

"Couldn't be better," Palling answered. "Take Violet's feet."

Palling felt a great sense of relief. Fate, he felt, had played into his hands. The girl had fainted under the stress of Lane's attentions. How very convenient. He knew now the exact diagnosis which would explain Kitty's untimely death.

#### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE MORNING of Sarah Reckon's funeral dawned drearily. Long before day-break, Highway wakened in his little room on the ground floor and heard the water pouring from the roof and rattling like small shot against the palm fronds. For a long time he stroked his beard, trying to make a pattern of the things which had happened during the brief time he had been in Poldrate Street.

When the three shots cracked through the trees, he had been seated in the Reckon garden, smoking his pipe and petting the complacent Squire. Knocking out the hot ashes from his pipe against the thick sole of his brogue, he hurried into Poldrate Street. The dog trotted beside him almost to the Palling gate, and then stopped. Highway called to him, snapping his fingers, but the dog refused to go farther.

Passing the Palling gate, he heard excited voices and went in. When Lane passed, carrying the unconscious Kitty, Highway could have reached out and touched him. Concealed by the broad leaves of a banana plant, he watched Palling and Breene pick up Violet. He wondered what Breene meant by asking, "Is it all right?" He was even more puzzled by Palling's reply, "Couldn't be better." To Highway it seemed a doubtful comment upon the extraordinary condition of two feminine members of the party.

He was waiting on the little front porch of the Reckon house when Lane returned half an hour later. From him he learned that Kitty, without a mark on her body, had been put to bed in the Palling house. From the moment she fainted in Lane's arms, she had shown no sign of recovering consciousness. Highway questioned him repeatedly, but he had been positive on one point. Kitty fainted *before* a shot was fired and *before* she even suspected the presence of Mrs. Palling and the gun. He admitted he had been kissing her at the time. Under pointed inquiry, he supposed he was being a bit rough about it. But he insisted with rather a shamefaced grin that Kitty was being a bit rough herself. In fact, Highway gained the impression from his description that it had been pretty much of a catch-as-catch-can affair in which she had more than held her own. Without warning, she had suddenly gone limp in his arms, her hands pawing feebly at his face. He said she tried to say something about her head feeling funny. It scared him, Lane said, having a woman turn from something pretty lively into a corpse, as it were, in such a short time.

He was bathing her forehead when he heard Violet coming. The woman burst into

the clearing waving a gun, and ordered him away from Kitty before she killed the both of them. She was insanely drunk, Lane said. The first shot hit the water. Kitty was lying in his arms, her eyes closed; yet Palling insisted it was the shock of Violet's attack which caused her to faint. Very odd, Highway thought.

Kitty was still in a coma when they went to bed, although that was long after two o'clock. Lane had stolen into the Palling garden and met Breene coming away. The undertaker had been rather surprised, Lane thought, at the sight of him. But he talked readily enough. Kitty was in bed, in no pain apparently, but showing no signs of recovering. Violet had gone to bed drunk and quarrelsome. Cora, with the aid of several quarts of black coffee, had been scalded into semi-sobriety and impressed into acting nurse for Kitty. Joseph Sleep, more than a little drunk and abusive, had been taken home and put to bed. Highway was puzzled about Sleep. He hadn't appeared the kind of man who got drunk. A little wine now and then, perhaps.

He continued to ponder Sleep's drunkenness as he took his accustomed cold tub.

While he towelled himself he heard Lane preparing breakfast in the kitchen. The odors of bacon and coffee spurred his movements. The meal they shared was mainly silent. Lane had already asked about Kitty and been told there was no change. Palling had asked, as a matter of neighbourly consideration, that nothing be said about the affair last night. Violet was sober this morning and felt very badly about her conduct, he said. Apparently the shots had attracted no attention. Palling appeared worried about Kitty's condition.

"He blamed it on a gland," Lane said, looking puzzled. "Thymus was what he called it. He said it was too big."

Highway nodded. "That's possible," he said. "The thymus is supposed to retract as people grow up. If it doesn't, it's likely to cause trouble."

It might explain the girl going into a faint before she heard the shots. Shock was bad for an enlarged thymus. Perhaps the young man's method of making love was shocking, although from what he said the lassie wasn't the kind to be upset by anything but the lack of it.

The funeral was set for half past ten. At a quarter after, they went down the path together. The rain had stopped, reluctantly it seemed.

Highway felt his heart sink as he sat down in Mafia Breene's funeral establishment. It was not that death was unfamiliar. But the calculated solemnity of a civilized burial always depressed him.

There were few mourners in the plain wooden benches. In the front row Highway saw four strangers, apparently pressed into service as pall-bearers. Behind them, each in a bench alone as if seeking solitude in the house of death, people sat with bowed heads. Sleep was there and Dr. Palling. There was no sign of his wife. "Face" Gordon sat farther back with a woman Highway supposed to be his mother. There were half a dozen middle-aged women, sad-looking souls with grey hair and cheap hats set stiffly on their heads. There was a hushed, unhappy look about their faces as they waited.

Then a thin, sing-song voice began tossing words into the silence. There was a man standing beside the coffin with a book in his hands, a man with stooping shoulders and glasses set crookedly on his nose. He informed the unhappy group frozen in the pews that their dear sister, Sarah Reckon, was not dead. They must not think of her as anything but happy upon a sunlit shore where they, in turn, would one day go. Highway sank back in his hard chair, dulling his ears to the minister's pitiful attempt to soothe whatever grief lay in his hearer's hearts.

It was a short distance from the chapel to the grave in the adjoining cemetery. Highway walked with Lane between the head-stones until they reached the pile of new-turned earth. Standing under an umbrella held by Breene, the minister hastened his last words. With the first rumble of dirt upon the boards below, the little group began to drift away. Highway and Lane lingered until the grave was partly filled, and then followed. Tramping along Washington Street, Highway lit his pipe. The smell of tobacco seemed to help them both. He sensed the younger man's eyes on him and felt he wanted to say something.

"What is it, Jimmie?"

"I was a fool last night, Highway," he said. "I *love* that girl, damn it. Not just — well, you know."

"That's good."

"I can't understand this gland business. She's not soft. She's in just as good condition as I am. She shouldn't stay out for hours like this."

They turned into Poldrate Street and found "Face" Gordon with his dog. Highway stopped. "How's Squire?"

"Face" kicked the sidewalk gloomily. "He isn't my dog any more, I guess. He ain't the same since he came back."

Highway bent to examine the dog. His eyes were clear, the nose black and moist. "What's wrong, 'Face'?"

"Well, I wanted him to go up the street with me. He comes to Palling's gate and then quits."

Highway remembered the dog's curious refusal to follow him last night. "Let's try him again. Come along, Squire."

The dog trotted willingly enough beside the little group. Lane, after a glance through the gate at his own cheerless premises, followed. At the Palling gate both Lane and the dog stopped. "I'm going to ask again," the fighter said, and went inside.

Highway was watching the dog, who was staring ahead, his nostrils working. He growled faintly. "Come along, Squire." Confidently Highway stepped out. The dog took a few steps and stopped again. Despite Highway's coaxing, he remained where he was, his head drooping and tail between his legs.

Highway stooped and patted the dog, who responded happily, sensing that he was not in disgrace for his refusal to obey. Using his handkerchief as a leader through his collar, Highway walked along the street. Thus led, Squire went forward without re-

sistance, but there was no eagerness in his bearing. They went by the Sleep gateway and came to the entrance opening into the shadowed premises of Mafia Breene.

There, Squire braced his four feet and hung back. A faint whine came from his throat and his eyes were filled with tortured appeal. Highway slipped the leash. The animal turned and retreated a hundred feet before he stopped, looking back. There was shame in his manner. "Face" sniffed. "He's sure scared of something."

Highway nodded thoughtfully and stared into the Breene garden. There was no doubt the animal had experienced something very unpleasant inside those gates, something which had happened during the days of his mysterious disappearance.

"He'll get over it, 'Face'. Better take him home and make a fuss over him. Don't punish the dog. You'll only frighten him."

He watched the boy as he walked to his dog. Boy and dog went on, disappearing together through the Gordon gates. Highway strolled into the Breene premises. The undertaker, he hoped, would be detained long enough for him to make a brief inspection of his flowers. His search was shorter than he hoped. Among the sodden blooms along the main path he found what he was seeking, a little clump of a particularly dark-flowered geranium. There had been some like it in Sarah Reckon's basket, and nowhere else in the Poldrate Street gardens had he found a single bloom. He knew now beyond a doubt the woman had entered Mafia Breene's grounds the night before she died.

He helped himself to a few of the flowers and left the garden. He wanted time to put all the odds and ends in his mind together into some kind of a picture.

Young Gordon had been more than a little helpful, he thought, as he tamped hot ashes in his pipe. The lad had a quick eye.

He had learned from "Face" that Sarah Reckon's garden was the only one watered the night before she died. The boy attached no importance to that, but Highway did. He learned of Joseph Sleep's annoyance because his grounds had been neglected by the elder Gordon. Why had Sleep thought so? Undoubtedly because he was convinced the gardener had watered the Palling and Breene gardens. What had given him that idea?

Suddenly Highway paused, pipe half-way to his bearded lips. Joseph Sleep was giving a party on that particular night. Suppose during the evening one or more of his guests had left his house, returning later? Palling and Breene, for instance. When they came in there were marks of water on their shoes, marks which Sleep had noticed. What more natural than that he should suppose they had walked through a freshly watered garden? Since he knew his own had not been touched, he would be convinced the gardener had given them service and not himself. When the elder Gordon denied watering either garden, he would be left wondering where his guests got wet feet. Highway knew. The flowers in his pocket told him Sarah Reckon had been in Mafia Breene's garden, and Joseph Sleep's questions convinced him either Breene or Palling or both had been in the Reckon place.

Jimmie Lane came out of the Palling gate. There was no need to ask a question. His gloomy face told Highway what he wanted to know. Kitty McKay was still unconscious. He wondered if she would ever waken. He was beginning to wonder if someone intended that she never should.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MONK WAS CLEANING the preparation-room when Mafia Breene came back from the funeral. He turned off some of the lights the fellow was burning, disregarding his disgusted grunt.

He stood watching Monk as the latter gathered up the shabby heap of clothing which had belonged to Sarah Reckon. Monk went out, carrying the garments. Slowly Breene crossed to the preparation-table, his eyes vacant. With the palm of his hand he stroked the marble, trying to visualize the slender body of Kitty lying there.

It was going to be a pretty tricky business pretending the girl was dead and going through all the movements. He hoped nothing would go wrong. They were lucky to have got her into Palling's house. Very few people would see her. Once Palling thought it was safe to announce her death, he could go right in and get her. From the moment she came down here into the preparation-room, they were out of danger. After that it would be simple routine up to the moment when she went on view in her casket. They'd have to let people see her, of course, but that's what all the experiments with the dog had been for. She would go into her casket and people would look at her and there she'd be lying dead. Lane would see her and the minister and maybe that bearded tramp. It would be like him to come spying around. Sleep, too; but under the circumstances he didn't think the old man would be hard to convince.

But was it? He began to worry about the thing. Suppose Palling's experiments with the dog didn't work out with a human being? The animal certainly looked dead, and there had been no respiratory movement. But could they do the same thing with a girl and get away with it? Things had gone too far, of course, to stop. They'd have to go through with it and take a chance. Breene tried to fix his thoughts on Kitty and forget the other things.

He couldn't separate them. He was worried about the operation Palling would have to perform. First he would inject the sodium luminal to the point of anesthesia. After that he would fix a tube in the trachea, just as he had in the dog. That was the part which worried Breene. Palling's knives were going to mar Kitty's lovely body. He had to do that, of course, because through that tube the oxygen would find its way into her lungs from the small tank hidden at her feet in the casket. Just enough oxygen to keep her alive without respiratory movement while people looked at her after the service. He was going to make up the face himself, of course, and arrange the lights so