no one to run down my own sex. But old Amos didn’t think she was good enough to wed into the family. Neither did Ed’s uncle, Jabez Bourne, like the idea.” The old maid ogled Maitland slyly. “You see, ‘fore she hitched up, she’d been sort of flighty. But, say I, what’s the use of livin’ if you can’t have your bit of fun.”

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Maitland arose. “Miss Withers, would you escort me into the sheriff’s room?”

SHERIFF LOCKHART in funereal black was slumped in a chair near the window, staring moodily at the floor. A shaft of light refracted through the glass. Iridescent tints

shimmered over the sheriff’s thick gray hair.

Edmund Lockhart, wearing a mourning band on his sleeve, his eyes unnaturally bright, greeted Maitland: “Sorry, I was late.” He picked up his hat. “We’ll be on our way.”

Maitland held up a hand. “One minute.” He said dramatically: “Sheriff, I have a statement to make in front of these two witnesses.” The detective paused. The sheriff stared at the floor.

Maitland continued:

“Last night a cowardly attack was made on my person. I’m here to warn you that I shall defend myself with all the means at my disposal.”

Sheriff Lockhart shrugged wearily. “What do you want of me? A twenty-four-hour personal bodyguard?” He smiled sourly. “Speaking of assault, there’s a complaint against you on that score. This man St. Clair claims that you brutally slugged him without provocation. A plague on you both. Now get out!”

Pacing briskly with the detective over the sun-dappled sidewalk, Edmund Lockhart began: “Uncle told me this morning, before the funeral, that he thought of hiring you. Did you come to terms?”

“We did.” Maitland shook his head puzzledly. “Your family is a queer one. Your uncle offers to pay me for a job which I already offered to do without fee, for your brother. The sheriff disdains my help. What’s behind this?”

Edmund Lockhart grinned. “It’s too deep for me. Never could figure my kin folk.” He began speaking with expansive joviality. His manner was affected. He tried to act as if he’d had a drop too much to drink. “Yes, sir, my kin are queer. Take Uncle Jabez. Never thought he cared much for me or Nancy. Regardless of that, he’s made me his heir. Me and brother Theodore. Uncle told us the news right after we buried dad. All we need to inherit is to agree to a certain provision of the will.” The young man laughed. “Don’t

know what that is, and I don't care." He rambled on, "Look here, Maitland, keep an eye on that fellow St. Clair. I think he's mixed up somehow in this business."

Purposely, Maitland had let the other set the course. They had now reached the walk that led through the arbor in front of Edmund Lockhart's house.

As they strolled up to the porch the door was flung open. Nancy Lockhart in swishy black silk, her hair in stringy disarray, ran down the steps, grabbed her husband's arm. "Ed, I've got to talk with you." She gave Maitland a stony stare, drew Lockhart aside.

Wife and husband began talking excitedly in low tones. Maitland couldn't hear what they were saying but he could see that an argument was going on. Finally, Nancy stamped her foot, whirled about and set off agitatedly down the walk to the street.

Edmund Lockhart turned to the detective. "My wife thinks you're poison," he chuckled. "Bawled the daylights out of me for bringing you here. She's going to punish me by staying at her mother's tonight." He sighed. "Women are stubborn critters." Suddenly he said brightly: "The hell with domestic woes. Come around and see my spiders.

They entered a small building that had four windows. A skylight, through which the sun blazed, took up half the roof. The place looked like a miniature greenhouse. Frames and open boxes of various sizes and shapes were affixed to a bench that ran through the middle of the building. Inside the frames and boxes, spiders had woven their webs.

Edmund Lockhart explained: "Snares or webs of different spiders differ greatly in structure and texture. Here you see irregular nets, sheet-webs, funnel-webs and orbwebs."

The curly-haired entomologist picked up something from the bench. It looked like an atomizer. The curious thing about this instrument was that instead of one opening it had four parallel vents.

"What's that atomizer for?" asked Maitland.

"That's a home-made air-brush. My own idea. I can spray on four different tints at once. I've been experimenting with the application of colors to these webs. My latest idea is a four-color scheme. A sort of plaid effect."

Young Lockhart sprayed the contents of the air-brush over one of the webs. The gossamer-threads shone with an opalescent, viscid glitter.

"All this is very odd," commented Maitland dryly, "but what made you think that I'm particularly interested in your hobby?"

Edmund Lockhart drooped his friendly, bantering manner. He said curtly: "Because you and I are both in the same boat."

"How's that?"

"About the time my father was murdered, you and I were—" Lockhart hesitated for the right word.

"Skulking about his house," Maitland finished the sentence.

Edmund Lockhart nodded grimly. "Yes, the way I see it, you probably think I'm the killer. And I think the same about you. The reason I brought you here to view my hobby was to prove to you that my talk of spider-webs when I first met you was not an improvised idea."

Maitland said pleasantly: "Your alibi will be given due consideration. I'll not detain you longer."

FRED NEWMARCH'S river-site cabin wasn't hard to find. It perched on a scrubby hillock that sat back some feet above high-flood line. As Maitland stepped into the yard, a peacock, resplendent in blue, green and gold plumage, strutted along the picket fence. Maitland followed the fence, sidled through a line of raspberry bushes to the front of the cabin.

A pock-marked, chubby man, with a

mesh of netting tied over his head, lolled in a rocking chair beside a table on which were placed a boiled ham and a loaf of rye bread. With one hand the chubby man made passes at a swarm of flies that hovered above the food. The other hand was busy slicing ham.

Maitland stepped jauntily up the porch. He took a bottle of applejack from his coat and placed it on the table. "My credentials, sir. I'm a reporter for a Charleston paper. Happened to be in Fernwood today. There was talk around town that you'd been molested by Indians. I'd like to hear the story."

The chubby man slid out a foot, hooked the leg of a chair toward Maitland. "Relax, boy." He uncorked the bottle, lifted the net and swallowed. He put the bottle down. It was a third empty. He sighed with gusto, looked admiringly at Maitland. "You sure know your liquor, boy. Now, about those Indians." Newmarch sliced a generous hunk of ham, put it on a piece of bread. "Eat hearty! I guess you passed some of my peacocks on your way here. I let the birds roam at will. They wax healthy on snails and worms and what they pick up in the brush. Finest pea-fowl in the valley. Powerful crying birds, too. You can hear them way back to Fernwood."

Newmarch took a healthy swig of applejack, went on: "I'd just gone to sleep, about eleven o'clock, when I was awakened by my peacocks making an awful racket. I jumped out of bed. I thought maybe a weasel or fox had gotten at them. I ran outside. The screaming had stopped, but I could see someone wearing a head-dress and sort of a robe, running over the crest of the bluff. The intruder ran over to the river, jumped in and swam toward West Virginia. I found out what had happened. The red vandal had killed one of my peacocks. A lot of the tail feathers had been plucked out. I figure it was the work of one of those Indians from across the river. Indians and feathers—you'll

always find them together."

Maitland said gleefully: "The tale of the tail! Your recital has been most edifying." He wrung the chubby man's hand. "Duty calls. I'm on my way."

Newmarch lumbered up. "But the most remarkable thing, sir, is that the peacock that was killed was a white peacock."

Maitland back-trailed through Newmarch's holding. He walked leisurely, searching the ground around him. He was trying to find a peacock feather to take with him. Any peacock feather would do. After a while he found one, lying in a litter of leaves and brush. He picked up the gaudy blue-green shaft and stowed it in his coat.

CHAPTER IV

The Corpse Tells All

THE sun was setting when Maitland returned to Fernwood. He had a leisurely supper, spent a relaxed hour dawdling over a local newspaper. He shot a game of pool with one of the rustic gentry, ambled back to his hotel.

The desk clock pointed to nine. The downy-lipped clerk was on duty. Maitland asked him, "Where's Gelway?"

"Through for the day."

Maitland glanced at the register. St. Clair hadn't checked out. He went upstairs. As he passed Number 25, he heard St. Clair snoring peacefully.

The next hour Maitland spent in earnest thought. Slouched by the window, he fingered the peacock feather that he'd picked up in Newmarch's place. Somebody, carrying a feather similar to the one he had, was the crux of the case.

He reviewed events since he'd come to Fernwood. He was pretty certain that he knew the person he'd tangled with in Jabez Bourne's place the previous night. That helped, but it didn't clear up everything. Not

by half.

This much he was sure: In some subtle way he was being used to further the murderer's ends. Maitland lay on the bed, began rechecking his thoughts.

He dreamed that a squat man, wearing blue glasses was straddling his heck, running a clipper over his scalp. He dreamed that a peacock's crying changed to the loud tattoo of a bugle.

Maitland awoke. One part of his dream seemed to hint at a clue. *The tattoo of the bugle*. He got up. Dawn was breaking. He'd slept through the night in his clothes, but it had been a rewarding sleep. Now he knew what kind of a peacock feather he had to look for.

Out on the street an auto horn started blowing. It was evident the driver was signaling to someone inside the hotel.

Maitland dabbed his eyes with a wet towel, started for the door. Then he ran back to the window, retrieved the feather and put it into his coat. He went out of the room. He stopped at St. Clair's door, put his ear to the keyhole. He couldn't hear St. Clair snoring. He rattled the knob, kicked the door. There was no answer. He went downstairs. The clerk was nodding behind the desk. Outside on the street the horn kept up its racket.

He went out of the hotel. A Ford was parked at the curb. Nancy Lockhart slid from the seat and ran to him. There was a haggard look in her eyes. "Is Matt Gelway inside?" she asked anxiously.

"No. It's his night off."

She grabbed Maitland's sleeve. "I'm terribly upset. I stayed at my mother's house most of the night. About four o'clock I started worrying about Ed. I dressed, borrowed mother's car, I came home. Ed wasn't there."

"Did you look in the spider-web shed?"

"Yes. I could tell he had been there part of the night. Where he is now I don't know. I

came here to ask Matt to go with me. Maybe you'll help me look for Ed?"

"I wouldn't worry. Probably playing cards. Maybe he got lonely, spent the night with his uncle. Let's drive over and find out."

NO WORD passed between them until the car neared Jabez Bourne's driveway. Maitland idled the engine, leered at her. "Matt Gelway is in love with you, isn't he?"

She colored. "What difference does that make," she replied angrily. "He's nothing to me. I love my husband—any fool can see that!"

They got out of the car, started up the walk. They passed the first beech. Then Maitland saw St. Clair. St. Clair was sitting against the trunk of the big tree. He was facing the driveway, a gun in his limp hand, but he couldn't see Maitland. A bullet had gotten him down low.

At sight of the dead man, Nancy let out a shriek. Her face went chalky. She clung to Maitland, began whimpering, "I'm afraid—afraid! Something's happened to Ed!"

The second body lay at the edge of the grass. The blond curly head was cushioned in a patch of dandelions. There was a rip down one sleeve of the dead man's shirt. Something like a monstrous rose seemed to be blooming in the middle of Edmund Lockhart's stomach.

A slow, bleating sound issued from Nancy's throat. Then she fainted. Maitland let her lie on the turf and went over to Lockhart. There was no gun on the dead man.

After a while, Maitland found the peacock feather that Edmund Lockhart was carrying. He was carrying it on his right arm. It was an elegant piece of tattoo work, in the center of the biceps. A colorful design in blue, green and bright orange.

The tattooed peacock feather explained a lot of things. What bothered Maitland was how St. Clair fitted into the picture at this particular spot. Then he glimpsed St. Clair's violin case near the beech tree. That made things a lot clearer.

Maitland constructed a plausible sequence of events that might have led to the twin killings: St. Clair knew that Jabez Bourne had taken over Amos Lockhart's collection of violins. The violinist, bent on switching his own instrument for one of Amos' rare fiddles had come here to tamper with the cabinet. St. Clair's felonious entry was discovered by Edmund Lockhart.

Lockhart, probably, had come to get a private peep at his uncle's will. The two intruders recognized each other. Lockhart, realizing that St. Clair's knowledge of his sneak visit could be used against him, acted quickly. He shot St. Clair, threw his gun away. As Lockhart hurried off, dying St. Clair pulled his own gun, fired and killed Lockhart.

The reconstruction wasn't air-tight, but it could pass for want of a better. Maitland knew it hadn't happened that way. The pattern was all wrong.

NANCY began moaning. Maitland carried her to the veranda, placed her gently in the hammock and let her weep. He thumbed the door-buzzer. No one answered. Far off beyond the green hills a bell began tolling. The sun hid behind gray clouds. Footsteps sounded. The door opened. Jabez Bourne, a ragged bathrobe around his shriveled frame, gaped at Maitland. He wheezed through toothless gums, "What do you want here?"

"There are two dead men on your lawn," said Maitland. "St. Clair and your nephew Edmund."

Jabez Bourne's face was the color of ash. "How come you ran across them?"

"Nancy Lockhart came to my hotel,

asking my help to look for her husband. She slept at her mother's last night. We thought Ed might have stayed with you. We came over and found the bodies. Didn't you hear any shots in the night?"

The old man drew the collar of his robe tight about his skinny neck. He shivered. "I'm hard to wake. I let my two servants have the night off. That's why nobody heard anything."

"How can I reach the sheriff?"

"The phone's in the library."

The voice at the other end of the wire said drowsily, "Sheriff speaking."

"This is Maitland. I was passing your uncle's place this morning and came upon a dead man on the lawn."

"Do you know the man?"

"St. Clair."

The sheriff's voice was tense. "Where are you?"

"At your uncle's home."

"Stay there. Don't let anybody touch anything. I'm coming over."

"One minute, sheriff. Better round up Gelway and bring him along. Miss Withers, too. We need a woman's hand here now."

"What have they got to do with it?"

"I don't know. I'm just making a suggestion. Oh, by the way, I think I know the person that *might* have killed St. Clair. He's dead too. This one has got a peacock feather tattooed on his arm." Maitland hung up. He went out on the porch.

Jabez Bourne had dressed and put in his dentures while Maitland was phoning. The old man was conversing mournfully with Nancy. Maitland cut in on them brutally:

"Mr. Bourne, remember that I'm still your employee. Because of that fact, I'll have to ask you some questions. First, what was the provision in your will that your nephews had to obey in order to inherit? Don't look surprised. Your nephew told me something about that matter."

"Simply this," replied Bourne, "my

nephews would both inherit provided they legally added the name 'Bourne' to their own names. Not an unreasonable whim, is it? Does this signify anything?"

"Not the provision itself, particularly. Only the fact that it was unknown—perhaps. By the way, I suppose Amos Lockhart always called his sons by their shortened names. 'Ted' for Theodore and 'Ed' for Edmund?"

"That's right," agreed the oldster.

"One more question, sir. Did you know that your nephew Edmund had a peacock feather tattooed on his arm?"

Jabez Bourne shook his head. "No."

Nancy broke in tearfully: "Only three people knew that. Ed's father and brother and myself."

"I'll not disturb you further—for a while," said Maitland and went out on the lawn.

THE finale wasn't far off. It was a devilish scheme that Maitland had been inveigled into. There were brains, ruthlessness and greed behind the three killings. Maitland knew who the killer was. All he needed was a bit of luck to make the case foolproof.

Then a tigerish, happy smile creased his mouth. He two-stepped across the lawn to where St. Clair rested against the tree. Maitland reached inside his coat, took out the peacock feather and placed it in St. Clair's pocket. He sauntered peacefully down the drive. Some dust began spiraling across the highway. A car rolled into view.

At sight of Maitland, Sheriff Lockhart and Gelway came running up the driveway. Amantha Withers was skipping along a few paces behind, holding her skirts, her eyes popping with excitement. The sheriff had a .38 strapped at his belt. Gelway was perspiring, the beads of moisture trickled over the bluish bumps beneath his eyes. The squat man was gasping for breath, but the

sheriff said evenly as he came up to Maitland, "Take me to the bodies."

The three men and the old maid went up the pathway to the dead men. There they stood in silence a while. Old Bourne and Nancy came down from the veranda and joined the others. The women ran to each other, embraced. Nancy put her head on Amantha's shoulder and sobbed.

The sheriff turned to Maitland, then pointed to the body of his brother that lay with one arm uncovered, showing the tattooed feather on the biceps. Sheriff Lockhart said mournfully, "Now it can be told, Maitland. I suppose you understand the meaning of that feather. You appreciate now the position I was in."

Maitland punched the sheriff's paunch with force. "Everything's pretty clear."

The sheriff didn't wince from Maitland's blow.

Jabez Bourne piped angrily at Maitland. "Your manners are in the worst of bad taste, playing fool in the middle of tragedy."

Maitland paid no heed to the old man. The detective said to Sheriff Lockhart, "I suppose the reason your father didn't name his killer by name was because of similarity between your brother's name and your own. 'Ted-Ed.' You can hardly tell them apart, can you? So he identified him by calling attention to the feather."

"Seems to me," cut in Gelway dryly, "that was mighty fast thinking for a dying man."

"Shut up," rasped Maitland, "I'll come to you later."

"Look here, Sheriff," complained Gelway, "Who's running this inquest?"

Sheriff Lockhart waved an impatient hand at the squat man. "Be quiet. Maitland's got a right to speak. He's been treated pretty scurvily,"

Jabez Bourne broke in shrilly: "Here's what I figure. St. Clair came to steal a fiddle. Nephew Ed was prowling around. They ran

into each other. Neither of 'em wanted the other to know about his visit. They started shooting. That's how the double killing came about."

THE sheriff considered. "Off-hand, Uncle, I imagine it happened something like that," He turned to Maitland. "I and Nancy owe you some explanation in addition to our apologies. When you first told us about father mentioning the peacock feather, we knew, of course—Nancy and I—what it was all about. I suppose you'd call it obstructing justice, but I didn't want my brother to hang. I tried to scare you into getting out of town."

Nancy stifled her sobbing, raised her head from Amantha Withers's shoulder. She said to Maitland: "What Theodore says is true. That's why I came to you at the hotel. Tried to get you to go away. Somehow we figured we could get rid of that peacock feather on Ed's arm."

"But what was your husband saying to all this? Did he admit anything?"

"Not a thing," the sheriff spoke for Nancy. "He said we were crazy or dad was. But we knew he had had a terrific quarrel with dad only a few days ago. Ed had been drinking heavily, too, during the last week,"

Maitland turned to Nancy. "So it was you that skulked into Fred Newmarch's farm and killed one of his peacocks in order to confuse the issue, wasn't it?"

She nodded, said weakly, "It was."

Maitland asked her, "And it was at your urging that Gelway tried to scare me off right in this very yard, night before last?"

"Yes," she wept, "I was panicky." Gelway gave Maitland a sheepish look out of his puffy eyes. "It was nothing personal, you understand," he said passionately, "I'd do anything for Nancy."

Jabez Bourne favored Maitland with a look of smug disapproval. "There goes your five-hundred-dollar fee," he cackled mean-

spiritedly. "Seems to me you weren't the first to learn who killed my brother."

Maitland ignored the old man. He said puzzledly, "But if Edmund killed his father, what was the motive?"

Everybody was silent for a while. Then Amantha Withers broke in. "If nobody else will speak, I guess I'll just have to say my say. It's all as plain as apple-pie to me. Ed didn't want his father to inherit Jabez Bourne's money. He was afraid old Amos would let the fortune trickle through his hand, before he could get his fingers on it. Ed got rid of his old man."

Jabez Bourne began to wheeze, "Amantha, you're right. I guess I was next on the list. The ungrateful, murderous puppy! What can you expect from a disobedient nephew that marries below him!" He gave Nancy a spiteful look. Then raised his voice shrilly, "And don't you think, Nancy Lockhart, that you're getting one cent when I die."

Amantha Withers said: "Shut up, you old goat."

Maitland bent down, felt in St. Clair's pocket, brought out the peacock feather. He registered astonishment. "Look what I found!"

Sheriff Lockhart exclaimed, "That can't be right!"

Maitland asked, "Now how did that feather get in there?" He turned to Nancy. "Couldn't have been you that put it there. Newmarch told me it was a *white* peacock you'd killed."

He shrugged, stepped up to the sheriff. The sun hadn't broken through the clouds, but there were opalescent tints shimmering in the sheriff's thick grey hair. Maitland grinned, ruffled his fingers through the sheriff's scalp and said: "Sheriff, permit me a few uninterrupted words." He bowed in Jabez Bourne's direction. "For the benefit of my client."

Jabez Bourne said, "I'm not interested."

The sheriff said dignifiedly: "We'll listen to you, but don't paw me again."

Maitland laughed. "That won't be necessary." He said to Bourne: "Edmund Lockhart didn't kill anybody. One person killed your brother Amos, St. Clair and your nephew Edmund." Maitland turned to the sheriff. "You admit it all, don't you?"

The sheriff said bitterly, "This is no time for gagging. Say your say."

Maitland glowered. "I'm saying it. You killed your father and your brother. Motive: profit. St. Clair wasn't part of the original pattern. He happened to get in the way. You killed him, too, made use of the fact cleverly. The other two killings were premeditated. I was one of the cogs in your murder machine. Here's how you did it."

Jabez Bourne interrupted, "Tommy-rot. Where's your proof?"

"I'll get to that," said Maitland.

THE sheriff stood at ease, smiling good-naturedly. His hand rested lightly on the butt of his gun. He said, "Finish your piece, Maitland."

"Listen to it. It started when I got that letter, supposedly from old Amos. Amos didn't write that letter; that was your work, Sheriff. You knew your father had a date with St. Clair. The idea was to get me to Fernwood so that I would receive that fake message over the phone—the message that you, Sheriff, spoke yourself, after you killed your father. That was the whole point of the plan. Somebody had to put the idea across that old Amos' killer had carried a peacock feather. Consider. It had to be an *outsider* to announce that fact. You, yourself, couldn't herald it. That would cast suspicion on you. Then you pretended to want me to leave town. You weren't too insistent. Even if I had left Fernwood, your main purpose would have been achieved, since I had already broadcast the peacock feather angle. But you really wanted me to stick around."

The sheriff said dispassionately: "Granting I had the motive you claim for killing my father and brother, why should I go to all the trouble to rig up such a plot as you have outlined? Why didn't I simply kill my father and brother without any of this peacock-feather business?"

"That's an important point. Your main idea was to make it appear that Edmund had killed your father. The result would be a revulsion of feeling on your uncle's part toward the murderer. He wouldn't be likely to leave the widow of a killer any money, especially when he wasn't kindly disposed to her in the first place. However, had Edmund departed this life without the stigma of murderer upon him, your uncle would have felt it his duty not to overlook the widow in his will."

Jabez Bourne said, "To be honest with you, those are exactly my sentiments. However, Maitland, you've offered no proof that the sheriff is in any way concerned in these killings."

The two women, hand in hand, moved closer to the others. Nancy kept her eyes riveted on the sheriff. Amantha Withers was gawky with suspense. Gelway was perspiring with excitement.

Sheriff Lockhart spoke calmly. "Maitland, you've built up quite a case, haven't you? But, as uncle says, of course, you haven't any proof. How could I have killed my brother? Miss Withers will tell you I was in my room all night."

"As far as I know you were," said the old maid. "You were home when I retired and when I arose."

"Let's get back to the point," smiled the sheriff, "about me not wanting Nancy to share in uncle's estate. That makes three people I didn't want to get hold of the lucre, doesn't it? Wouldn't it have been much, much simpler to have killed Nancy also?"

"Simpler," said Maitland, "perhaps, but not desirable. You see, you had, and still

have, I suppose, your eye on the gal.”

The sheriff said menacingly, “I’ve had enough of your slanderous remarks.”

MAITLAND held up his hand. “Grant me one minute. I first got the idea something was crooked about the set-up when I ran to your father’s house after I received the message. I saw the unfinished meal on the kitchen table. It seemed unreasonable that your father had called me up in the middle of his repast, and not after. I suspected it was somebody else that had contacted me. And as Gelway said a few minutes ago: Talk of the peacock feather was mighty fast thinking for a dying man.

“After you had killed old Amos you made a quick dash from his place to your room, arriving in time to partially undress and await my coming. That paunch doesn’t fool me. You’re in good shape. Your wind is first rate. Now, as to your whereabouts last night. You’re lying if you say you never left your room.”

The sheriff’s fingers drummed over the butt of his gun.

Maitland went on: “I’ll re-route your steps in case you forgot, Sheriff. You came here trying to sneak a look at the will. You bumped into St. Clair and shot him. Then a brilliant idea came to you. You knew your brother was home alone. You went to his house. You found him in the spider-web

shed. Under some pretext you persuaded him to accompany you here. Then you finished him.”

“It’s all a damnable falsehood!” cried the sheriff.

“The tell-tale mark is stuck in your hair,” said Maitland. “Some of that four-color webbing brushed over that gray ruff of yours while you were in the shed.”

The sheriff paled. Nancy screamed, tugged the .38 from Lockhart’s holster and fired.

The bullet clipped the sheriff in the shoulder. He pivoted, slipped to the turf.

Maitland barked at Jabez Bourne: “There’s your money’s worth!”

The old man piped shrilly: “You’ve earned your fee. I’ll keep my promise.” Jabez Bourne said to Nancy, who hadn’t dropped the gun: “You’ll be the richest woman in the county.”

Nancy began wailing in Amantha Withers’ arms. “It’s my Ed that I want.”

Maitland went down the driveway, passed through the gate.

Over on the river-bank below the levee, one of Newmarch’s peacocks began its brassy, insistent yell.

Maitland grinned. “Real jungle music. Serenade for a wealthy widow,” he said cynically. He laughed harshly, started for his hotel.