

"Yes," said Benjamin. "They were raising all kinds of hell. First it was just roughhousing. We didn't bother them about that any. You've got to let customers have fun even though it looks like any minute they'll maybe do a thousand dollars' worth of damage to the place. But then after a while they started taking their pants off, all three of them. Can you figure that?"

"They must have been plenty drunk," said Schmidty.

"Sure they were, Inspector," Benjamin agreed. "And what's more I don't like saying anything about a guy after he's dead, but even customers, you can't let them go giving the place a bad name. When they started this undressing business Stitch stepped out from behind the bar and bounced the three of them. They were plenty sore about it, but Stitch dragged them out and tossed them into the road. That's why he was so upset when you and Gilligan came in with the third guy. He thought maybe that one, because he had to be specially rough with him, was bringing charges or something."

"The third guy?" Schmidty asked. "Who was that?"

"The one that was bounced with these two." Benjamin indicated the corpses. "He was the drunkest acting of the three of them. You've got him outside with Gilligan right now. The one that wears his arm in a sling."

CHAPTER TEN

WE WENT RIGHT OUT to the anteroom to put it up to the Zipper. Briefly Inspector Schmidt repeated what Jack Benjamin had just told us, and the Zipper listened with intent interest. When Schmidty had finished, however, Zip made no comment. He just looked thoughtful.

"Well?" Schmidty prompted. "Does that help you remember anything?"

"No," the Zipper answered slowly, as though he were speaking only after he had given the matter due consideration. "I'm afraid, Inspector, it doesn't help me at all. I can see, though, where it should help you a lot."

"That," Schmidty interrupted, "is not the point. You should try to remember."

"I am trying," Zipper answered plaintively. "But I have to have more to work on. It all makes some kind of sense. Somewhere along the line Bellringer and I switched clothes. We must have switched a couple of times. We've known that practically from the beginning, but just what went on that made us switch I haven't been able to figure out. I know this sounds as though it ought to help but, it just doesn't."

"What were they talking about?" Schmidty turned to Benjamin. "Did you hear anything, anything that sounded like a reason for this business of taking clothes off?"

"It wouldn't even have to be a good reason," the Zipper urged. "From even a drunken reason I could probably put the evening together."

I knew just what he meant. After all, there is in every act, however mad and irresponsible, some thread of logic. A drunk might do the most fantastic thing imaginable, but he does it not because he chooses deliberately to be fantastic. Under the precise circumstances of the precise moment, the act strikes his drunken intelligence as being the most reasonable and logically inevitable available. Now, despite the fact that he drank like a madman, the Zipper was nobody's fool. He knew himself and roughly he knew what he was capable of, drunk or sober. For example, he knew that he was subject to the darkest of dark moods when drunk, and each time he sobered up, I think it was with just a touch of astonishment that he had been through another drinking bout without committing suicide. That, I believe, was the root of his strange habit of checking up on himself whenever he came back to consciousness. He counted his limbs and members out of curiosity, asking himself whether this time he had really done some damage to himself. If Benjamin had told him that he started taking off his clothes and giving them to people to rid himself of his worldly effects before he went out to kill himself, he could probably have gone on from that and recalled his suicide attempt and how it had failed. Many a time the Zipper, in his cups, has given me his watch with the most careful instructions for its winding and setting, going through an oral last will and testament. In fact, among the Zipper's friends such bequests were generally recognized as a danger sign.

One would take the watch and promise to treasure it, but one would also immediately look to all sharp knives or potentially dangerous weapons and get them out of the Zipper's way.

Benjamin, however, insisted that the Zipper had not been taking off his own clothes and giving them away. His idea, or so it seemed, had rather been to undress his companions. And that left the Zipper's memory up against a blank wall. He could recall no reason he might have had for such behavior, no course of action of which it might have been the part, or to which it might have served as prelude.

Red came out of the autopsy room and joined us. He had with him the doctor who had done the post mortem and Red was in high good humor. He slapped Stinker on the back gleefully and burbled out his good news.

"You're not the strong man you think you are, keed," he chuckled. "You hardly hurt him at all. He had a better job done on him later."

"Who, Doctor?" Benjamin asked. "You talking about Stitch?"

"Yes, Mr. Benjamin," Red answered. "We just finished the autopsy."

"What did you find?" Schmidty asked.

Red deferred to the local doctor, who had actually done the job, although he nodded in eager and pleased agreement throughout his colleague's report. Stitch had died of a cerebral hemorrhage caused by a skull fracture. A careful check of the body for contusions had shown some, but they were all superficial. The most severe was found on Stitch's jaw where Stinker had landed. The other bruises were located on his thighs and on his right shoulder. The skull fracture was at the back of Stitch's head

but there was a bruise, too slight to be of any medical significance, just above his right ear.

"And that," Red summed up as the other doctor finished, "lets Stinker out."

"Why?" Stinker asked. "Why? I've got to be sure."

"Listen." Red put his arm on Stinker's shoulder. "I wouldn't try to fool you. All those little bruises tell the whole story. He hit his side against the table when you knocked him down. We found the marks of that on his thighs. It was his right side, and the bruise on his shoulder shows that he hit the floor on his right side."

"Yes," Benjamin corroborated the statement. "I remember that he did land on his right side."

"So," said Red gleefully, "we have that niggling little bruise above his right ear. That's where his head hit the floor when you flattened him. He really landed on his shoulder. That took most of his weight, and that's where he had the real bruise. All he got on his head was a bump he wouldn't even have noticed."

I could see that Stinker wanted to believe Red's description of what had happened, but he had to be convinced beyond the slightest shadow of doubt.

"But," he objected, "he didn't snap out of it right away, the way a man does ordinarily from a punch in the jaw. He moped around afterward. We all saw that."

"Maybe," I suggested, "he wanted to mope."

After all, Stitch had gone for Schmidty in the first place. When a man starts using his fists under questioning, you can be pretty sure that a good part of the reason is that he doesn't want to answer any questions, or at least that he is trying to play for time. I suppose, if he had knocked Schmidty cold, he would have at least had the time it might take before the fight could be broken up and before Schmidty would be in shape to get back to the point. It worked out differently, but it was conceivable that taking it on the chin from Stinker suited him just as well — perhaps even better. If he was playing for time, he got it. Even after Red looked him over and said he was all right, he could have just been dodging further questioning with his song and dance about feeling dizzy.

"But the skull fracture," Stinker persisted. "How can we be sure that he did not hit his head against the table while he was falling?"

"Because," said Red, "he fell on his right side, which means that he was facing the table as he fell. I thought I remembered that, but the location of his bruises bears me out. If he had hit his head against the table, it could never be the back of his head. It would have been his face or his forehead."

"Is that right?" Stinker turned to the doctor who performed the autopsy.

"I," he said, "do not pretend to be a detective."

"The first man I ever met," Inspector Schmidt murmured, "who didn't."

"But," the doctor continued, "Doctor Sweeney's description of the autopsy findings is accurate in every detail, and his conclusions seem airtight to me."

Stinker heaved a sigh of relief so profound that it could have blown down a tree.

But Red was not finished. He had another detail to offer.

"The doctor," he said, "will agree with me that, from the nature of the injury to the back of the head, we can form no certain opinion of how it was sustained. We feel sure, however, that it could not have been the result of any ordinary fall."

"Sure," Benjamin murmured. "Everybody takes falls. Most times a man doesn't break a thing, but it's some helluva fall that cracks a guy's skull open."

"Exactly." Red beamed at him. "Exactly, Mr. Benjamin. I have seen skull fractures like the one we just explored. I remember one that was the result of a bad automobile accident where the man was thrown through the windshield of his car and smacked with most of the force of the collision against a concrete traffic stanchion. There was another sustained by a man who fell out of a fourth-story window. And then ——"

"I've seen them too," the other doctor interrupted. "I can remember in my intern days I saw a man who had been beaten over the head with a baseball bat. He had such a fracture."

"The well-known blunt instrument," murmured the Zipper.

"Yes," said the doctor. "I think Doctor Sweeney will agree that we cannot say definitely that this man was beaten on the head with a heavy object; but, Inspector, if you should find evidence that indicates anything of the sort, it would astonish us not at all. Medically, that would be the most likely cause of such a skull fracture, more likely than any other possible cause."

"That's it," said Red. "We are not saying that there are not other possible causes, but we agree that the others are just possibilities."

That's about as far as we had gone when Harry Stedman arrived. He had in tow young Larraby and his Peggy, explaining that he had kept them safe overnight but that he thought it best to deliver them back into Inspector Schmidt's hands rather than leave them alone out at his house. Schmidt explained about the man who had been found in the submerged car, and before he took Harry in for the identification he asked the doctor to wait and perform another autopsy.

"This one," he said, "looks like a drowning."

He took Harry into the improvised morgue, and Young Larraby edged over to Stinker. I had started to whisper to Red, Benjamin's story about the Zipper having been out to Stinker's Run with Bellringer and our newest corpse. The kid plucked at Stinker's sleeve.

"Could I talk to you alone?" he asked.

Stinker, however, now that the weight of the possibility of his having killed Stitch was lifted from his mind, was full of concern for the Zipper.

"Later, kid," he said curtly and went into a huddle with us.

I didn't bother to notice especially what Benjamin and the boy and girl were doing, except to make sure that they could not hear us. When I glanced over my shoulder at them, Benjamin seemed to be making conversation. I did notice that young Larraby

kept tossing nervous glances in our direction, but I was glad that Benjamin was keeping him away from us, because I had things to tell the boys and there was very little time. I am not exactly proud of what I did, although when I confessed it to Schmidty later, he was generous about it and hinted that it was natural enough that I should have put my loyalty to my own friends before other loyalties. I rather think, in fact, that he knew all along that I was likely to try to help the Zipper all I could, even to the point of interfering with the investigation.

Red, Stinker and I begged the Zipper to come clean with us, to tell us everything and anything he knew, but he insisted that he knew nothing that he had not already told Inspector Schmidt.

"I'm not holding anything back," he protested. "I want to know what happened just the way Stinker wanted to know what happened to Stitch Johnson. Somehow I don't feel as though I killed anybody and there is no sane reason why I should; but I was drunk and I don't know what happened, and I don't like the feeling that maybe I did kill Bellringer. I don't like it a bit."

"Yeah," said Red. "I have one idea though. I don't know that it's important, but it has points. I think I know how you got those odd bruises around your armpits."

"How?" the Zipper asked eagerly. "That might just be the detail that could start me off remembering things."

"What might?" Schmidty asked, returning with Harry.

"Red," I explained hastily, "thinks he has the answer to the Zipper's bruises."

"What's your answer?" Schmidty asked, giving me the first indication since the case started that he had an answer of his own.

"I hear," said Red, "that the Zipper was bounced out of Stinker's Run last night."

"Yes, Doc," said Benjamin. "Stitch had to put him out. He —"

"Yeah," Red interrupted, "I know. You saw him bounced, didn't you?"

Benjamin nodded.

"Do you remember?" Red continued. "Do you remember exactly how it was done? What was Stitch's technique? Did he grab customers by the collar and the seat of the pants and heave them out?"

"That," said Benjamin, "would depend. I'd say generally we'd grab them by anything that was handy and get them out of the place when we had to. This fellow and the other two he bounced out one at a time. He just got them under the arms and hauled them out with their heels dragging."

"Could you," Red asked, "demonstrate on me?"

"Sure," said Benjamin.

He stepped behind Red and grabbed him under the arms. Red slumped and hung by his armpits on the palms of Benjamin's hands. Hanging limp, he let Benjamin drag him a few steps. What he meant about the Zipper's bruises was obvious. Benjamin had a firm grasp on him, and you could see the four fingers in front and the thumb behind. They pressed in the precise positions where the Zipper had his bruises.

"You see?" said Red. "Zipper got those funny marks when he was bounced out of the roadhouse."

"What kind of marks?" Benjamin asked.

"Four little bruises on the front of each shoulder and a slightly bigger one in the back," Schmidty explained.

"You don't say?" said Benjamin. "Of course, Stitch did have a terrific grip. You'd know that if you ever shook hands with him."

"Yeah," Schmidty grinned. "I remember. He was always one of these guys that like to grab your hand and leave you a fist full of mashed fingers."

Benjamin nodded.

"He thought it was funny," he said. "First time he did it to me I busted him in the eye. It was after that we became friends."

"All very interesting," murmured the Zipper, "but it doesn't help me any. I'm still up a tree."

"Well," Schmidty interrupted, "about this new corpse."

"Yes, Inspector," said the doctor. "If you are ready, I can do the autopsy right now."

"Good," said Schmidty. "The body has been identified by Professor Stedman."

"Is it ——" I asked.

"Daggett Nelson," Harry finished for me. "This seems to have been a dangerous reunion for the class of 1926."

"I think," said Benjamin, "the college ought to stop having these reunions. Fun's fun, but this is bad stuff."

"I agree with you there, Benjamin," said Schmidty. "But we've got work to do."

That, of course, is the inspector all over. He will never bother his head about a general principle or some large reform when there is anything like a specific fact available for the ferreting out.

"Red," he continued, "would you mind helping the doc with the Nelson autopsy?"

"Sure thing," said Red. "It's a nice change from my daily run of sick women."

"Say, look," said Stinker. "If nobody minds, I'd like to see one of these things. Might I watch?"

"It's up to the doctor," Schmidty answered. "Makes no difference to me."

The doctor had no objection to Stinker as an audience, and that was arranged. While Inspector Schmidt went with the doctor into the room where the bodies were laid out, Bob Larraby got his chance to buttonhole Stinker. They had a whispered conference in the corner of the room. The kid, it appeared to me, was getting something off his chest, and he was doing it with obvious difficulty. That Stinker did not like what the boy was telling him was equally obvious, but at length he patted the kid on the back. They broke it up, and as they came toward us Stinker spoke loud enough for me to hear.

"Don't worry, kid," he said. "I'll get it."

Then he buttonholed Harry Stedman and they huddled. I was watching them and saw Stinker writing Harry a check. Harry put it in his wallet without looking at it, took out his own checkbook and wrote a check which Stinker pocketed. Larraby watched them anxiously all the time. He was whispering to Peggy James the while, and they seemed to be arguing. After the exchange of checks, Stinker thanked Harry and went into a huddle with the two kids.

The end of all this maneuvering was that Larraby explained that he had an errand to do in town, and Stinker added that he had to get up to the bank before it closed.

"We'll go uptown together," Stinker said. "Do you mind taking care of Miss James till we get back, Harry?"

"A pleasure," Harry answered.

"Why can't I go with you?" the girl asked.

"You'd better stay with Professor Stedman," Stinker advised. "We're going to make time."

"What about the autopsy?" Red reminded him. "I thought you wanted to watch it."

"I did," Stinker answered. "But I forgot about the bank closing at noon. Somehow it didn't feel like Saturday today. I'll just have to give it the miss."

"You're not missing much," Red shrugged.

"Tell Schmidty," Stinker said as they left, "that I'll be keeping an eye on the kid. I'll bring him back safe."

I didn't try to stop them although I did have a feeling that there was more to all this check and bank business than met the naked eye. I tried deliberately to look the other way and let them go because, whatever Stinker was up to, I rather wanted him to succeed. Down inside me, I just couldn't feel that he would be doing anything to obstruct justice, but I had a hunch that Schmidty would not feel as I did about it and that therefore the best thing for me to do would be to just know nothing. Although I was aching to get together with Harry Stedman and get a line on what Stinker and he had whispered about, I refrained from asking. After all, Gilligan was on hand and he had the authority. I thought that if Schmidty really got sore, I could let him take the rap.

The inspector, however, took it all pretty much at its face value. He didn't seem to mind especially that Bob and Stinker had slipped away to the bank. The doctor and Red went to do their autopsy, and the rest of us went up to the police station. Schmidty wanted to look at any reports that might have been coming in on Bell-ringer, and the rest of us strung along. Benjamin murmured something about getting back to Stinker's Run, explaining that he expected the day's business to start early, and he left us when we got up to Main Street. Since Schmidty had shown so little concern about Stinker and Bob, I figured that it was safe to ask Harry about the checks. As we went into the police station Harry explained.

"Stinker," he said, "just needed some cash. He figured that the bank wouldn't

honor his check for any sum as big as five hundred dollars. So he gave me a check for five hundred and I wrote him one of mine. He's getting it cashed."

As he spoke he tipped me the wink, and I realized that he had guessed, just as I did, that Stinker wanted the money for Bob Larraby. Naturally he didn't want to say anything about that phase of it while Peggy James was with us, but the whole thing left me wondering just what young Larraby had wanted with five hundred dollars. I didn't have long to wonder. Before many hours passed we all knew.

There was nothing at the police station to tell us much about Bellringer that we did not already know. The New York police had reported that he had no record although they did know that he had been a speakeasy operator for about three years, beginning in 1926. That evidently had been the profession into which he first drifted after he had been kicked out of college. The name of the speakeasy meant nothing to me but it pleased Schmidty mightily, and I could understand his pleasure when he explained that Stitch Johnson, to his own knowledge, had tended bar there.

To Gilligan, while the rest of us listened, he expounded the importance of this bit of information. As he explained it, it gave us a lead to a possible connection between Stitch and Fundamental Finance, Inc. If Stitch had once worked with or for Bellringer, the association might well have continued after Bellringer went on to bigger things like launching fraudulent holding companies. It also threw an interesting light on the little scene Benjamin had described for us. That Stitch should have bounced three disorderly customers out of Stinker's Run had seemed to him all in the day's work. Of course, it was odd that the three should turn out to be the Zipper, Daggett Nelson and Bellringer, but the bouncing began to look like more than just an odd coincidence when we learned that Bellringer, so far as Stitch was concerned, had not been just any disorderly customer but rather a man whom he knew and knew well.

We were discussing this point when Stinker and Bob Larraby turned up. Schmidty asked them if they had gotten their errands done, and they said they had. Leaving it at that, he returned to his explanation of the significance of this new lead on a Bellringer-Stitch Johnson connection. I noticed that Larraby and Stinker exchanged a glance, and I thought I saw Stinker flash the kid what looked like a reassuring smile. But Stinker rapidly turned it into a broad grin.

"Fry me for a catfish," he said. "You were keeping bad company last night, Zipper, old kid."

The Zipper agreed absently and Schmidty asked if by any chance Stinker and Larraby had run into either Mander or Brink in their errands around town. They replied in the negative. I looked at my watch and had a suggestion to offer.

"They could be anywhere at all now," I said. "But if you want them, you can pick them up in the parade. It's due to start in a few minutes."

"What parade?" Schmidty asked, and we explained.

If you've never been down to the old place for a reunion, you may not know about the parades, although pictures of them turn up almost every year in newsreels or

rotogravure sections. Every reunion week end, on Saturday morning, the alumni parade in their reunion costumes. The parade forms around the campus flagpole, and the line of march is through the campus and down river road to the football stadium. It ends with a mass meeting of all alumni in the stadium. The ceremonial of the march has long been fixed by tradition. Leading the parade comes the senior class, the boys who are to become alumni on commencement day, two days later. Then, each with its band, the other classes follow after. They march according to age, with the previous year's graduates following the seniors and so on back through the years until the oldest living graduate brings up the rear. At the stadium each class falls out and lines up on either side of the road. The senior class takes its place nearest the gates and the others continue down the road, so that all the classes are lined up outside the stadium when the oldest living graduate arrives. He is always too old and feeble to march, but in his car he goes down between the rows of cheering alumni. The next oldest class, after his car has passed them, falls in behind him and so on down the line, so that gradually the parade re-forms and goes into the stadium with the oldest first and the years following after in order until the senior class enters the stadium last. By that method, each class has an opportunity to cheer every other class as the others march by, and each class in turn is cheered by all the others, for the oldest living graduate is the last to arrive outside the stadium and the first to enter it. He passes all the classes on his way in. The others outside the stadium pass all classes except those older than themselves. Inside the stadium they find these older classes already in their seats ready to review their juniors who have just been reviewing them.

"You mean," Schmidty asked eagerly, when we had finished explaining the procedure, "that if you march in that parade you see all the classes and all the costumes?"

"Yes," I answered. "Every last one."

"That," said Inspector Schmidt wistfully, "is something I'd like to see."

"Sure," said Gilligan. "The whole town turns out every year to watch it."

"You can do better than that," Stinker suggested. "What say we make Schmidty an honorary member of the class of 1927?"

"Oh," Schmidty blushed. "Thanks."

"That," I said, "is a swell idea. You march with us, and then you can be right along with Mander and Brink and at the same time you can see the whole thing."

"That," said Schmidty with what seemed to me an almost childish joy, "will be swell."

Just before we started for the flagpole Red and the doctor came over from the hospital. As we all walked over to the campus, they reported their findings on Nelson. Daggett Nelson had drowned, but they found that he had been slugged first. As they described it, he had been alive but almost certainly unconscious when the car went into the water. They figured that the car had probably collided with a tree or some such obstacle before it rolled into the lake — that perhaps it had caromed off a tree

into the lake — because Daggett Nelson had received a blow on the head that was more than a stunner.

"Where," asked Schmidty, "did you find these marks on his head?"

"Back of the head," the doctor answered. "The same as Johnson."

"No accident," Schmidty murmured.

"Murder?" I asked.

"Nothing else," he said.

As he explained it, there seemed to be little possibility of doubt. The body had been found in the driver's seat of the car just as though Nelson had been driving, had driven into the lake and had drowned without making a move to save himself. A collision that would give him a blow on the back of the head, sufficient to stun him into an unconsciousness deep enough to continue through submersion in the lake, would necessarily have dislodged the body somewhat from its neat position in the driver's seat.

This new information, however, had no effect on Schmidty's determination to see the parade. He was like a kid on the Fourth of July, and I couldn't figure him out at all. Considering the trouble he always had with his feet, just the suggestion that he march in a parade could be expected to send him into a veritable passion of revolt. He had made no secret of the fact that he found the whole reunion business puerile and silly. Why he should decide that the parade was any different was beyond me. He was absolutely eager for it. On the way over we adopted Peggy James as another honorary member of the class of 1927. Larraby had to leave us to form with his fellow seniors, and Stinker invited the girl to march with us.

"Are women allowed?" she asked. "I thought reunions were completely stag."

"They are," Stinker explained. "But the parade is different. Wives and children march in the parade. You just pretend you're my daughter."

"Don't you think I'm rather a big daughter for you?" She dimpled.

"Now," Stinker grinned. "Everybody knows I've always been precocious."

We found our own gang easily enough. The yellow pants and pirate shirts ran high in visibility. Harry Stedman dropped back to join his sailor boys, and while the parade was getting started we milled around in our own crowd, looking for Brink and Mander. We spotted Brink first, and when we hailed him he joined us. To his pirate suit he had added one extra item of clothing. He had a white silk scarf wrapped several times around his neck and knotted. Over this mass of gleaming white his face looked red and flushed. As he pushed through the crowd toward us, Schmidty plucked at Stinker's sleeve.

"This guy," he asked, "the one you almost choked in Larraby's room last night, did he have ordinary clothes on, or was he wearing one of these costumes?"

"I don't know," Stinker answered, staring at the scarf around Brink's neck. "I didn't see him, I told you."

"I know," Schmidty continued, "but you had your hands on his neck. Didn't you feel a collar or tie or anything like that?"

"No," said Stinker just as Brink came up. "No collar or tie. Whatever he was wearing must have been open at the throat."

Schmidty turned to Brink.

"Hello," he said. "How are you this morning?"

"Lost my voice."

Brink mouthed the words rather than spoke them. All that came out was a husky whisper.

"Let's have a look at your throat." Red turned medical again.

"I'll be all right," Brink whispered. "It's just a touch of laryngitis."

"Better to have it looked at anyway," Red insisted.

Brink shook his head. At that moment Mander spied us and came over to join us.

"Say," he said. "Did any of you happen to find a gold cigarette lighter last night? I lost mine sometime after I first ran into you. I can remember using it over at the firehouse just before I went to the hospital to look at that body you had."

"What did it look like?" Schmidty spoke for us.

"It had my initials on it," Mander answered.

"That's it," said Schmidty. "I have it back at the hotel. I'll give it to you later."

"Where'd you find it?" Mander asked casually enough.

"In that Larraby kid's room," Schmidty answered equally casually.

"What?" Mander exclaimed. "The dirty little rat. He must have snatched it out of my pocket. And I thought I had lost it all the time."

Peggy James gasped and I saw Stinker's fist clenched, but Schmidty took charge.

"You're a pretty smart liar, aren't you, Mander?" he asked.

"I'm no George Washington, if that's what you mean." Mander grinned nervously.

"Yeah" said Schmidty. "You and Brinkley here thought you could give me the run-around on Bellringer's identification last night."

"All right," said Mander. "I knew him, so what?"

Schmidty, however, had looked around at Brinkley to see how he had taken it. Red had persuaded him to let him look at his throat, and Schmidty's crack had startled Brink so much that he bit Red's finger. Red yowled with pain.

"What did you see down there?" Schmidty asked.

"Teeth," Red growled, "There's nothing wrong with your throat, Brink."

"That's what you say," Brink answered. "But I can't talk anyhow."

I began to wonder whether that husky shadow of a whisper might not be a fake. I was aching to whip that scarf off his neck and see whether Stinker had left any fingerprints there.

"Last night you wouldn't talk," Schmidty remarked as the parade started and we began moving, "and now you can't. I suppose you can't even tell me that you weren't sucked in on Fundamental Finance by Bellringer."

"What the hell," Brink whispered. "You tell him, Humph. He knows anyhow."

"I don't care which one of you talks, but talk," said Schmidty.

The bands were blaring march music, and we swung along while Mander told their story. Both he and Brink had known Bellringer and Daggett Nelson at college. The four had played bridge together often. After Bellringer had left college they had kept in touch. Mander insisted that they had never known that Bellringer had been kicked out. When he formed Fundamental Finance, he offered to let them in on it. As Mander explained it, he had made it sound like a good thing and they had both invested heavily. He told us that, a couple of weeks before reunion, Brink had begun wondering about the company. Things had turned up which led him to suspect that there was funny business afoot. He had heard rumors in Wall Street, and he had gone looking for Bellringer. Bellringer had been out of town, and Brink had seen Daggett Nelson and told him of his suspicions. Nelson had promised to tell Bellringer that Brink wanted to get out. Later Brink had seen Mander and had warned him that there was something rotten in Fundamental Finance. Neither of them, however, saw Bellringer until reunion. At reunion, Brink had accused him of pulling a swindle and Bellringer had blandly admitted it. Brink, according to Mander, had threatened to go to the police and Mander had backed him up on the threat.

"Then," said Mander, "Bellringer said a curious thing. It scared Brink badly, and I must confess that it gave me a bit of a turn. 'You're not going to the police,' he said, 'because I know what to do about guys who go to the cops. I know a fellow who'll strangle anybody at all for me. His rates are twenty-five dollars a killing but, since he's a friend of mine, he'll do them for me at two for thirty-five dollars.'"

"And that scared you?" Schmidty asked.

We had reached our stopping place outside the stadium, and the older classes were marching past us. Schmidty gave the octogenarians in their automobiles scant attention.

"It made us think," Mander answered. "It was after that, in the crap game, that Bellringer made the crack about it taking a thief to catch a thief. Brink and I talked it over, and we decided that the thing to do was to mark the investment down to experience and forget about the whole thing. Of course, when Bellringer turned up dead a couple of hours later, neither of us wanted any of it. All we were trying to do was keep out of the whole thing if we could. That's the story."

"Tell him about Bellringer's other proposition," Brink prompted in his husky whisper.

The older classes just wear arm bands, with their class numerals as a distinguishing mark, but these arm bands do not make their regular clothes look any more colorful. The first real costumes passed us with the class of 1912. Schmidty began giving closer attention to the parade, but he still had an ear for Mander.

"Oh, yes," Mander continued. "Bellringer came over to Brink in the firehouse after he threatened us, and he tried to take the whole thing back. He had some kind of song and dance about how it had hurt him to think that we didn't trust him, and he tried to convince Brink that although Fundamental Finance was in trouble, it was

all on the up-and-up. He wanted us to put more money into it to tide it over, and he promised that we'd end up by making plenty. Of course, Brink wasn't having any more and told him so."

They had all passed us, all the classes that had seniority over us. The costumes seemed to have Schmidty fascinated. His eyes never left the parade while he listened to Mander. By the time we got moving again to pass in review before the younger classes, he should have been surfeited. He had seen Indians, cowboys, Mexicans, Chinamen, swordfishermen, bullfighters, gladiators, cops, white-wings, poilus, French sailors, baseball players, kilted Scots, leather-breeched Tyroleans, and American sailors. When the last sailor had gone by — it was Harry Stedman and he thumbed his nose at us — we swung into line behind them, and still Schmidty feasted his eyes on the costumes. As we pirates went down the line of the younger classes, he stared at tricolor-clad French revolutionaries, brown-robed friars, helmeted and goggled aviators, bearded and smocked Russians, wooden-shod Dutch boys, diapered and ruffled babies, a whole battalion of ragged Huckleberry Finns, aproned bartenders and leopard-skin-wrapped cavemen.

Until we came to the soberly clad senior class he was as attentive to the sights as was Jim Dale, who walked along with us using his camera every step of the way. As we passed the seniors, we spotted Larraby. He stood in the back row of his class, and right behind him was Jack Benjamin, whispering in his ear. We had agreed before the parade that we would all fall out at the gate. The mass meeting is always a bore, and none of us had wanted to go. As we fell out, Peggy James headed for young Larraby and we followed, elbowing our way through the rows of seniors.

"Did we see all of the classes?" Schmidty asked eagerly.

"Every last one," I assured him. "From 1912, the oldest class in fancy dress, down to Larraby's class that hasn't graduated yet."

"That," said Schmidty unexpectedly, "does it, I think."

"What?" I was asking when we joined Larraby and Benjamin.

I received no answer.

"Come on," Schmidty called. "All of you. We're going back to the hotel right away."

I didn't think that Benjamin was included in the invitation, but when Larraby took Peggy James's arm and began following after us, Benjamin came along, and I didn't think it was my place to object. It must have occurred to him, however, that he was a bit of an outsider because he touched Schmidty's shoulder.

"Anything new on Stitch, Inspector?" he asked.

"Not quite yet," said Schmidty, "but I hope to find what I'm looking for back at the hotel."

"Would it be all right if I came along?" Benjamin asked.

"Sure," said Schmidty. "Stitch was your partner after all. I can see how you'd be interested."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AS WE WENT BY the police station on our way back to the hotel Gilligan hailed us from the window. Schmidty stopped to talk to him and he sent the rest of us on to the hotel, after explaining to Jim Dale what he wanted. His instructions were simple enough. He wanted another showing of Jim's firehouse films, and he promised he would join us at the hotel by the time Jim would get the reels out of the hotel safe, set up his projector and get the bed sheet hung for the show.

All the way to the hotel, Stinker stuck close to Bob Larraby and Peggy James. Brink, Mander and Benjamin walked right behind them and seemed to have a lot to say to each other. At least, Mander and Benjamin did the talking. Brink was still contributing only an occasional husky whisper. The rest of us were following behind, and I managed to detach Red from the group. We dropped a couple of steps behind Harry Stedman, the Zipper and Jim. Immediately Red guessed what I had on my mind.

"As sound a pair of tonsils," he said, "as I've ever seen."

I kept my eye on Brink, as we talked. I preferred that he should not overhear us while we were discussing him.

"Why the husky whisper then?" I asked.

Red shrugged.

"Maybe," he suggested, "he doesn't want to talk."

"But he let Mander talk for him," I objected. "In fact, he prompted him to tell more than Mander seemed ready to spill of his own accord."

"Yeah," said Red. "It's got me. All I know is what I read on his tonsils. There's not a sign of inflammation there."

"Could there be inflammation without it showing?" I asked.

"No," said Red. "Inflammation shows."

"Then," I concluded triumphantly, "the husky whisper is just a dodge to hide the real reason for tying up his neck."

"Exactly what I thought," Red grinned. "I'm not in the tonsillectomy business. Brink can keep his tonsils for all of me. I insisted on looking at them because I wanted to know whether Mr. Peter Brinkley really had a bad throat. Whoever it was that Stinker grabbed in Larraby's room last night should be wearing his neck in a sling. Would you have ever figured Brink as the kind of a guy who would hide behind doors waiting to bean a kid with a hammer?"

"No," I murmured. "I've never liked the heel."

"No more have I," said Red. "But there are lots of people we don't like, and still they don't seem the least little bit like hammer slayers."

"That," I agreed, "is just what I was about to say. Brink is a liar and a hypocrite, a sanctimonious bore and a pompous ass, but it would never occur to me that he was the skull-basher-in type. I don't know what to make of it."