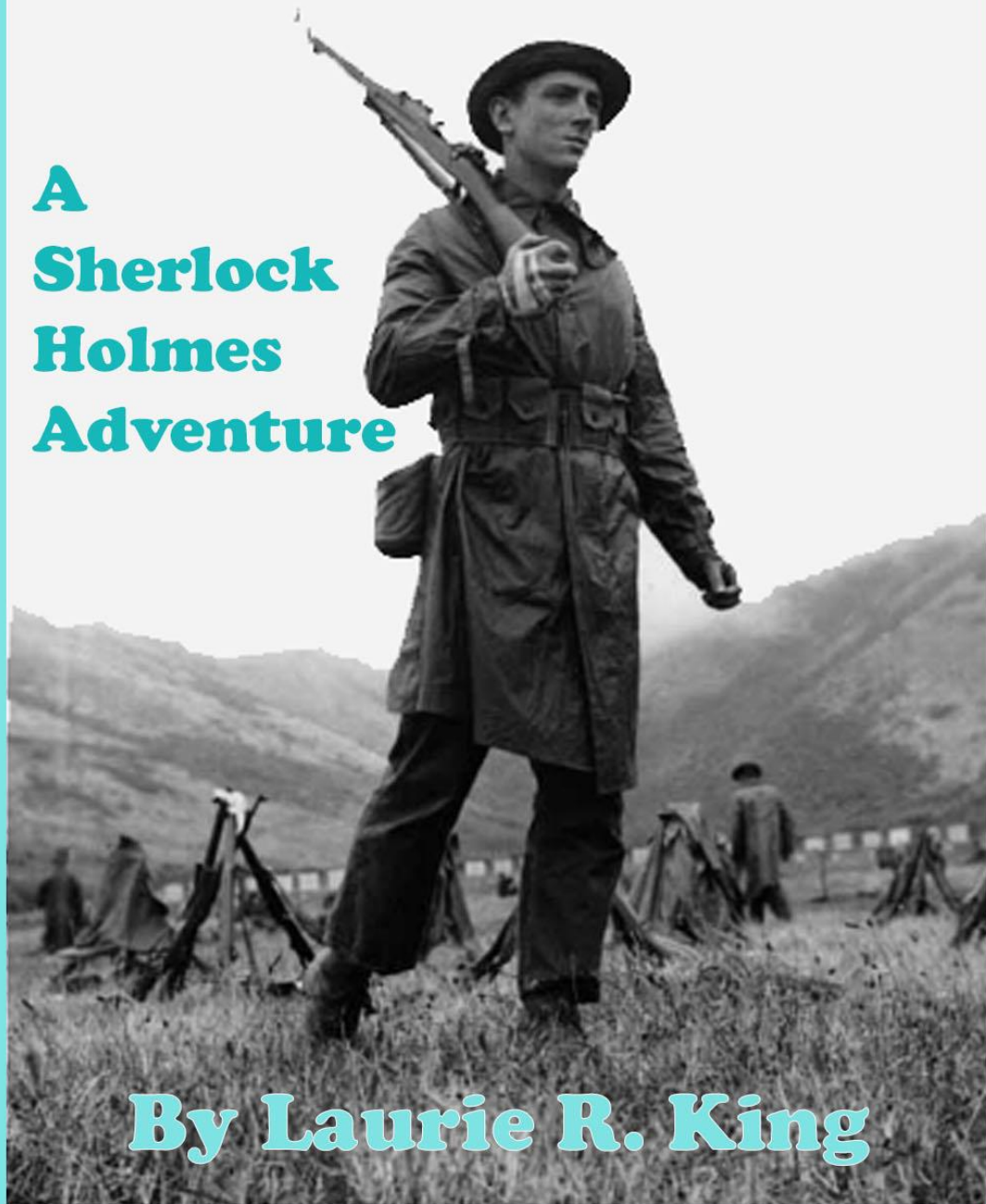


The Marriage of Billie Birdsong

**A
Sherlock
Holmes
Adventure**

By Laurie R. King



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Introduction

In 1923, on his world tour of Spiritualism lectures, Arthur Conan Doyle visited San Francisco. The following spring (or so it is given in Laurie R. King's *Locked Rooms*) Mr. Sherlock Holmes and his wife Mary Russell themselves arrived in San Francisco.

What happened there, as described in King's *The Art of Detection*, has created something of a controversy in the world of Holmes studies. Either the account was penned by Sir Arthur during his 1923 visit to this skeptical city, then abandoned and left unpublished for fear of shocking his devoted readers—or it was written in 1924 by Mr. Holmes himself, while his wife and partner Mary Russell was away on business of her own.

Readers of the Russell memoirs will accept that the story is nothing short of the actual truth.

Billie Birdsong's story is but a part of a larger tale, and only finds its completion on the day when the mayor of San Francisco, Gavin Newsome, opened the doors of city hall to the marriage of same-sex couples. From February 11 to March 11, 2004, gay men and lesbian women were given the same rights as the rest of the population. On August 24 of that year, those marriages were annulled—until four years later, when the California Supreme Court ruled that such a ban was unconstitutional. In 2015, the US Supreme Court did the same for the entire country.

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This story is found within *The Art of Detection*, by Laurie R. King.

The Marriage of Billie Birdsong

by Sherlock Holmes, Esq.

I

The mind is a machine ill suited to desuetude. The occasional holiday is all very well, but without the oil of challenge and the heat generated by effort, the mind rusts and seizes and is unavailable when needed.

I found myself in San Francisco one spring evening, my travelling companion temporarily about other business and my mind at a loss for a load to carry. Recent days had seen the successful conclusion of a case not without interest, but after forty-eight hours of solitary leisure, a dangerous restlessness had begun to set in, so I cast about for other forms of stimulation to see me through the days ahead.

In the brief time I had been in this brash city on the Pacific, I had come to appreciate its idiosyncrasies and, despite its youth, its powerful sense of personality. A remarkably diverse metropolis, with nearly three-quarters of its residents born elsewhere, it seemed less a part of these United States than a country unto itself. It claimed, only half-humorously, its own emperor, a poor madman who had wandered the streets during the previous century; it had faced the worst fire any modern city had ever known and had built anew within a decade; its port linked the disparate parts of the world more than any other I had seen; it even chose which federal mandates it should apply to itself, so that the Volstead Act that was currently shredding the social orders of the rest of the nation went all but unacknowledged in San Francisco, where the prohibition of alcohol was given merely token recognition in restaurants and public houses alike:

I had myself seen the chief of police with a glass of wine in his hand. The main effect of Prohibition that I had found was in the reduction of quality, not quantity.

I decided that, in keeping with my long-held belief that matriculation in the university of life ends only with the great final lesson, my education might benefit by an exploration of this remarkable city of the future. Not, however, the sort of exploration available to me by light of day—I had already spent more time than I cared playing the tourist. Thus, as evening fell I took up my overcoat against the night's mists and my stick against any possible assailant, and walked out of the doors of my hotel.

The city had come far from its days of being little more than a polite adjunct to the roaring Barbary Coast. The humorously named Maiden Lane, once the centre of bawdy entertainments, was now a staid enclave of the fashion industry, and these days, few men woke after a night out on the town to find themselves on a ship bound for Shanghai.

Still, though the Barbary Coast might have been shut down and the Chinese district cleansed of its more noxious corners, this remained, I had been assured, a 'wide open town'.

In the interest of research, then, I went to investigate its self-professed openness.

In San Francisco, those wishing the less salubrious quarters keep away from the hills and make for the low-lying ground. I had been in the city long enough to know the general direction, and made my way out of the commercial centre towards Market Street, and beyond. Within ten minutes I had found what I was looking for, paid a twenty five-cent 'membership fee', ordered an overpriced glass of a beverage that in better times

would have been swilled around the floor with a string-mop, and soon had found my evening's guide.

My guide introduced himself by a surreptitious insinuation of his fingers into my pocket. When I had his wrist firmly locked between my own fingers, I said without turning around, 'I see that the New World pickpockets have yet to attain the skill of their London brothers. Or perhaps I have simply come across an incompetent.'

Give the lad credit, he did not attempt to struggle against my grip, feeling no doubt the threat of broken bones in the particular arrangement of my finger-tips. Actually, I should admit that 'incompetent' was something of an exaggeration, a word chosen more for effect than accuracy. The boy was good enough for most purposes, just not good enough to lift the contents of my pocket. Particularly not in a place where I had half expected something of the sort.

I twisted his arm in a manner that forced him to circle around me, and nodded at the chair behind him. 'Do sit down,' I suggested firmly.

He hesitated, and I bent my restraining hand by way of encouragement. When he was seated, I let go.

'May I buy you a drink?' I asked him.

He did not immediately bolt for the door, as nine of ten young men in his position would do. He rubbed at his wrist, then sat back in his chair, eyeing me curiously.

Returning the favour, I saw a slim young man of perhaps nineteen or twenty, dressed in the compensatory fashion of one who has more sense of style than means of paying for it: quiet and slightly threadbare coat over flamboyant collar, waistcoat, and cravat, freshly polished shoes that had been cut for some other man's feet, quality

trousers slightly bunched at the waist, with knees on the edge of shiny and cuff-edges that had worn through and been neatly turned up. The whole was put together as if to say that if he couldn't dress well, he would dress with panache.

His blond hair (in need of a trim) was sleeked back over his head, and had not known a hat since it was last combed; his cheeks were freshly shaved, albeit by his own hand and with an inadequate looking-glass, or perhaps simply inadequate light; his nails were clean and well trimmed; his teeth had regular acquaintance with a brush and tooth-powder.

It was his gaze that gave him away. As they wandered across my person, seeing a grey-haired man in expensive London clothes to suit the accent, his pale blue eyes took on a knowing cast. I was not surprised to see him lean back a trifle more, tucking one arm behind the back of the chair so his coat fell slightly away from the clean, innocent whiteness of his shirt, of which one button did not quite match the others. He gave me the sort of smile I had seen before, one no doubt intended to be sultry.

I laughed aloud; his carefully composed smile wavered, his eye-brows tipped into a scowl.

'My dear young man,' I said, 'when I offered to buy you a drink, it was merely for the purpose of conversation, nothing more. If you are looking for companionship, I would suggest you approach that male person in the unfortunate cap sitting along the back wall. His collars might not be clean, but he is clearly interested in making your acquaintance.'

My companion hesitated, glanced over his shoulder at the unprepossessing gentleman in question, and settled again with a dismissive shake to his shoulders. ‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I’ll have a drink.’

He ordered a cocktail of the sort that had been invented by a bored and sadistic barkeep the week before, and while we waited I ran a small wager with myself as to its colour and the shape of glass it would come inside. I won on colour—a sickly lavender tint—but the glass was an ordinary water-glass rather than one of those broad plates better suited to olives or salted nuts than liquid. He held his drink up to me by way of toast, took a sip without wincing, then by way of thanks thrust his hand out at me and said, ‘Martin Ledbetter.’

I gave him a name and my hand, and when we had settled the matter of identities, I sampled my local California claret-type, which to my relief did not actually scour off the membranes of my palate. I then bent to examine the small bowl of assorted oddments that had arrived with the drinks.

‘Are these intended to be eaten?’ I asked my companion.

‘If you’ve got a hard stomach and good teeth, they probably won’t kill you,’ he replied. I nudged the bowl across the table for him, and he happily scooped up a handful and began snapping off the shells of what I decided were either large pistachios or wizened peanuts, depositing them onto the floor to mix with the sawdust, shells, and assorted waste. ‘So, what brings you to our fair city, Mr Sigerson?’

‘My wife’s family live here,’ I replied, which statement had as much truth in it as the names we had given each other. ‘She’s off for a few days on business, so I thought I’d take a look at the other side of San Francisco.’

‘The seamy tour, eh?’ he said, wagging his nicely shaped eye-brows in a raffish commentary on the whims of the old and rich.

‘More by way of comparison. I have spent a great deal of my life in places such as this, for the most part in London. I was curious to see if this new town had any variations to play on the old themes.’

His eyes again ran down my trousers, paused on the shoes made for me by a man in Piccadilly, went to the immaculate silk of the tie I wore, before he blurted out, ‘Why would someone like you spend time in places like this?’

‘And what is someone like me?’ I wondered aloud.

His gaze went from the ebony cuff-links I had been given in Japan to the heavy gold watch-chain across my waistcoat, and he shook his head in thought. ‘You’re not beat-up enough to be a lifelong drunk or an addict, and you walked right past the girls near the door, so you’re not looking for them. Or for me. Are you some kind of do-gooder? A church reformer or something?’

‘I have absolutely no desire to reform any of these good people,’ I assured him. ‘Then why come here?’

I held up my wine to the dim light leaking from the bar, noting the evidence of sugar added to the fermentation, then told him, ‘You might say I come here in a professional capacity.’

I could see him pick over my statement, saw his eyes narrow for a brief instant as he considered the possibility that my profession might be within the bounds of law enforcement, then go on to more likely roles. Eventually he cocked his head at me, appraisingly, no doubt recalling the ease with which I had intercepted his intrusive

fingers. ‘Con-man? Dance-hall owner? No, I’ve got it—you’re a professional gambler—a cardsharp!’

‘I have been known to play the Great Game, but lesser forms such as baccarat and poker have never interested me. As to the other possibilities, well, shall we say merely that I try not to limit myself?’

I nearly laughed out loud at the sudden bloom of respect in his pale eyes. Young men are ever gullible to the siren call of romance, and the romance of crime has the sweetest voice of all. ‘Tell me, Mr Ledbetter, have you any pressing engagements for the rest of the evening? I find myself in need of a guide to the city’s underworld, and you seem well placed for the position. A paid position,’ I added.

‘How much?’ he responded.

‘Not as much as you’d have got had you managed to lift my note-case, but more than you would get were you to depend on the generosity of the man in the cloth cap.’

We negotiated for a time, agreed on a sum, and after I had paid him half, he rose and led me out onto the street.

It was a curious evening, the first I had spent among the demimonde in some years, and although I found it much as I had left it, decades before and half a world away, it was every bit as sad, as tawdry, and as entrancing as it had ever been, from the ladies tapping at the upstairs windows to attract custom to the curiously appealing foodstuffs each establishment presented to keep its patrons on the premises—although in this town, the free food tended to be spiced meats wrapped in Mexican flatbreads or diminutive ham sandwiches rather than the Scotch eggs and kidney pies of my native land.

Ledbetter, understandably enough, began with the higher end of the spectrum, those establishments where the gin came in a distillery's bottles and the singers could hit a reasonable percentage of the notes. However, once he had figured out that I was not easily shocked, he rose to the challenge, and led me to half a dozen holes that I would never have discovered on my own. As his *pièce de résistance*, in the wee hours of the morning he pulled me into a narrow doorway in a part of town north of Market Street. A window slid open, an eye gazed out, the window slid shut, and the door opened: one breath, and I was transported to the days of my youth.

'An opium den, by Jove,' I exclaimed, and laughed aloud at his expression. Looking back, I suspect that the accumulation of odd spirits I had consumed had begun to affect me, but it had been in truth a far more entertaining evening than I could have anticipated.

When we were back out on the street some time later, I said something of the sort as I paid my guide the remainder of his evening's hire. 'I have to thank you, young man, for a most enlightening tour. It has assured me that the human imagination, while somewhat stuck in its old grooves, is not completely moribund.'

He accepted his money with an owlish blink, watched me slip the note-case back into my pocket, and said, 'I can't let you walk back to your hotel by yourself. What if you're robbed?'

'That is very kind of you,' I told him, politely not deigning to point out that attempted robbery was precisely what had brought us together. Too, considering his condition, I thought it not unlikely that he would be the one to wake in some dark alley with a bleeding head and empty pockets. 'But I shall be fine.'

Still, nothing would do but that he walk me out of the dark areas where the taxis do not ply, by which time we were nearly at my hotel. He accompanied me to the steps, looking considerably more sober for the effort, and shook my hand.

‘Mr Sigerson, any time you want a tour, just say the word.’

‘What about tonight?’ I asked. Midnight had gone, long before.

‘Again?’

‘Something slightly different, perhaps. Shall we say nine o’clock, here at the hotel? At the same rates, of course. Yes? Very well, see you tonight.’

I do not know which man watched me pass through the doors of the hotel with more amazement on his face, the night doorman, or young Mr Ledbetter.

The following evening I took an early dinner and dressed in a manner even more formal than I had the previous evening. My silk hat gleamed, my immaculate suit (not evening wear, which I deemed would create too much of a distraction) did not; I gave my ebony stick a polish with a face-flannel and tucked my prized emerald stickpin into the folds of my silk tie. Thus besplendoured, I waited in the park across the street from the hotel. When the young man came striding up the western side of Powell Street, I gave a sharp whistle, and he crossed over to join me.

He stopped in front of me and eyed the gold chain across my front. ‘Don’t you want to dress down just a little?’

‘So that I look less like a toff, you mean?’

‘I don’t know what a toff is, but you look like a man just asking to be robbed.’

‘As good a definition as any. I find contrast offers a soupçon of spice to one’s social encounters. And besides, had I not looked like a man asking to be robbed, you and I might never have met.’

I was amused to see the lad blush, amused and encouraged: A pickpocket who could feel shame was by no means lost. I set my top-hat at an angle and declared, ‘Mr Ledbetter, I am in your hands.’

The previous evening, I had visited half a dozen establishments in his company, and only the opium den had qualified for the term ‘dive’. This evening, my guide appeared determined to complete my experience of the city’s night-life.

At the third such place of business—dark, dismal, and so dispirited, the owners had not even bothered to maintain the electric bells behind the bar to warn of a raid, I poured my glass of so-called whisky onto the matted sawdust underfoot and said, ‘These sorts of places are, I agree, worthy of note, but I fear my liver will not survive too many more of them. What about the Blue Tiger?’

‘You know about the Blue Tiger?’ he enquired in surprise.

‘It came up in a conversation the other day.’ In fact, I had sat surveillance across the street from its door for several hours; however, it was also true that the place did later enter into the conversation with the subject of that surveillance.

‘Okay, it’s your nickel.’

We took a taxi, and joined a brief queue of private cars and taxis disgorging their brightly dressed Young Things at the door. There we received our first hitch: The doorman knew my companion, and blocked our entrance with a mighty scowl and an impressive set of shoulders.

‘Marty, I told you not to come back here,’ he growled.

‘Oh, Henry, don’t be wet. I’m on my best behaviour tonight—this is my friend, Mr Sigerson. He’ll keep an eye on me.’

‘We had complaints, last time.’

‘Unsubstantiated,’ the lad retorted, although he gave me an apologetic smile.

The retired pugilist looked me over dubiously, no doubt caught on the possible meanings of ‘friend’. Obediently, I told him in my plummiest of voices, ‘I assure you, Mr Ledbetter will behave himself.’

The man nodded reluctantly, but leant forward to shake one massive finger in my guide’s face. ‘We have one lady say her handbag’s gone missing, you’re out—and with a set of bruises you won’t forget easy.’

‘Ooh, Mr Toughie,’ Ledbetter purred, and slipped past the doorman into the club beyond.

The Blue Tiger was a dance hall, but it had a balcony that circled three-quarters of the floor. It was there we took our seats, with—such was the ‘membership fee’ I had paid on entering—a clear view of the stage. At the moment, the raised space was as bare of players as the dance floor was of couples, but the disarray of chairs and instruments indicated a mere break in the music.

A waiter appeared at my elbow, and I glanced at the surrounding tables. The customary drink here, unless one wished a named cocktail, appeared to be champagne; I ordered a bottle. It was priced at only five or six times what I would have paid for the same beverage in Europe, and it arrived in a not too badly tarnished silver bucket with a pair of admirably clean glasses.

My young companion waved the waiter away and set to removing the cork. He did so expertly, directing the upwelling foam into a glass before it could be lost. He raised his glass to me in a wordless toast, a habit that was either his own or that of his American generation. Before I could enquire, the band spilt back onto the stage, six comely Negro ladies, and resumed their instruments.

Their music was not at all bad—not to my taste, of course, but the notes were accurate and the syncopation precise. A hundred gaily dressed young people bobbed and spun out on the floor, and the temperature and humidity climbed. It was as well, I reflected, that the female dancers were as lightly clad as they were, all open backs and exposed arms. The young men, on the other hand, succumbing to the dictates of wool and linen, had faces as shiny as their hair. Ledbetter's foot tapped under the table, but when I assured him that I would not feel abandoned were he to go out onto the dance floor, he merely shook his head and refilled our glasses.

Perhaps he feared that, once among the crowd, he might find it difficult to keep his promise to the doorman. This hesitation could have been another vestige of ethics, or merely the knowledge that I could too easily abandon him unpaid.

A likeable young rogue, Mr Martin Ledbetter.

When the band broke for another brief intermission, I signalled for a second bottle of the wine and then said to the lad, 'Tell me about yourself, Mr Ledbetter.'

'Why?' he replied, his voice short.

'I suppose I could point out that conversation is what I am employing you for, in my search for understanding of the American way of life. Or I could say that I am interested in how a personable and clearly intelligent young man comes to find picking

pockets more lucrative than, say, working in an office. However, let us merely say that a break in the music is intended to provide an interlude for conversation, and it would be churlish of us to pass the opportunity by.'

He stood up abruptly, and said, 'A break is also intended to provide the chance to whiz. Which I am going to do.'

He made his deliberate way between the tables, hands slightly outstretched as counterbalance to the wine in his blood. The music started again and he was not back, but by the second dance, he reappeared up the stairway.

He sat down, fortified himself with half the contents of the glass, and said abruptly, 'I was born here in 1901, never knew my father, my mother was killed in the Earthquake, and the aunt who raised me died when I was sixteen. I make a living how I can, and nobody gets hurt but me.' He made the toast gesture again, polished off the contents of his glass, and reached for the bottle, defiantly allowing it to slosh over the side.

Looking only at the hard-working jazz band, I told him, 'You were born in 1903 or four, and spent your early years in Minnesota. Your father may well be dead, but someone put you through school, some male friend or relative who was two inches taller and forty pounds heavier than you, who had a certain amount of money about ten years ago, and who died within perhaps the last two years.'

I did not need to look at his face to see the look of confusion and alarm there: I had seen that expression often enough, and as I usually did, I relented with an explanation.

‘You can’t be more than twenty now. To a trained ear, your voice provides clear evidence of where you were when you first learnt to speak. You have been to school, although not university. And the clothing you wear was expensive ten years ago, but tailored to a larger man, who died and left his wardrobe to you.’ I finally looked at him, to explain, ‘You are wearing a complete change of clothing from what you had on last night, yet both sets of suit, shirt, and shoes have the same ill fit. And the amount of wear evidenced by the shirt collars would take about two years to accumulate, given an original two-week supply. If you stole the clothes rather than inherited them, you would surely have replenished your supply of shirts over the years.’

The young man’s jaw worked, his pale eyes went icy; for an instant, I expected him to dash the contents of his glass in my face and storm out, never to cross my path again.

Instead, he controlled himself. He set his glass carefully on the table and leant forward until his face was inches from mine. ‘I’ll show you around; I’ll play your games; I won’t talk about who I am.’

‘Very well,’ I answered equably. ‘Then tell me about these gentlemen on the stage.’

The boy’s face remained taut for a minute, then slowly relaxed into a grin. ‘You caught that, did you?’

‘That all the ladies are men wearing frocks and make-up? Certainly.’
‘You must’ve heard about them before. That’s why you wanted to come here.’

‘I will admit, I heard something of the sort. But I would have known in any case. It’s hardly a new act, you know. London had transvestites of both varieties long before

Victoria was on the throne. The Romans in Londinium probably watched a similar performance.'

He had no answer for that, although as he sat watching the stage, I knew that a part of his mind was taken up with the idea that former generations had flavours of sin that were not so very different. Such an idea invariably takes the young by surprise.

The song ended, the overhead light changed subtly, and Ledbetter sat forward in his chair. I watched curiously as the entire cabaret held its drinks and came to attention. The lights dipped to nothing, there was a sound of machinery and motion, and a minute later the lights rose again, glittering off the polished bars of a golden bird-cage a good ten feet tall. It swung gently a few feet from the boards, then descended, and as it lowered the lights gradually revealed a person seated on the cage's swinging perch. The moment she became visible, the audience erupted with applause, hooting and whistling their appreciation. The woman's pretty head remained inclined in modest recognition; when the cage touched ground, its door fell open, and she stepped out into the fanfare, head still looking at the ground.

She was small and exotically handsome, her theatrical make-up emphasising the large eyes and full lips Nature had given. A gold-and-pearl head-piece wrapped her head like a bandeau, but with cross-pieces that connected over the crown of her sleek ebony hair and continued down on either side to make ear-pieces. Her dress was long and golden, the slippers peeping from beneath its hem were gold, her finger-nails were painted gold, even her warm coppery skin seemed to glitter; the white explosion of a lengthy feather boa around her throat only emphasised the overall colour.

When the tribute had begun to fade, she took a step forward and threw back her arms and her head, showing for the first time a pair of blazing green eyes. She opened her mouth, and the band came in precisely on the first beat.

Her signature song was, of course, 'The Bird in the Golden Cage', a tune that I had first heard when I was not much older than Martin Ledbetter, in those gay fin de siècle days that the Twenties already seemed determined to emulate, if not surpass. The notes emerged from the singer's throat completely unhindered by any trace of masculinity; if one closed one's eyes, one would hear only a saucy and self-assured woman at the height of her powers; when the song had ended, I applauded as freely as the rest.

Ledbetter leant over to speak in my ear. 'That's Billy Birdsong. Just returned from half a year in Europe.'

'Ah yes, Miss Birdsong. I have heard of her.'

'Originally William,' he said, pouncing on the words as if he had caught me out. I suppose he still expected me to be shocked at the daring sins of his generation, sins previously unseen upon the earth.

I concealed my smile, and said merely, 'Of course. However, good manners require that one accept at face value whichever identity a person presents. Wouldn't you agree, "Mr Ledbetter"?''

He gave me a sharp glance, then turned back to the stage.

The chanteuse was no operatic voice, but her contralto range was true, and had clearly been trained. She was pleasing on the eyes, her jokes were clever if on the racy

side, her costumes remarkable, and I could easily understand if this home-grown talent had made a successful conquest among the sophisticates of Europe.

At the end of her set of songs, she retired from the stage amidst whistles and hoots, and the dancers settled in for the more mundane talents of other singers.

It was here that Ledbetter justified his salary. He stood up and said, 'Be back in a minute.'

As the young man did not appear to be using his disappearances to ingest any substances more illicit than the alcohol on the table, I wondered if he had a medical condition that should be seen to. When he had not returned in a reasonable time, I further began to wonder if perhaps I had been abandoned—I will admit that I even felt at my inner pocket to reassure myself that my note-case was still with me.

However, I had neither been robbed nor abandoned; indeed, it turned out that I was being served well by my hireling, who had gone to fetch the evening's entertainment.

I rose at the approach of Ledbetter's companion, taking the delicate hand and bowing deeply over it as my guide made the introductions. The singer's green eyes danced with pleasure.

'Marty here told me I had an admirer from a far-off land. I just had to come see.'

Billy Birdsong was a fine womanly figure of a man, five feet four inches of smooth racially mixed skin over a dancer's muscles and pleasingly languid bones. Modern dictates of fashion made re-forming the male form less of an engineering feat than it had a generation before—these days, even women were required to appear boyish. The casual drape of a sheer scarf around the singer's neck concealed the masculinity of the throat, and she navigated with assurance on heels higher than many women dared.

I invited her to sit while Ledbetter summoned up a new bottle of champagne and another glass. Miss Birdsong fluttered her eye-lashes with only the slightest exaggeration of femininity, and said, ‘You are from England, Mr Sigerson?’

‘London, yes.’

‘I was there for most of February.’

‘Pity, the spring can be quite lovely. Alas, I was in India then, or I would surely have seen you. Where did you perform?’

She told me, acted gratified that I had heard of the place, and set about the sort of conversation that is required of professional ladies. She was, however, distracted. Before a minute had passed, her avid attention to my description of the Suez Canal slid sideways—only momentarily, and only those green eyes shifted—but clearly she was searching her surroundings for something, or someone. And not finding them.

This intrigued me in a way her professional demeanour had not. Billy Birdsong was the most prominent person in the place; why should she give the most surreptitious of glances at her surroundings? She could easily rise up and gaze imperiously about, and no one would be taken aback.

Either she did not wish to offend me, or she did not wish to be seen looking about. And although I could indeed have represented a potential source of patronage, her lack of interest made that seem unlikely.

No; she was scouring the room for someone, a face she did not want to be seen searching out, and she was not finding that person. Furthermore, that absence made her increasingly anxious: While her eyes probed the corners of the balconies, her fingers

sought out the large, beautifully mounted pink pearl she wore on a silver chain, tugging at it and rolling it between finger and thumb.

When her hand rose to her mouth and her sharp little teeth began to work at the cuticles of the finger holding the pearl, I knew something was amiss.

‘Miss Birdsong,’ I began.

‘Call me Billy,’ she broke in. ‘Everybody does.’

‘Yes. Miss Birdsong, you appear to be agitated. May I be of any help?’

At that, her gaze snapped back to me, her spine went straight, and her gnawed finger dropped away. ‘Agitated? Don’t be ridiculous,’ she protested, and laughed. ‘Why should I be agitated while I’m sitting with admirers and drinking their bubbly? Silly man.’

One thing I am not is silly, and I believe she saw that, despite the setting and my proximity to the pickpocketing ne’er-do-well at the other side of the table. She laughed again, a well-trained noise, finished her champagne, and rose to make a wide and easy circuit of the balcony before retreating down the stairs.

But *la donna è mobile*, even when *la donna* is an artifice, and thus I was not in the least surprised when a note arrived, on scented paper and in an elaborately calligraphed script:

If you would like to buy a girl some dinner after her second show, come to the dressing rooms at twelve thirty.

—BB

Ledbetter was, I believe, rather taken aback.

II

I should not by choice have sat through the second arrangement of Miss Birdsong's music, as the increasing intoxication of the audience and its dancers did nothing to make their feverish gaiety any more appealing. But I held myself in patience, observing the behaviour of this self-avowedly barbaric race of moderns and making notes on the stylistic oddities of American slang, Jazz music, and the parallel between the men/women musicians before me and their reverse equivalents (actresses in breeches) of the eighteenth century London stage. All three being topics with the potential for engrossing monographs (the number of euphemisms for drunkenness alone would fill a small note-book), the evening was not wasted.

Eventually, however, the singer waved her way merrily off the stage for the second time that night (or, by that time, morning). The crowds began to thin as those who had gainful employ the next morning took themselves home for a few hours' rest, and Ledbetter and I made our way down the stairs and to the dressing rooms behind the stage.

One of my first questions regarding the singer was answered when I saw that the costume draped over the screen, clearly for her to don once she had shed her stage finery, was also a frock: Some performers acting the part of women make it a point to assert a strongly masculine identity off of the stage. Miss Birdsong was one of those whose act merged into everyday life.

'Sit down, dear boys, I'll just be a jiffy. Have a bonbon.' We pushed aside the chocolates and orchids and sat on the stools beside the gifts while the singer swabbed the heavy pancake make-up from her face, revealing delicate features that, had the eye-brows

preserved their natural thickness and the side-burns been permitted to grow, would have read as that of a boy. As it was, she looked like a somewhat boyish girl—as indeed had half the audience, to my eyes. When her face was clean, however, she did not leave it bare, but replaced the heavy theatrical mask with lighter but equally effective powder and paint, chatting gaily all the time, mostly about Paris and London.

When she had finished to her satisfaction, she rose, loosing the belt of her mauve silk dressing-gown as she walked towards the three-panelled screen. When she had stepped into hiding, the dressing-gown shot artfully up to drape itself over the top of the screen, the frock waiting there vanished a moment later, and soon she came back, adjusting the seams of her embroidered stockings coquettishly.

A most entertaining performance; I could already see that this excursion into the night-life of the city of St Francis was bound to add to my education.

She caught up my silk hat and tipped it onto my head, permitted young Ledbetter to help her into her brilliant white sealskin coat, picked up her tiny gold mesh handbag, and sashayed down the corridor to the stage door, calling farewells to various fellow musicians and staff as she went. Outside of the door, she repeated the performance with the men and a few women waiting there, signing autographs and exchanging banter. The nightclub diva seemed well liked by all.

She hooked her two hands through our arms and steered us up two streets to a small bistro that was doing a brisk business despite the hour. Clearly a regular customer, she was whisked to a table, where she shrugged out of her furs and accepted a cigarette and light from Ledbetter.

When we had ordered, however, her first words were to me. ‘Mr Sigerson, how can you possibly imagine that I am in need of your help?’

‘You were hoping to see someone back in the balcony, a person whose absence both surprised and troubled you. The person, I venture to say, who gave you that pearl you wear.’

Her fingers dropped away from the object as if it had gone suddenly hot. ‘Ridiculous!’ she said, her fists clenching in a most unladylike manner.

‘You scarcely listened to what Mr Ledbetter and I had to say, you worried that necklace to the breaking point, and you chewed your finger-nails into an early manicure. How else to explain that level of anxiety?’

She reared back her head and stared at me. ‘What are you, some kind of Sherlock Holmes?’

It was a question I had encountered before. ‘I am a gentleman who finds himself with leisure on his hands, willing to assist a lady in distress.’

The series of expressions on the face across the table from me was inimitable, and priceless, as the singer wrestled with the improbable possibility that this grey-haired English gent might be far more of an innocent than was either likely, or desirable. In the end, the body inside the frock sat forward, subtly changing form, as the voice dropped the better part of an octave to ask, ‘You do know I’m not actually a woman?’

‘Mr Birdsong, how you choose to present yourself matters not in the least to me. And if you prefer to keep to yourself whatever troubled you on the balcony, I shall happily share a meal with you and take my leave.’

The man studied my face for a long moment, then sat back and slowly resumed the woman's skin. Such a talent is no common thing, nor an easy one, and my curiosity about the person gave another stir.

Birdsong—patently not the singer's birth name, although I thought the William might be original—was by feature and accent from the American south-west, Arizona or New Mexico. The thick, straight black hair and exotically tinted skin revealed a percentage of blood older to these lands than that of the European settlers, although the light green eyes were imports—in northern India one found this mixture of brown skin and green eyes, but not in America, and not with those cheek-bones. Close quarters revealed that he was older than the twenty-eight or thirty years old that he looked, perhaps by as much as a decade. As an adolescent, he would have been remarkably beautiful; the complications accompanying great beauty had, no doubt, contributed to set him on the road to his choice of profession.

Still, the singer seemed happy enough. Apart, that is, from those anxious eyes in the balcony.

'I was looking for a friend,' she said abruptly. 'He said he'd be there and he wasn't. It's not like him.'

'And you are unable to make enquiries?' I suggested. She had, after all, failed to reach her dressing room's telephone.

Still she hesitated, before explaining, 'I think he may be a soldier.' The shrug of shoulders was eloquent.

'Ah. Yes, that would create difficulties. A person such as myself, however, might gain access where you would be rebuffed.'

‘Impossible. If he is, and if his commanding officer got wind of where he spends his free time, he’d be in the brig before you could snap your fingers.’

‘My dear Miss Birdsong, kindly give me a modicum of credit. In a long and mis-spent life, I have at least learnt how to ask questions that lead nowhere.’

‘I couldn’t take the chance.’

‘You and your friend were, I take it, seen together in public?’

‘Occasionally.’

‘That alone is more of a risk than any queries I might make.’

I have been told that my manner with the fairer sex, although far from intimate, can be remarkably comforting. So it proved with this artificial female. Our meal arrived, and as she ate, the singer spoke about other things, keeping up a flirtatious repartee with Ledbetter, but all the time her eyes kept coming back to my face, trying to decipher what lay there.

Finally, when the plates had been cleared and I had settled the cheque, she studied me, then seemed to come to a decision, laying her pretty hand on my sleeve.

‘If you do anything to give him away, you will destroy the life of a fine man.’

‘Miss Birdsong, you have my word: If his superiors discover his secret, it will not be through me.’

‘I don’t know why I’m trusting you with this. I shouldn’t. But I do. His name is Jack Raynor.’

‘I met him a little more than a month ago, my second night back at the Tiger. I’d only been home from Europe a few days, but the travel expenses for that trip were monstrous, so I came right along to work. He sent a bottle of bubbly to my dressing room

after the second show, along with an enormous armful of pink roses and a note saying how much he'd enjoyed the show. I invited him back, along with about twenty others, and thanked him politely, and by the time the crowd thinned out he was gone.

'But the next night he was there again, with the champagne and the roses—yellow this time. I had him back, told him to wait until the others had left, and then we went for dinner. He was a very sweet, well-spoken boy. No—a man. Quiet but very self-assured.'

'He did not wear a uniform to the club?'

'Heavens no!'

'Yet you thought soldier rather than sailor.' The San Francisco Bay was home to both Army and Navy personnel. 'Yes. I'm not sure why. Perhaps it was the hair-cut and the straight back. Those generally say soldier, don't they?'

There might be a score of more definitive indicators, I reflected, but a singer in a port city such as this would have encountered enough of both varieties of military personnel to render an immediate impulse relatively trustworthy.

'How old is he?'

'In his early thirties, perhaps. He'd spent time in the tropics, and had that kind of baked look to his skin that makes it hard to tell. And I think, too, that he'd been sick. Not now, but not so long ago—his skin was a little sallow, and he spoke once about fevers.'

'But you think he was still actively in the services, rather than an ex-soldier?' A man in his early thirties would have been in his middle twenties during the War, and could easily have left the service since then.

'I really don't know. Does it matter?'

'All detail matters.'

‘I suppose so,’ she said doubtfully.

‘What about his history? Is he from San Francisco?’

Did you ever meet any of his friends?’

‘He wasn’t from here, no. I got the impression that he hadn’t been in the city very long.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘He had that kind of new-kid interest in the place, kept coming up with items of local interest that tickled him. He especially liked our sizeable collection of dotty characters—he got a kick out of Emperor Norton, I remember. Have you heard about him? One of our local eccentrics of the last century, who got involved in some shady deal, lost everything including his mind, and then went around telling everyone he was the Emperor of California and making sweeping commands and pronouncements. Another eccentric he liked was Charley Pankhurst, a stage-coach driver down near Watsonville. “Mountain Charley” owned an inn, voted in elections, had a lot of friends in the area—only when Charley died, they discovered he was a woman. Yes, the San Francisco area has its fair share of characters.’

‘I see,’ I told her, taking care to keep my voice even, lest she think I might be so bold as to include her among the eccentrics. ‘What about Raynor’s friends?’

‘I never met any, and I don’t even know—well now, wait just a tick. He did one time let slip that he had a friend who talked about music and books. Oh dear, I’m so bad with names. Joe? Gary? I’m sorry, it was just in passing. And there was a night, we were leaving the club to walk back to my apartment, and he spotted someone he knew. That fellow was even more of a soldier than Jack—he might as well have been marching on the parade ground. You know, heels down, shoulders back?’

‘Did you speak with this man?’

‘Oh no, Jack steered me away from him right quick.’

‘Pity.’ It sounded more and more as if the man Raynor was indeed on active duty, if he was so chary of meeting a fellow soldier while in the company of Billy Birdsong.

‘To return to his presence at the Blue Tiger—You saw him there with some regularity?’

‘After that first time, he would show up three, four, sometimes five times a week. After the third night I invited him home, and ... well, he turned out to be a real sweetheart.’

‘Quite. And when was the last time you saw him?’

‘Five nights ago. When he left, Friday just before dawn, he said, “See you tomorrow”, meaning Saturday. But he didn’t show up, and I haven’t seen him since.’

‘Could he not simply have been taken away by unexpected responsibilities?’

‘Well, he had something to do Friday night, but once before when we’d had a date and he couldn’t make it, he sent me a note—a post-card, sent to my home, an innocent message but just something to let me know he wouldn’t be there. Something like, “Tell your Aunt Tillie she’ll have to see the sights without me, hope to get there tomorrow.” That’s when he told me about the fevers—he’d been too sick to come.’

‘But this time you’ve had no post-card.’

‘Not a word.’

‘Very well, I shall see what I can find out about your friend. Is there anything else he said that would indicate his employment, interests, habits?’

‘Well, he didn’t like to talk about his work at all. We talked mostly about music, and art, and Europe. Not about what he did during the days. He liked to chat about imaginary things, and what he’d like to do with his life. He’d pose a question, and we’d both talk about that. Things like, if you were a painter, who would you be? Or, where would you live if you didn’t have to work? And, what one thing would make you give up everything else?’

‘What did he say to that last?’

‘Love, of course. We both agreed that love was better than anything.’

I shook off this claptrap of a sidetrack. ‘If he was a soldier, you would say that he was an officer?’

‘I assumed he was. He was educated and well-spoken-and he had no shortage of spending money. I don’t know for certain. Stranger things have happened.’

‘They have indeed,’ I agreed. Just the previous year I had worked on a case involving a baronet who changed his name in order to enlist as a common soldier, with harsh consequences. ‘Can you give me a description of Mr Raynor?’

‘I have a photograph, if you’d like to see it.’

That gave me pause: If he had granted her a photograph, it indicated more than a casual fling.

‘Yes, I would like to see it.’

She opened the clasp of her bag and took out a small cabinet photograph some four inches tall and three wide, popping open the lock and holding the resulting silver clamshell out on her palm. I took it from her, and saw a fit young man in his early thirties, pale of hair and eye. He was clean shaven, easy to look upon, and faced the

camera with a tilt of the head that could have been confidence, or a trace of defiance.

Still, the lines gathering at the corners of his eyes suggested an easy good humour; at the same time, the inward set of his lips told of secrets unspoken.

‘His eyes are blue?’ I asked.

‘Blue as lapis lazuli,’ the singer answered. ‘He’s more tan than he appears in the photograph, although in certain lights he appears a little sallow-looking. And you can’t tell from the portrait, but he’s about as tall as you, though heavier around the shoulders. He has a scar about an inch and a half long just above his left jaw-bone, which you can’t see there. And I don’t know if it matters, but he has a little mole the shape of a kite on his back just above the belt-line.’

I handed her back the portrait; she tucked it away with care. ‘And can you give me a more specific idea of the days and times he came to the club?’

‘To be absolutely certain I’d have to look at my diary. But I do know that in the early days he would only be at my first set, then half-way through the second he’d stand up, give me a wave, and race away like Cinderella from the ball.’

‘You mean he left at midnight?’

‘Not as early as that, but pretty much like clockwork at, oh, say one o’clock.’

‘Those were the early days. And later on?’

‘After the first week or so, when I got to know him better, we’d meet in the afternoon before I had to come here, and have a little early supper. And later still, Jack began to stay for both sets, have some dinner afterwards, and take me home. Sometimes he even sleeps for a little while before waking up at around four-thirty to leave.’

‘But there have been some days he didn’t have to leave early,’ I said, and when she nodded in agreement, I asked which nights those might have been.

Her pretty brow wrinkled in thought, creating lines that confirmed my suspicion of her true age: a good seven or eight years older than her missing friend.

‘Mostly he’s free weekends, so sometimes he’s with me from Friday afternoon until Sunday night. It’s really lovely to have all day Sunday together. Jack likes to go to church, then maybe out to the beach or take the ferry across the Bay. Once we took the trolley out to see how that new museum is coming along, the one out near the ocean, and afterwards we went down to ride the Ferris wheel, then had dinner at the Cliff House. He’s very knowledgeable about art, isn’t as well versed in music, likes good food but hasn’t a clue about wine. He’s a confident dancer, he has a lively sense of the ridiculous, lovely manners, and an eye for clothes. He’s ... I’d have to call him a gentleman.’

‘I see. Well, when you have your diary to hand, I would appreciate a more exact reckoning of his times in the city.’

‘I’ll do it as soon as I get home.’

‘Tomorrow will suffice. Send it to me at the St Francis, if you would.’

‘Certainly.’

‘Now, when he leaves you in the mornings, have you happened to see which way he goes?’

‘Early on, he’d walk straight down towards Van Ness. You know, east of my place. Now, though, he goes just one block in that direction and then turns left.’

‘That would be going north?’ She agreed, and I reflected that habitually rising at four-thirty in the morning to watch one’s friend depart indicated a high degree of affection.

‘One last thing. Your necklace. How long have you had it?’

The singer’s hand went to the luminous gem nestled at her throat. ‘He gave it to me eight days ago. Our three-week anniversary, he said. He brought the pearl from the South Pacific himself, and had it made up.’

‘I should like to borrow it, if I may.’

The singer’s fingers tightened protectively. ‘Why?’

‘That necklace appears to be the only piece of evidence Raynor has left behind.’

‘How do I know this isn’t some elaborate con, you disappearing with my pearl as soon as my back is turned?’ She nobly refrained from glancing at the third party at our table.

‘It would be an elaborate con, indeed,’ I remarked, but had to agree that she deserved some concrete reassurance. I started to pull my note-case from my pocket, by way of surety, then stopped; there was something more appropriate than mere money. If, that is, I trusted the singer with it.

With some reluctance, I removed the emerald stickpin from my neck-tie and held it out. ‘This was given me by a lady I held in the highest esteem. I would have given my life for her, and this was a token of her thanks for a service rendered. As ransoms go, this may be the possession I hold most dear.’

The thing glittered on the palm of my hand. In a moment, the pearl on the chain spilt onto my palm beside it; then the pearl lay there alone, while the stick-pin was fastened onto the bodice of the singer's dress.

I took my leave of guide and chanteuse, and walked through streets that seemed to shimmer with a contralto voice, like the fading image of sudden brightness on the eye.

The next morning, I went in search of the silversmith who had made the pearl necklace. I began on Market Street, at the large emporium called Samuel's—not that I thought they had produced it, as a glance showed me that most of what Samuel's carried was manufactured elsewhere, but I hoped that they could recommend a direction for me to set my enquiries. As indeed they did. Mr Samuel himself, once I produced the name of a mutual acquaintance, proved highly knowledgeable about his competitors in the trade, and willingly suggested the sort of silversmiths who might have made the setting for the pearl. I found my man at the third such establishment, a bijou house of treasures situated just two streets from the hotel.

The sleek but friendly young woman who greeted me took one surprised look at the article in my hand, settled me in a chair, and retreated to the back of the store, returning with her employer.

'This is Mr Minovski,' she told me. 'He can answer any questions you have about your necklace.'

'Yes, yes,' said the gentleman in question, a wizened fellow with a full head of pure white hair, the characteristic stoop of the jeweller or watch-maker, and the identifying stains, scars, and calluses of the trade on his fingers. 'What has happened to

this little beauty? Surely my chain has not parted?' He poured it from his palm onto a square of black velvet, bending over with his loupe adjusted for examination.

'No, nothing of the sort,' I reassured him. 'I merely borrowed it from its owner, who has asked me to locate the young man who gave it to her.'

The jeweller fixed me with an attentive eye. 'The boy's gone missing?'

'Shall we say, he did not appear where he was expected to be. And it seemed to me that anyone presenting a lady with such a gift as this was not a mere casual acquaintance.'

'Indeed no. He brought me the pearl, asked me to design a setting worthy of it, and offered half again my price if he could have it in half the time.'

'When was this?'

'Annabeth, my dear, could you please look up the date for this kind gentleman? Lovely piece, this, I was quite happy with it. So was he, for that matter. Ah yes, here, it was two weeks ago, on the Thursday. I took a liking to the lad, and set aside one or two other commissions in order to give it to him in the time he asked. He picked it up on the Monday.'

And gave it to Billy that night. 'Did he leave a manner of getting into touch with him?'

'I wouldn't know. Do you have anything there in the order book, Annabeth?'

'No, Mr Minovski, he didn't leave an address or telephone number. You remember, he said he was staying with friends and it would spoil the surprise if they found out? That was why he paid for it entirely when he ordered the work.'

‘Did he say anything else, about the pearl perhaps, or what he was doing in San Francisco?’

I had asked the question in general; Minovski answered. ‘Oh yes. I specifically asked about the pearl, since it’s such a beauty, and he said it came from Manila, or in any case, that’s where he bought it. He bought several, thinking to have them made into necklaces for his sisters, but he particularly liked the colour and lustre of this one. I asked him, purely from professional interest, how much he had paid for it, and although it had seemed to him quite a price, I assured him that he could make his cost back several times over if he cared to sell it here and now, it or some of the others he’d bought.

‘He laughed and said that the others were nothing near as special as this one, but that he’d keep it in mind if he found himself in need of cash. Mostly he was interested in a setting that would flatter the pearl, and decided on an old-fashioned, almost Baroque sort of work, heavy and ornate by comparison with modern tastes. You have to admit, it’s a splendid piece.’

‘It is indeed.’ More than that, it was a splendid mystery, who this gentleman was that had paid a year’s salary for a soldier for a singer’s token. I began to take my leave of the jeweller, when his next words froze my hand with the hat half-way to my head.

‘The young man seemed to think so, as well, since he went on to make enquiries concerning a pair of rings.’

‘A pair?’ I said sharply. ‘Wedding rings?’

‘He did not use the phrase, but when a man looks at designs for two matching bands, one makes assumptions.’

I lowered the hat and sat for a time in thought. It was, I supposed, on the edge of possible that Raynor would be contemplating a pair of friendship rings to be shared with the singer. However, the stronger, and considerably darker, possibility was that the wedding bands were precisely that. After all, a man in Raynor's situation—a 'gentleman' in his early thirties, with means, position, and apparently from a good family—might well be considering marriage, a conventional relationship with an unexceptional and appropriate mate. Indeed, the fling with Billy Birdsong might be just that, a final dance of Bohemian youth in San Francisco before the sombre establishment of a marriage elsewhere: That he had failed to tell her anything of his life pointed in that direction. The pearl necklace could well have been intended as a thank-you, and a wordless farewell, four days before he left the city.

I thanked the jeweller, tipped my hat to his assistant, and made my thoughtful way back to the hotel. Once there, a borrowed ferry schedule, the telephone, and a handful of shag tobacco provided me with a modicum of light in the darkness and a plan of action for the afternoon.

The next problem facing me was that of impersonating an officer.

III

I had done it in the past, of course, any number of times. However, my present age made appearing as anything short of a high-ranking officer unlikely, and the irritatingly instantaneous communication offered by the telephone made exposing my ruse all too easy.

Instead, I decided that the appearance of a dignified and persistent legal person, formerly of the officer class, might be equally effective. I considered a car and driver,

decided that the measure of verisimilitude they might offer was not worth the inconvenience of being tied to them, and turned to my storage trunks to assemble a legal personage: intimidatingly formal if slightly out-of-date suit, golden pince-nez, and much used leather despatch case. This last necessitated a trawl through the pawn shops in the vicinity of the Flood Building, in the third of which I uncovered the one-time possessions of a failed stock-broker. Adding a tightly furled black umbrella borrowed from the doorman, I inserted myself with dignity through the doors of a taxi and directed the driver to the Ferry Building.

San Francisco, that key portal to the western United States, is guarded by no less than nine forts: North of the Golden Gate, the gap through which the sea ebbs and flows, lie Cronkhite, Barry, and Baker; McDowell stands on an island in the Bay; Mason, Scott, and Miley form the Presidio along the city's northern shore; with Funston down the coast a distance with the longer-range guns. This is in addition to Alcatraz Island, currently a federal prison, and the distant guns at Milagra Ridge even further down the peninsula.

An embarrassment of riches when it came to hunting for one lone soldier who may or may not be a junior officer.

However, this Cinderella soldier had tended to scurry off before his coach turned into a pumpkin—or rather, before he was stranded on the wrong side of his day's duties. The Army launch would serve for ordinary business, but for Raynor's no doubt clandestine activities, the anonymity of the ferry might have better suited him. A printed schedule obtained from the hotel clerk informed me that my last opportunity for a ferry to Sausalito, the town nearest those forts north of the city, departed at 1:30 in the morning, precisely correct for a man having to hurry away from his musical entertainments just

before the strike of one. I thought a destination of Fort McDowell unlikely since, being an island, McDowell would have involved Raynor in further transportation beyond Sausalito; this left the contiguous forts of Baker, Barry, and Cronkhite.

Fort Baker, occupying the sheltered eastern stretch of the south-facing peninsula called Marin, was closest to the ferry's landing. And according to my most reliable local informant, a boot-black who plied his trade around the corner from the hotel, Baker was the most active of the three northern forts. This was only sensible, that those fortifications facing the sea should come into their own in times of war, but be allowed to rest during the peace.

It was nearing three o'clock when a taxi hired from the Sausalito dock delivered me to the gates of Fort Baker. I informed the guard that I needed to speak with the commander, who proved to be a Major Morris. It was not, of course, as easy as all that, but persistence, coupled with my accent, clothing, and grey head, eventually had me in the presence of a large man with jutting iron-grey eyebrows and a body showing the strain of desk work.

'I don't have much time,' the major began by telling me. 'I have an inspection at four, you should have made an appointment.' He transferred some papers from one side of his desk to the other, to illustrate how extremely busy he was.

'Had I telephoned for an appointment, you would have given it me next week. And had you seen me when first I entered your offices, we might have been finished by now. I am looking for a man under your command by the name of Jack Raynor.'

'You and half the post,' he snapped.

The phrase was sufficiently colloquial that I thought it advisable to clarify his meaning. ‘Am I to understand that Mr Raynor is absent without leave?’

‘You are indeed. Lieutenant Raynor is officially absent without leave, taken off with some floozy no doubt. I tell you, mister, this is a hell of a place to command. Much easier out in the middle of nowhere, the boys have nothing to tempt them away.’

This time, I perceived a trace of actual concern beneath the bluster, and thought it time to ingratiate myself into the major’s affections. With a wry smile on my face, I told him, ‘I can understand that. My last command was surrounded by nothing but sand and rats, and any discipline problems we had were due to boredom rather than opportunity.’

He perked right up at that, as I had anticipated. ‘What command was that?’

The regiment to which I claimed allegiance had in fact served in South Africa, although so far as I know, it had never possessed a young officer by the name of Sigerson. Still, anecdotes about inadequate arms, wretched food, and wily enemy action bring a bond to such men, and Morris was feeling considerably more beneficent towards the one-time English captain before him when I worked our conversation back to his missing lieutenant.

I arranged a look of sympathy on my face and leant forward to reinforce it. ‘Has Lieutenant Raynor pulled a disappearing act before this?’ Now that I had Jack Raynor’s proper rank, I took care to pronounce it in the American style, so as not to distract my informant.

‘Raynor? He hasn’t been with us all that long, but I’ve never had cause to reprimand him. Lately he’s looked a little the worse for wear some mornings, but he’s never so much as reported late, far less failed to appear entirely.’

‘Why do you suppose he has seemed, er, “the worse for wear”?’

‘Why do you think?’ he answered with a snort. ‘Good looking young officer, a little money behind him, he’s a catch. I figured he’d get tired of the hours pretty soon and either drop her or marry her.’

I did not inform the major that the lady in question and the lady to marry might comprise two separate problems.

‘You say he hasn’t long been under your command?’

The major fixed me with a curious look. ‘I thought you were the family lawyer?’

‘I represent the family lawyer, who did not feel the matter required his personal presence. I was charged simply with the delivery of certain papers, which did not at the time appear to necessitate a knowledge of Raynor’s history.’

‘Not enough to bring the big man himself from Minneapolis, eh? Or was it St Paul?’

‘The firm has offices in both cities,’ I replied equably.

‘Right. Well, Raynor’s only been here going on three months. He was in Manila, but came down with the malaria and the medics said if he didn’t get himself into a cooler climate for a while, he’d be a goner. So they transferred him to the Presidio, and since he wasn’t good for much, they sent him to me. Not that I needed another young officer, especially one who’s not up to much, but Barry—you know Fort Barry, just to the west along the headlands? Barry’s on caretaker status, with just a detail to keep an eye on things—pretty boring station, so we keep it turned over fairly regularly. There’s really just a handful of men, and sometimes there’s just a non-com in charge, although at the moment I’ve got a young lieutenant over there. When Raynor came, I sent him over

there, mostly to get him out from under my feet—last thing I needed was an invalid lieutenant to nurse. And I figured Raynor could keep the other young man company. Once Raynor was back on his feet, I thought I'd bring him back over here and let him do some work. Now that he's getting his health back, Raynor's shown signs of being a good officer. The men like him, he fits in well with the other officers, no problems. Until this.'

'When was he last seen?'

'Friday. Five days ago—another two days and he's going on the books as a desertion, and he's in big trouble. He led a detail to service Battery Wallace, supervised the shooting range in the afternoon, came back here to Baker to lead a night-time manoeuvre, and the next day he was missing.'

'Did he take any possessions with him?'

'His clothes are still in his rooms, but who knows what else he had?'

'There might be one thing to indicate whether he planned to be away for good,' I suggested. 'I happened to be shown a letter he wrote some time ago, from Manila, which referred to a number of pearls that he'd bought to have made into jewellery for various family members.'

If we looked in his rooms and found them, that would be fairly definitive indication of an accidental absence.'

The major thought this over for a minute, and nodded. He opened his mouth to summon his adjutant outside the door, then changed his mind. Instead, he opened a drawer in the desk and came out with a formidable ring of keys, stood and set his cap on his head, and told me, 'I'll do this myself. I'll be back in a few minutes.'

I, however, was standing as well. 'I can come with you, see if anything catches my eye. I will give you my promise that I will touch nothing, if you like. The family will want to know,' I added. I intended to see the inside of the young officer's rooms, even if it meant breaking into an Army base at midnight.

Such a venture proved unnecessary, for the major only hesitated a moment before deciding that a fellow officer could be trusted that far, and shouted for his car.

The major, it seemed, preferred to motor under his own power rather than use the driver that rank might have expected. No sooner were we away from the parade ground than I began to wish him more concerned with appearance than the art of motoring. Major Morris was a terror behind the wheel, one of those men who can scarcely bear to glance at the road ahead, and instead peers to either side, into his passenger's face, and even around to the back window. I clung to the front and attempted to empty my mind of all thought.

The road to the neighbouring fort was steep, but brief, and cut through the intervening hills in a distressingly long and narrow tunnel which was in a condition my younger associates might term 'dodgy'. It couldn't have been more than eight or ten years old, but the massive timbers making up its damp walls and ceiling looked as soft as old bed sheets, and when the major had to shift into a lower gear with the gradient, I expected the sound to shake the walls down onto our heads. I came closer to prayer than I have at any time since I gave up the habit as a schoolboy.

After a small eternity, blessed daylight opened up around us, and I peeled my fingers out from the dents on the dash-board and reminded myself to breathe.

The fort on the other side of the tunnel was a collection of buildings overlooking a long, narrow lagoon. It was an attractive setting, but appeared nearly deserted, as I saw only two men in uniform between the tunnel's mouth and the apparent centre of the fort. We passed the chapel and pulled to a stop—adding a large dent to the smaller ones in the dash-board, as the major's use of the brake was as vigorous as might be expected. I lowered myself to solid ground and followed him up the steps into the officer's housing.

'This is a duplex,' he informed me. 'Raynor's got the west half, Lieutenant Halston the other. The house-boy lives in the back.'

Raynor's quarters had the methodical tidiness of an experienced soldier, with everything in its place and, apart from the furniture, capable of being packed up in an hour. The books on his shelves were the usual—Thackeray, Defoe, Hugo, two poetry collections—although the recordings stacked neatly by the Victrola were more classical than the Jazz I might have expected. Some of them I owned myself.

His most personal effects were a small, intricately worked Chinese carpet on the floor between his armchair and the fireplace, its thick pile depicting a lively and colourful twisting dragon, and three similarly intricate carvings on the table beside his armchair, each a different form of dragon. The smallest was of age-darkened ivory, no bigger than a chestnut, the creature turned back on itself and with features picked out by a knife blade like the point of a needle. The next was of a lustrous jade the colour of the ocean across the next ridge, grey tinting the green and giving it a depth and mystery. This dragon was simpler, but muscular, if that word can be used to describe a thing that would fit into a fist.

The third dragon was of some tropical wood, a glossy dark substance almost without texture. The seven-inch high creature was sitting on its haunches like a begging lap-dog, its tail curled around its rear legs and both small fore-legs in the air. It was the sort of thing an amateur critic would instantly dismiss as rough and whimsical, but in fact, the eye kept returning to it, for behind the whimsy the dragon gave off an air of watchful deliberation, and the roughness of the carving was of a kind with the rough surface of a master Japanese potter. A curious object, all the more so to find it in the establishment of a junior Army officer.

I pulled myself away from Raynor's collection of dragons and turned to the man's desk, but before I had done more than open a drawer, Major Morris came upon the small velvet bag of pearls. It was in the first place he looked, the bottom of his lieutenant's sea bag. 'They always hide things in their travelling kit,' he mused, the black bag pulled open on his palm, but his mind was clearly taken up with the implications of the pearls rather than the habits of young soldiers. 'If he left them here . . .'

'Then he did not intend to be gone,' I finished his sentence for him, equally preoccupied with the scrap of paper in my own hand. (I had not actually promised to touch nothing, merely said that I would make such a promise if he had asked. He had not.) 'Do you know a man whose name begins with DuM? The "M" is a capital letter, so perhaps DuMons, DuMont, something of the sort?'

'No,' he said, pulling the strings shut on the bag. Then he added, 'There's DuMaurier, but that's not a man, it's a battery. Was a battery, I should say.'

'It is no longer?' I asked, but he was already set on his historical lecture.

‘The emplacements are all named for Army men. DuMaurier was a captain who led a daring raid against Fort Sumter in the Civil War. DuMaurier is one of the older emplacements, although the gun itself was pulled out in 1917 and sent to France. Probably melted down by now and being used to tin peaches. Anyway, turns out there’s no point in having a gun you can see from the air, not any more. Airplanes are changing everything.’

‘Quite.’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Because he’s made a note here, “DuM 2:00”.’

The major dropped his find back in the duffel bag and came to look at the paper in my hand. He scowled at it, then at me, for the paper I held had nothing written on it, but then, I’d had more practice than most in the art of reading pencil indentations pressed from one sheet to another. I had needed only the light through the window, but for the major, I took a pencil from the desk drawer and gently rubbed at the sheet until the letters appeared.

He raised one of those bushy eye-brows, and without another word walked to Raynor’s door. I hesitated, my fingers yearning after the envelopes that lay so tantalising in the drawer behind the pencils, but Morris was standing there waiting. I closed the drawer reluctantly and wondered again about the difficulties of a night-time raid on Army grounds. I was glad to see him turn the key in the door behind us.

As he marched down the steps of Raynor’s ‘duplex’ the major spotted a callow uniform approaching, and raised his voice in that effortless parade-ground bellow of the career soldier.

‘Corporal, double-time it over to the stables and have a horse saddled by the time I get there.’

‘I say, Major,’ I began.

‘And another horse for this gentleman here. You do ride?’ he demanded of me.

Not by preference in a city suit and shoes, but if the alternative was to be left behind, then ride in a city suit and shoes I would.

Before long I could see why the major had called for four-legged transport over that with four wheels. The road was well enough maintained, but when we turned off it for the cliffs that first climb, then precipitously drop down to the sea, we should have had to proceed on foot. As it was, the way the horses picked their cautious path downhill, it might well have been more comfortable to have walked. Certainly it would have been faster. However, a major requires the dignity of transport, even if it be just for a mile, so transport we had. Morris led the way, his voice reaching me in uneven phrases, snatched away by the perpetual wind from the sea. ‘. . . not maintained... new long-range guns ... mine-fields . . . bird-watchers . . .’

Eventually, we reached the gun emplacement, a low, grey, weed-choked concrete structure rooted in the cliffs like the nest of some enormous sea-faring bird. Unlike the other batteries we had passed, this one was, as the major had been trying to tell me, not well maintained. One of the cliffs had slumped across the narrow roadway, and the horses were not happy about picking their way across. We reached the gun and dismounted, tying our reins onto an iron ring clearly set there for the purpose, and walked past the circular clearing where once the gun had thundered. To the south had been built a set of rooms for the storage of powder and such, although as the gun was inactive, and looked

to remain that way, the wide doorway was not supplied with so much as a padlock. The major wrestled with the rust-clotted handle, then laid his shoulder against the door. The hinges gave way with a groan that appeared to embarrass him, as evidence of neglect.

Neither of us said anything, however, and in a moment the thought of rusted metal had fled from our minds. For inside the first room, slumped in a heap against the northernmost wall, we found the body of Lieutenant Jack Raynor.

The moment I saw the figure, I was aware of a considerable feeling of satisfaction. Not, I hasten to say, that the man was dead, but rather that Major Morris and I had come here alone. It was rare to be given the opportunity to examine a body before the police arrived with their clumsy ways. I held out no hope that the Army methods would prove any more gentle.

‘You must go back and summon assistance,’ I told him, wincing at the way his great boots scuffed the floor around Raynor’s head.

‘I can’t leave you alone here,’ he declared.

‘But the poor fellow, he’ll be eaten by the foxes,’ I protested, with more sentiment than accuracy. ‘I can’t very well go for help, your men wouldn’t obey my orders-indeed, they’d probably clap me in the brig for trespassing. I’ll just remain here and chase away the vermin. You won’t be long.’

The man gave a brief and disapproving look at the remains of his lieutenant, mounted up, and rode off. I took up a position just outside the entrance of the emplacement and lit a cigarette, sketching a brisk salute as Morris turned to look back at the top of the rise. And the moment his hat had vanished behind the hill, I tossed the half-smoked cigarette over my shoulder and stepped inside.

The room had clearly gone unused for some months, if not years, which vastly simplified my examination of the floor. From the door, I shone my pocket-torch at an oblique angle, comparing what I saw there with the soles of the shoes worn by the dead man. I could see no sign that Raynor had walked over the accumulated dirt; instead, he had been bodily carried inside by a size nine boot with a heavily worn right toe, then dropped. I then continued inside to look at the body itself.

Raynor lay on his left side, and had done so for some days, long enough for rigor to come and go, long enough to attract the interest of flies and a few small teeth. He had been described as handsome, but no one would say that now. He possessed the requisite facial structures of nose and lips; his teeth had been good and his hair light; that was about all that could be said of his appearance.

Fortunately, he had come to this place fully dressed, and the thick wool of his uniform had preserved the rest of his skin against encroachment. I searched the pockets, finding a silver cigar-case in one pocket, containing two slim, brown cigarillos, and a matching silver wind-proof lighter. In another pocket lay his note-case. This held eighteen dollars in assorted denominations, a letter from his mother, and an assortment of scraps and receipts that seemed to have no immediate bearing on the case, although I made note of them, for future reference, before returning them to their respective places. The case also contained two items of interest to a limited number of people; those I transferred into my own pocket, for the sake of the young man's reputation.

I then loosed his clothes, primarily to confirm his identity, and found just above one hip the kite-shaped birth-mark described by Billy Birdsong. I looked over the rest of the man's torso, then scrupulously restored the clothing to its previous arrangement.

I examined the head wounds closely, then tipped Raynor onto his back. The dark stains along the left side of his body showed that he had been placed here while his blood was still liquid enough to pool with gravity. He had not, however, been killed here. I could see no blood on the walls, none but the stains directly under his head—indeed, when I turned on my heels to look back at the floor, there were not even any droplets between the body and the entrance. I became aware that I was softly humming one of the Bach cantatas, a sign that the case had just become interesting.

The wounds to Raynor's head had been done with a smooth, rounded piece of wood as big around as a girl's wrist, which had left a few slim splinters embedded in the wreckage. The first injury described a line a fraction of an inch above the right ear, descending slightly towards the chin. The second injury, the fatal one, had come straight down into Raynor's face, driving everything from brow to jaw back into the brain. A thorough autopsy could prove the sequence, based on the intersecting fracture lines of the skull, but I thought it unlikely that a trained soldier would placidly sit and watch a blow coming at his face. Nor would his assailant have reason then to hit the side of a dead man's head.

No: Raynor was sitting and calmly smoking an evening cigar—a glance into his mouth revealed the chunk of tobacco leaves bitten involuntarily by his front teeth—when someone behind and above had swung a vicious blow at his head. The lieutenant had collapsed to the ground. His assailant had then kicked him onto his back, leaving a sharp semicircle of discolouration on Raynor's belly, before standing over his victim and delivering the coup de grâce, straight down onto the once-handsome face.

Even with the rudimentary tools of pocket-torch and magnifying glass, I could see among the smashed flesh and bone a splinter of wood and some threads of white cotton. The latter, I decided, explained the lack of dripped blood: The murderer had wrapped Raynor's head in a bathtowel as he transported his victim, so as not to leave a trail, or incriminating stains on his own person; the threads I saw now had remained behind on the drying blood when the cloth was ripped free.

I sat back on my heels and considered the figure before me.

The note in Raynor's room indicated a meeting here at two in the morning. It was remotely possible, taking into account the perpetual breezes playing across this exposed spot, that he had failed to notice a man with a bat sneaking up behind him. Still, I thought it more likely that Raynor had known his assailant, and trusted him enough to allow him to pass behind his back.

Raynor's scribbled note, the location of their meeting, clandestine or not, and his acquaintance with the man determined his identity: a fellow soldier.

It shouldn't be difficult to identify him, I knew, not with the evidence at hand and the limited pool of individuals. The main problem would be preserving the evidence, that he might be convicted.

I was conducting a close but fruitless search of the emplacement's forecourt when the sound of voices reached my ears. I met the Army half-way, Morris with four privates, one corporal, and a sergeant.

'They're sending a man over from the Presidio,' Morris said without preamble, and sounding none too pleased at the interloper. 'We're to take the body back to Baker.'

‘Major, a word?’ I asked. He glanced at his men, and told the sergeant to allow them a smoke while we stepped aside for a little chat.

‘Sir,’ I began, ‘I have had occasion once or twice to work with the police, and have some little experience with their methods of gathering information on criminal cases. I would suggest, therefore, that before you have your men take up Lieutenant Raynor’s body, you make an effort to preserve those things that might lead to his murderer. It is, of course, possible that the man from the Presidio would do the same, but after all, Raynor wasn’t his man.’

‘I can hardly leave the poor fellow lying here until morning, and it’ll be dark by the time the investigator gets across.’

I stifled the impulse to point out that another evening would make no difference to Raynor, and thought instead about the resentful edge to his voice. Morris cared nothing for ordering his soldiers to stand about—that, after all, is what soldiers do best. No, what the major resented was for his men to be forced to wait on an outside authority. And I was very willing to play on his territoriality to maintain personal control of the investigation, before it was taken forcibly from my hands.

‘Would you like me to begin one or two actions a professional investigator might take?’ I offered. ‘For example, there’s a foot-print that must have been left by the man who put Raynor here. It needs only some care not to be trod upon, and later a small pot of plaster-of-Paris. And if I might borrow one or two of your men, we could search for the place where Lieutenant Raynor was killed.’ Again, I took care to pronounce the man’s rank in the American fashion, lest the introduction of a *leftenant* remind Morris that I, too, was an outsider.

The major readily agreed to this—although less, I believe, in any hope that I might solve his case before the outsider could, than to get me out of his hair while he took control of Raynor's corpse. To him, the discipline of restoring a missing soldier to his post, even if he be an inanimate soldier, was foremost.

At his command, the men resumed with their lamps and the canvas stretcher they had brought. I stood over the foot-print while they worked, to save it from their heavy boots, and when Morris mounted up, I reminded him that a small pot of plaster would be very helpful. He nodded and turned his ceremonial little procession in the direction of Fort Baker, leaving me with the corporal, a diminutive tow-head by the name of Larsen. My miniature platoon and I removed our hats in recognition of the sombre occasion, then got to work.

'We have but a few hours of daylight left,' I told Larsen. 'We need to find where Lieutenant Raynor was killed.'

'Wasn't he killed here?' he asked.

'A blow like that would cause the blood to splash about, and there was no sign of that inside.'

'So we're looking for a lot of blood?' he enquired, casting a dubious glance at the expanse of hillside.

'Yes, although it rained briefly on Sunday night, so there may not be much visible. Let us instead search the ground for one of two things: a stick or bat, broken in pieces, or a half-smoked cigarillo. Brown, about the size of your little finger.'

Three invisible items on some acres of hillside: dried blood, wooden stick, and brown cigar. With the sun already working its way down in the sky.

We began our search in the vicinity of the emplacement, the most logical place to sit while waiting for a meeting to begin. We found nothing, and I directed my troop to begin a sweep in circles out from the gun.

For myself, however, I find a systematic approach both unsympathetic and ineffective. Much better to step aside and allow the human sense known as intuition to take command. I settled on a grass-covered rock and took out my pipe.

It is two o'clock in the morning, at 37 1/2 degrees north, with a moon that is five nights past full riding in what until Sunday evening would be a clear night sky: enough light that, were I a young man well familiar with the terrain, I would not require a lamp to make out my path. I am a young artillery officer, fully dressed, anticipating a difficult interview—were the conversation to be simple, it could have been held in closer proximity to the base. This was most probably the wee hours of Saturday morning, since Raynor left Birdsong early, expecting to see the singer on Saturday night—'See you tomorrow,' he'd said at dawn Friday. It is two o'clock in the morning, I am a young man with concerns on my mind, a young man who has also been looking at wedding rings, and I sit to smoke one of the slim cigars from my case. The sky is clear—and the moon...

I rose and looked around the daylight hillside, then strode downhill nearly to the cliff face. The waves below crashed and churned, the great Pacific stretched out endlessly, and the number of available protruding boulders grew.

But I would want to watch for the approach of the person I was meeting. I would sit where I could keep the emplacement in view.

I followed the ridge south, scarcely conscious of the precipitous drop to my right, and suddenly there it was, a three-inch-long scrap of brown marginally darker than the

red-brown colour of the soil. I bent down and teased it out of the grasses. One end showed the uneven remains of a cigar allowed to burn itself out, but the other, despite the intervening rain, still appeared sharply broken off: cut, by Raynor's teeth when the crashing blow came to the side of his head.

I tucked the cigarillo remnant into an envelope and in my pocket, pulled out my glass, and dropped to my knees for a close examination of the vicinity.

Ten minutes later I spoke.

'That is close enough. You risk treading on the marks.'

'I saw that you'd found something,' my corporal said, somewhat unnecessarily. 'I wondered if you wanted my help over here instead.'

'You found nothing?'

'A wad of chewing gum, a dead sea-gull, a sheet of week-old newspaper caught on some branches. No blood.'

'The blood and the cigar are here. And two tiny slivers of wood, although the remains of the bat appear to have been carried off. Or perhaps thrown. But the pattern of the blood, although diminished by the rain, presents a clear picture. I don't know if you have noticed, but when a viscous liquid such as blood falls, its manner of striking the ground testifies to the direction of its fall.' The young soldier murmured some response, but I paid him no heed. I do find it useful to have a pair of ears in the vicinity—when no audience is to hand, I will even talk to myself to aid the process of thought. The best assistant is the one who contributes nothing, acting as pure sounding-board to reflect my thoughts. My audience here was, at least, experienced in volunteering nothing.

‘Blood dripping straight down produces a circular shape, ragged at the edges but essentially round,’ I continued. ‘Blood thrown up from a wound that then hits a vertical surface tends to slump, leaving a tear-drop shape that can be traced back to its source. Similarly, when shed from a moving man, it leaves its tail in the direction from which the man is moving. I am writing a monograph on the subject, for the use of crime investigators. I call it “The Science of Blood Splash Analysis.” Now, young man, what do you make of this? You may come this way, there’s nothing to be damaged along the path.’

I was not actually interested in what he made of the mark on the ground, although what he had to say would tell me what kind of man I had been given to assist me. The corporal picked his way across the ground, following the faint path left by generations of deer, and looked at the soil where I pointed.

‘That from a boot?’ he offered.

I looked up in surprise. Not only had he seen the gentle depression cut into the turf, he had recognised it.

‘Very good,’ I told him. ‘Anything else?’

‘The lieutenant was sitting on that rock, wasn’t he?’ For this, I wanted to look my assistant in the eye or, in any event, from a standing position. I braced myself to rise, and the polite lad took my elbow to help me.

An unremarkable face, with pale brown eyes and cornsilk hair, crooked teeth, the upper- body musculature that comes with physical labour from childhood, and the exaggerated muscles of hand and wrist that indicate far too many hours bent over a cow’s udders: dairy farmer’s younger son, escaped into the Army, I diagnosed. His was a face

of boyish innocence, which on closer examination hinted of a vein of well-concealed humour. That combination can only mean intelligence.

‘How do you know that’s where he was sitting?’ I asked Larsen.

‘The marks on the stone. The moss is all mussed along the top, and there’s a scratch where a metal grommet scraped it.’

‘Lichen, not moss,’ I corrected absently. He grinned suddenly, so that he looked about eleven years old.

‘Me and my pappy did a lot of hunting. They sometimes use me as a tracker here, when one of the horses wanders off or something.’

I sent a vote of thanks in the direction of Major Morris, and said, ‘A veritable Natty Bumppo. What see you here, young man?’

‘I’m not that good, and there’s probably not all that much to see, what with the ground being a little on the dry side beforehand and then the rain afterwards. One man was sitting here smoking, another man came up behind him and knocked him off the rock. Looks like one or both of ’em sort of rolled around the ground a little, and although I don’t know about blood splash patterns and all, you can sure see the blood right there.’

‘Where Lieutenant Raynor lay dying.’

‘He was a good man.’ The lad pulled off his cap in an unconscious tribute, staring at the hand-sized smear of red-brown.

‘You knew him.’

‘He’d only been here for a little while, but it’s not a very large base, you get to know most of the officers. And he was one of the good ones.’

‘Any ideas about who would have wanted to do this?’

‘Nope. Most of the fellows felt the same way about him I did.’

‘I see.’

‘What was he doing out here, do you know?’

I turned to look over the great shining expanse of the Pacific, set alight by the low-lying sun. ‘He was sitting and looking at the moon, smoking one of his small cigars, and waiting to meet a man he regarded as a friend. And I suspect that the man who did this had his own ambiguous feelings about Raynor. He killed him, but he couldn’t quite bear to turn his back and abandon Raynor’s dead body out here on the hillside, knowing what the gulls would do to it. Nor could he bring himself to push Raynor off the cliff to the sea.’

‘Wouldn’t be all that easy, to push him off.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Oh, it looks simple, just roll something over and splash, but in fact the slope’s just a little too gentle for that. ’Bout six months ago, we had a horse break its leg along here, had to shoot it, and the major ordered us to shove it off the cliff. Took ten of us the better part of the day to get the cursed thing anywhere near the water. ’Course, a man’d be simpler, but not real easy. Not unless you could pick him up and throw him.’

I studied him for a while, so intently that the young man began to look nervous, as young men do. ‘Let us take a closer look at that cliff,’ I said. At that, his nervousness increased.

‘Uh, mister, I really wouldn’t if I was you. I mean, no offence meant, but you’re not a real young man.’

‘I shall endeavour to remain on the land side of the water-line, Corporal.’

My youthful helpmeet sheltered my every step as we approached the steeper portion of the cliff, although I could see what he meant, that at this part of the cliffs, there was no convenient spot at which one could absolutely guarantee that a rolled object would continue rolling without fetching up on rock or shrub.

I could also see something else. At the very point at which the slope became impossible, when I had resorted to hunkering onto my heels with one hand on the ground and Corporal Larsen’s firm grip on my coat-tails for support—the point, in short, at which farther progress became impossible—I spotted a lump of white half-way to the breaking waves, and even more precipitously, a light shape that could be the raw colour of broken wood.

I looked around into the worried brown eyes of my assistant. ‘Which position on a belaying rope do you prefer?’ I asked. ‘The anchoring end, or the dangling?’

IV

The lad would not hear of my dangling out over the ocean. In fact, he came perilously near to arguing with me entirely, considering that he was a soldier under orders, and only agreed to assist me when I pointed out that our other, equine companion might also serve to anchor the rope.

Further delay came when he would have set out for the fort, where the nearest rope lay, on foot. It appeared that the nag which had transported me here was an officer’s horse, thus rendered off-limits to a mere corporal.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ I told Larsen. ‘Even if you travel at a jog-trot we’ll be working that cliff in the dark. Take the horse and go. If anyone questions you, you’re on a personal mission from Major Morris. But, lad? Don’t give anyone details.’

In the end, the threat of impending darkness tipped him into obedience. With none of the caution demonstrated by the major and me, Larsen flung himself into the saddle and dug in his heels, not even pausing to adjust the stirrups to his shorter legs. Rider and mount flashed over the top of the hill, and he must have kept up the breakneck racing attitude because he rode the two-mile journey to the barn and back again in far less time than I would have credited to that particular creature. He dropped off the winded animal, led it along the slope to where I stood and, as soon as I had the reins in my hand, began dragging his equipment from the saddle.

Along with the sack, the rope, and three apples, he had brought a lantern, which indicated how long he thought this was going to take us.

I showed him how to fashion a climbing harness out of the rope, then tied the other end of it to the saddle, looping the middle around the saddle-horn. The corporal eyed the process dubiously, but seemed reassured by my knots as much as the attitude of disinterested competence I created for his benefit. He set off down the hill uncertainly, testing the play of rope as he went, but by the time he reached the sharper decline, he was moving easily, trusting my control of the situation.

Before long, he turned around to traverse the slope backwards, braced fully against the rope that was scouring my palms. The horse was tired enough that the peculiarity did not cause it to startle, which was as well. The sun rested a thumb’s breadth from the horizon, and Corporal Larsen was invisible to me, nothing but a tension on the

hemp running through my hands. I felt him move down, responding to the single tug by holding the rope firm, then at the double tug played out more of the line. There was a single loop remaining at my feet, and I was considering the challenge of persuading the horse to move down the hillside a few yards when another single tug came, and I held fast. Finally there came a series of sharp tugs, and I began to haul the line steadily in against the pommel. In a few minutes the bulk of the rope lay across my boots, then a long shadow wavered across the hillside as the last rays of the sun gave outline to my assistant's form.

His boyish face with flushed with adventure and triumph as he wrestled himself free from the no-doubt painfully constricting harness, then walked over to present me with his treasure. However, he took one glance at the state of my palms and gave an exclamation of dismay.

'Your hands! Oh, that was really stupid of me, not to have brought gloves! Here, let me wrap them.'

'Your California weather is so clement, I neglected to wear my own,' I admitted. 'It's nothing, I shall just need to take care that I do not add my own stains to the marks on the towel. Show me what you've found, lad, and stop fussing over me.'

He insisted on tying off his relatively clean handkerchief, however, before he would give me his sack. While I opened its top, he tidied the rope like a good soldier, but his eyes never left what I was doing, and his actions were somewhat distracted by his attentions.

The wooden object I had spotted was the business end of a base-ball bat, split from the handle by the force of the blows, still clotted despite the rain with the killing residue. Shards of bone had been driven an eighth of an inch into the hard wood.

‘I couldn’t find the other part,’ Larsen said, sounding apologetic.

‘It’s probably floated half-way to Hawaii by now,’ I reassured him, and reached for the other object in the sack.

There is a shroud held in veneration by the Roman Church, displayed in a church in the Italian city of Turin, that appears to show the face of a bearded man around whom it was wrapped at death. Being old and odd, this remarkable object is of course identified as the winding-sheet of the Saviour, although there is no proof of the matter.

The cloth I unwrapped on that darkening hillside was weirdly similar to the Turin shroud. As I unpeeled the sodden object, stains appeared; I spread it flat, and in a peculiar coincidence, the last rays of that day’s sunlight travelled across it, then went dim, as
Corporal

Larsen and I stood staring down at the clear imprint of a man’s agonised face, pressed into the cloth.

We made use of the lamp Larsen had brought, darkness catching us up as we passed through the tunnel to Fort Baker. Although he would have had me in the saddle, I could see no reason to perch on high while the corporal laboured at my side, and in the end we walked together in front of the horse, which bore the stained towel and the murder weapon as if bearing Raynor’s body home.

Back at Fort Baker, I was disappointed to find the military police from the Presidio in possession. I needed a conversation with the good major, but such would not

be provided this evening. Instead, I turned over the items my young friend had recovered from the cliffside, and made an appointment for the following afternoon.

The Army launch *El Aquario* was busy shuttling back and forth across the passage, and after retrieving my unnecessary brief-case from Morris's office, I went down to the dock to await its next trip. As it happened, Lieutenant Jack Raynor waited there as well, on his final voyage across to the Army mortuary. I stood on the pier, and later on the tossing deck, contemplating the wrapped form of the young officer and addressing him with my silent questions. A promising young officer with secrets to keep: Why had he died?

The lieutenant did not say.

When I returned to the hotel, the desk-man handed me an envelope with the handwritten initials BB at the upper left corner. I opened it as I rode up in the lift, and found inside the dates of Lieutenant Raynor's presence in the city over the last month of his life, both at the club, and when he had been free during the daylight hours. At this juncture, I did not know that it would do me any good, but I folded it into my pocket and walked down the silent hallway to my empty room.

It was long since dark, and truth to tell, I was feeling my age. I should have liked nothing better than a large and leisurely meal, a book, and my currently solitary bed, but my day was far from finished. Instead, I called for a hurried plate of sandwiches and descended to the hotel's Turkish baths, which restored me sufficiently that I might consider the remainder of the night without outright loathing. I resumed my semiformal evening wear, dropped my silk hat onto my freshly trimmed head, pulled a pair of thin leather gloves over my abused hands, and set out for the Blue Tiger cabaret.

The man at the door tipped his hat to me, recognising instantly the generous patron of the night before. I was guided up the stairs again to the balcony, shown to a table overlooking the stage, and provided a bottle of champagne on ice. I was later than I had anticipated, and Martin Ledbetter gave a sour glance at the sweating silver bucket.

‘They wouldn’t bring the bubbly until you were here to pay for it,’ he said, reaching for the glasses.

‘Still, they did allow you to sit down,’ I pointed out. He did not deign to answer.

Billy Birdsong was already on the stage, half-way through the second of her two evening’s performances. I was interested to hear a different set of songs from the previous evening, an indication that many of the audience were repeat visitors. She also wore a different costume from those she had appeared in; I wondered idly just how extensive her repertoire and her wardrobe were.

Again, we were summoned to her dressing room after the show, and seated amongst the chocolate and flower tributes. She stripped off her stage face, painted on her other face of less exaggerated femininity, and changed into an embroidered frock of light wool.

When she emerged from behind the screen, I stood up, but instead of accompanying her down the street to her bistro, I escorted the remaining staff and hangers-on out of the room, placed Ledbetter outside in the hallway to keep them from returning, and closed the door firmly.

Wordlessly, I held out the pearl necklace; the singer took it, with hands that were uncertain with apprehension, and returned to me my stick-pin.

‘Sit down,’ I told her, and reached for the nearest bottle of an admirer’s wine, scrabbling through the debris atop the table for a cork-screw.

Hesitantly, frightened, she obeyed. She took the glass I handed her, drank its contents as if it held medicine, and sat expectantly.

‘He’s dead,’ I told her.

The green eyes closed. ‘I knew it,’ she whispered. ‘He’d have come back, otherwise. How?’

‘Murdered.’

The singer stared up at me in horror, and said, ‘God. Because of me?’

‘As yet, there is no reason to believe his death had anything to do with you. The Army police are looking into it, but more to the point, I will continue to investigate the matter.’

‘The police? Oh no.’

‘In my cursory search of your Lieutenant Raynor’s quarters, I saw nothing that would bring your name into this at all. The only thing I found was this.’ I took from my note-case one of the two items I had removed from Raynor’s pocket, and placed it on the table in front of the singer. ‘He had it in his wallet. I thought you might want it returned.’

She looked at the studio portrait of herself, which was signed, With love and kisses from Billy.

‘No, I don’t suppose his family needed to see that.’

She sounded bitter, as would any person required to deny their very existence; my need to move the investigation forward had to be put, temporarily, behind reassuring my

client. 'His family is of no importance,' I said firmly. 'What matters is that Lieutenant Raynor cared enough to risk carrying your photograph in his breast pocket.'

There followed the usual teary self-recrimination of a client, which becomes no less tiresome with the number of times one is forced to witness it. However, eventually the singer's tears receded and she sat staring at herself in the dressing-table mirror; I knew that in a moment, she would see her ravaged face and reach, half-heartedly but inevitably, for the make-up pots.

For a performer, the sentiment 'Life must go on' runs closer to the surface than for other people.

'The first night, you told me that one evening when you were walking with Lieutenant Raynor, he saw someone he knew, and retreated from a confrontation.'

'Yes.'

'I need to know every detail of that incident.'

'What's to tell? We were walking arm-in-arm, he spots two people a couple blocks up, he pulls me into an alley and we take another route to my place.'

'When would this have been?'

'I don't know,' she replied in a despairing little voice. I felt like shaking her, but instead merely leant forward so that I dominated her vision.

'Think, Billy. What you were doing, how you felt, what was going on that night.'

'I really don't—Wait a minute,' she broke off. 'It was the night after he gave me the pearl. And that was on the full moon, I remember because Jack held it up to the window and compared the two, and said I would remember that night whenever the moon was full. He was such a romantic boy,' she said, and began to weep again.

Ruthlessly, I pressed on. ‘So he gave you the necklace on the Sunday?’

‘Monday,’ she said, and blew her nose.

The moon had been at its fullest on the Sunday night, but I did not think the singer would have perceived the difference. ‘Monday, then. So you saw these other people on the Tuesday night?’

‘That sounds right.’

‘What did they look like?’

‘I only caught a glimpse.’ Her hand sought out a piece of cotton wool, and absently dabbed it into the jar of cold cream.

‘Men or women?’

‘Well, that’s the thing. There was a man and a figure in a dress. It was night and there was a street-light, but it was behind them, so between the fact that I only had a glance before Jack pulled me off the street and the fact that I couldn’t see their faces, I can’t be sure. But afterwards I thought maybe the woman was a kid who used to work with me, a few years ago when I was just getting started.’

‘A boy?’

‘Right. Very pretty face but couldn’t sing worth a plugged nickel, and two left feet when it came to dancing. As soon as I could afford better, I let him go. But I hadn’t seen him in years, and I can’t be at all certain it was him.’

‘What was his name?’

‘He called himself Merry, Merry Whisker was it? No, Winkle. Merry Winkle. I probably have a photo of him in my scrapbook at home, if you like.’

‘That would be extraordinarily helpful.’

‘I’ll send it to the hotel, shall I?’

‘Thank you. What about the man? Old or young?’

‘I really couldn’t see him—’

‘I understand, but impressions can be remarkably accurate.’

‘Well, young then.’

‘Tall or short?’

‘Short,’ she answered immediately. ‘That much I did see, that Merry, if it was Merry, was taller than him.’

‘Clothes?’

‘Against the light that way, he was just an overcoat and a hat. No uniform, if that’s what you’re after.’

‘And when you call to mind the attitudes of their persons, how they walked and the manner in which they moved, what would you say was their relationship? Brothers? Friends?’

‘Frankly, they looked like a pro and her john. A professional. Which is why I even remember it, because once it came to me that it looked like Merry, I thought how sad his life must be.’

‘I see. Where precisely did this take place?’

By this time I had been in San Francisco slightly over a month, and bore in my mind a clear map of her primary streets and districts. When Billy Birdsong told me the name of the street on which she and Raynor had been walking, the approximate cross-street, and in what direction the other two had been seen, I knew precisely where the encounter had taken place. I got from her a description of ‘Merry Winkle’ and questioned

her further for some minor detail of dress or person, but she had nothing else, and soon her eyes began to tear up again. I summoned her dresser from the hall-way outside, and asked the woman to accompany Miss Birdsong home.

Outside of the Blue Tiger, young Ledbetter hovered at my elbow, the very picture of impatience. 'What happened?' he demanded. 'Why were you talking to her for so long? And what are we doing now?'

I raised my eyes, then looked past him at the night-time street. 'I believe,' I said slowly, 'that I need to find a male prostitute.'

His dropped jaw said that I had succeeded in amazing him, yet again.

V

Martin Ledbetter was only somewhat reassured when he found that it was a specific prostitute I sought, and not for any carnal purposes.

'Er, you don't know who he is?'

'I know a possible *nom de nuit*, if that be the proper phrase, and I know more or less where he plies his trade. I am relying on you, Mr Ledbetter, to lead me to him.'

As we made our way in the direction of the sighting, I explained the situation: acquaintance of Jack Raynor seen with a person who might be a failed dancer with transvestite proclivities, where seen, accompanying whom.

'And you think I know him?'

'I should doubt it, as your circle is somewhat more exalted than his. However, you may know the sorts of places someone of that sort would ply his trade. A street corner, do you think, or inside an establishment?'

‘Did his, er, client know he was a trans-vestite?’ Ledbetter asked.

‘That,’ I told him, ‘is indeed the question.’

It was now close to three o’clock in the morning, and I had my doubts that we would find the person in question still lingering at a street-corner or inside a speakeasy. Ledbetter knew the area as well as I had thought, and one or two of the denizens claimed some degree of recognition to my description of the person we sought, but in the end, the hour was too far advanced, and the hypothesis was not to be proved that night. I should have to return on the morrow, when the working girls, and boys, are fresh.

However, this did not mean that my work was done.

‘You perhaps should go home, Ledbetter,’ I suggested. ‘You look as if you could use some sleep.’

‘The night is young,’ he protested, although a moment before he had been stifling a yawn.

‘Very well, perhaps you could recommend an all-night diner, at which we might while away an hour. Preferably along the water-front.’

He located a small building, little more than a hut with greasy windows, that nonetheless was warm and smelt pleasingly of fresh coffee and bacon. The other patrons were either early labourers on their way to work or revellers endeavouring to sober themselves for the trip home; I reflected with amusement that my companion and I fit with either category.

The coffee and breakfast fare restored us both to a second wind, and provided a layer of insulation against the damp air when we went out of the door at a quarter to five.

My valiant young guide paused in the doorway to get his cigarette alight, then asked, 'Where to now?'

'Fisherman's Wharf,' I told him absently, occupied with studying the figure he cut. 'I say, wait here for a moment.'

I went back inside, and within two minutes had made the necessary arrangements, returning with a hat in my hand. 'Put this on,' I told him. He took it with fastidious fingers, wrinkling his nose at the pomade stains that darkened its interior. Admittedly, it was not a very nice hat, but it was the only one in the diner that was neither a cloth working-man's cap nor a tall formal article such as the one I wore. All we required was the silhouette.

He lowered it with distaste onto his slick hair; I studied the effect, and nodded. 'You may take it off if you prefer, and save it until it is needed. Come now, dawn will be here shortly.'

'Why are we going to Fisherman's Wharf?'

'We seek an informal water-taxi service.'

'But the hire-boats are down closer to the Ferry Building.'

'Miss Birdsong lives on the southern slopes of Pacific Heights. When Raynor left her flat in latter weeks, he was in the habit of turning due north. This would lead him directly up the hills; if he were heading for the ferry, he would turn east, as he was wont to do in earlier days, in order to avoid the steep climb. I believe that in the early days he was dependent on the ferry to take him across the Golden Gate. Later, he made other arrangements.'

As dawn approached, this area of the water-front had become a hive of activity. Italian was the language of choice among San Francisco's fishing fleet, and the boats were built and rigged along a more or less Mediterranean pattern. However, as we stood and studied the bustle, I noticed that in the less desirable corners of the mooring areas were one or two boats with a touch of exoticism to their lines and sails. I was not surprised to see that the men moving about on the decks were similarly alien. I turned to Ledbetter, half dozing as he leant against a wall.

'I want you to put on the hat, button up your overcoat, and walk along the wharf to where that blue boat is just putting out. When you get there, take a dollar bill out of your pocket and hold it high in the air. Just stand there with it raised until I tell you otherwise.'

'Er,' he began.

'You haven't a dollar,' I said for him, and reached for my note-case.

I remained in the shadows, watching the reaction to Ledbetter's movements. Most of the fishermen were too busy to pay him any attention; one or two glanced at him curiously, and kept glancing, attracted by the money in his hand. But as I had thought, once the furthest boats noticed his figure, the entire crew of one of the alien boats stood and stared. After a minute, I saw a figure slip from the boat onto the dock and trot in Ledbetter's direction, only to slow, pause, and, after much peering and hesitation, retreat.

I quickly left my post and gathered up my young assistant, hurrying him along lest the boat leave its moorage before we could speak with the captain.

'Can I take off this damned hat now?' Ledbetter panted behind me.

‘We are finished with it,’ I answered, and heard a faint plop as it landed in the water.

When we were within speaking distance of the boat, which was rapidly casting off to depart, I said loudly, ‘We are nothing to do with the police. I will pay you for the answer to a question.’

The crew continued its rapid movements, but one figure stopped to listen. I came to a halt at the edge of the boards and called, ‘Please, I will pay. I just need to ask about the man who had you take him across the Bay in the mornings.’

The boat drifted farther away, but then the man spoke some words over his shoulder and the vessel’s outward progress slowed. After a moment, the anchor went down, and the man climbed into the small boat to row himself back within talking distance. He stopped twenty feet away, his oars playing in the water to keep him in his place. I squatted down onto my heels.

‘What you want know?’ he asked.

‘About three weeks ago, a young man with light hair made an arrangement with you to carry him across the Bay several mornings a week.’

The fisherman did not answer, but neither did he deny it. I went on. ‘Where did you take him?’

All I needed, in fact, was mere confirmation, but the question would do as well as any other.

He studied me, looked more closely at my companion, then grunted, ‘Fo’t Barry. He go Barry dock, near lighthouse.’

‘Why did he come to you rather than ask one of the Italians?’

The man shrugged. 'He speak some Chinee. Live in Manila, know Chinee there. Mebbe like Chinee. Who know?'

'Who indeed,' I agreed. 'Thank you, I hope I have not unduly delayed your day's work.' I looked around and spotted an empty tin that, according to the label, had once held pineapple. I pushed a five-dollar bill into it, stepped on its open end to secure the money, and tossed it under-hand into the skiff at the man's feet. He nodded, then pulled at the oars, taking himself back to his boat.

With age, a man's bones become weary, and stiffen with a night's fog; I will admit that I regretted the lack of taxi ranks in this part of town, and that I was relieved beyond all proportion when Ledbetter spotted a cab driving in the direction of the Ferry Building, and whistled it to a stop.

I had not paused to reflect how very long my day had been until I was walking down the corridor to my room minutes later. My overcoat felt as if it were lined with lead, and my fingers fumbled with key, then buttons, and finally laces. Then when I sat down on my piled clothing to remove my shoes, I heard the rustle of paper beneath me. I pulled my coat from the pile and felt for its inner pocket, then sat upon the edge of the bed to look yet again at the second item I had removed from the dead man's person.

Ten hours later, I woke half-dressed, inadequately blanketed, and with the letter still in my hand. An hour after that, bathed, shaved, and fed, I took up the envelope, which was addressed to 'Joseph Raynor' at a post office box, and slid out the letter. It bore the imprint of a law office in Los Angeles, dated the week before Raynor was last seen, and read:

Dear Sir:

I received your letter, and the payment, which as you noted, serves to assure me that this is no stunt. You will understand, I think, that working in proximity to the area's growing moving-picture industry, we are well used to stunts.

However, taking your inquiry as a serious one, I would have to agree that, setting aside for the moment the question of criminal charges, the solidity of the contract would appear to depend heavily on sympathetic and closemouthed servants and, in the event of ill health, a doctor of similar characteristics. I cannot tell you what the status is in foreign parts, although I can direct you to colleagues if you wish.

I do not, however, believe it possible to avoid a lawsuit entirely. It is true, as you suggest, that personal possessions can legally be left to whomever one wishes, be it man, woman, or four- legged creature. Family inheritances would be a different matter, and if it came before a court, might well create an enormous string of legal difficulties. Speaking personally, I would relish tackling such a matter, but I can certainly understand that the person or persons involved in such an inevitably drawn-out court battle would do much to avoid it.

Please let me know if you would like my help in making the arrangements you mentioned in your letter. However, I would urge you to come and talk to me first about the potential for prosecution this course of action could conceivably open you up to, with permanent effects on your future.

Yours,

Samuel Kapinsky

I went downstairs to compose a wire to Mr Kapinsky, then deposited the letter in the hotel's safe, and made ready for a third crossing of San Francisco's Golden Gate.

I presented myself to the major's office, as arranged, at three o'clock in the afternoon. As I had feared, his superior had laid ham-fisted claim to the investigation; as I had hoped, Morris was not happy about it.

'Don't know why we have to turn it over to him,' he grumbled when first I appeared. 'I was doing perfectly well.'

'Disruptive, eh?' I asked in sympathy.

'Exactly! Disruptive, that's the very word. Man thinks I should bring the whole day's schedule to a halt so he can talk to everyone on the post. Idiot.'

'I don't suppose I could be of service?' I suggested. 'Just to move him in the right direction and help him solve the case more quickly?'

'You'd do that?' Clearly, Captain Sigerson's long-ago and fictional experiences weighed more with the major than any so-called superior's qualifications. I hastened to agree with him.

'Certainly. I owe it to the family to conclude this sad business as soon as possible.' To say nothing of owing it to myself to finish here before one of the bereaved family could arrive and tell the major that they had not sent any lawyer.

'Very well,' Morris declared. 'See what you can do. I'll give you an officer to help you, what about—'

'What about that young corporal you left with me yesterday?' I suggested smoothly. 'Seems a sensible lad.'

‘But Lieutenant Halston is free today while they’re clearing up the shooting range. He knew Raynor, might be able to answer some questions.’

The last thing I wanted was a friend of the dead officer. ‘All I need is a man in a uniform, so as not to be continually stopped for an explanation,’ I assured Morris.

‘Corporal Larsen will be fine. If he can be spared.’

He did not bother to respond to the preposterous notion that a corporal might be urgently needed elsewhere, merely raised his voice to call, ‘Baxter!’ The door opened and the adjutant looked in. ‘Get Corporal Larsen. He’s to be seconded to this gentleman until further notice, on or off the base.’

Baxter saluted and closed the door. Before the major could move on to the next item on his calendar, I asked him what he’d thought of his dead lieutenant.

‘What do you mean, what did I think of him? He was a competent officer, but like I told you, he hadn’t been here long enough to get to know him.’

‘Do you think he looked upon the Army as a permanent career?’ I asked.

At that, he sat back in his chair. ‘You know, when he first got here I’d have said yes, even though he was about as sickly as I’ve seen a man. But later on, I don’t know. His heart seemed to go out of it. Maybe just the malaria; fever does wear a man down after a while.’

‘You sound as though you would have been disappointed, had he left the services.’

‘I thought he had the makings of a first-class officer. Not just an everyday officer, and he’d have been wasted in peace-time, but given another war, Raynor could have made a hell of a name for himself. Had that kind of quirky way of looking at things that

all the great commanders of history have had. The ability to rewrite the rules of warfare, if you follow me. 'Course, as I say, in peace-time that could make for terrible problems. Sort of like your own country's Major Lawrence. If he'd spent his career drilling the ranks, he'd have ended up drinking himself to death, or putting a gun in his mouth. Instead, he goes out into the desert and finds the Arabs, and takes off like a rocket. That was Raynor all over. All he needed was a good war.'

It was an unexpected insight, revealing and perceptive. I did not tell the major that the peace-time ranks were precisely where Lawrence had put himself, for indeed, I thought Morris was right about the man. Morris's judgement, nonetheless, added another piece to my understanding of Jack Raynor: Idiosyncratic military minds also have a tendency to make bitter enemies.

I thanked the major and left him to his paperwork, and in a very few minutes, Larsen came pounding up at double-time, red of face and as alarmed as one might expect at a summons to the commanding officer. He looked greatly relieved when he received his orders, but also puzzled, not understanding quite what my position here was.

'Larsen,' I explained, 'the major wants you and me to try and solve Raynor's murder before the police can.'

That, he understood.

The major's key and his relayed command to the soldier standing guard over Raynor's quarters opened the door. Before we could walk through it, a door down the corridor opened and a young officer with black hair and hazel eyes looked out, the slippers on his feet and a slim book in his left hand indicating that we had disturbed his rest. He propped the hand with the book against the door frame as he leant out, the three

fingers draped across the volume's cloth cover showing the scars and embedded gravel of an old injury. He looked at the three of us curiously.

'What's up?' he asked, his question directed, I thought, at the guard.

'Orders from Major Morris, sir. This gentleman's the Raynor family lawyer.'

The brown head nodded and his door closed as he went back to his reading. I appreciated this confirmation of the major's efficiency: Clearly, the guard had been a continuous presence here.

Once inside, Corporal Larsen stood with his back to the door, looking around him uneasily.

'Sir, what are we looking for?'

'Anything the Presidio men might have overlooked,' I told him, settling at the desk for a look at those tantalising envelopes: If Jack Raynor had a fiancée for whom he was contemplating the purchase of wedding bands, there would surely be letters.

A less experienced investigator might assume that the two items Raynor had carried on his person, the Birdsong photograph and the enigmatic letter from the Los Angeles lawyer, had been in his breast pocket because he attached a high degree of emotional import to them. I knew, however, that their presence over his heart could as easily be due to any number of factors, from a recent receipt to a general disinclination to leave problematic documents where others might find them; indeed, he may even have had them with him the night he died because he planned to tear them into a thousand tiny pieces and set them free on the wind from the Pacific—such romantic notions were not unheard of, in a man in his situation. But he was, I had no doubt, genuinely fond of the singer, no matter what his plans for marriage might be; clearly, despite the lawyer's

cautiously enigmatic wording, Raynor intended to leave Birdsong something in his will in the face of potential family objections.

Still, however problematic the signed photograph of a trans-vestite singer and a lawyer's letter might be, there would be no reason for Raynor to conceal his love notes from a fiancée. I expected to find them. I did not.

Instead, the three letters in the drawer were from his mother, his brother, and his sister.

The mother possessed what appeared to me an excessive interest in the game of whist, and furthermore assumed a similar obsession on the part of her son. Only at the very end did she add the lines, 'I would of course adore seeing you this summer, if you decide to come home for a time, and we can talk about your plans for the future at that time. If only California wasn't so very far away!'

The brother's letter addressed Jack Raynor's summer plans with slightly more detail, all of which underscored Major Morris's unvoiced fears about the renewal of his lieutenant's contract with the United States Army. The brother, whose name was given as Edward, seemed most concerned with Jack's possible desire for the summer house, which Edward hoped to use for the entire month of August.

It was the sister's brief note that hit the nail square:

Dearest Jack,

As you asked, I haven't said anything to the family, although really I think you're being a little silly about this. If you love this girl, then we surely will, and there's no need to go straight back to California. You know how Mummy adores planning a party, she's going to be so disappointed if you go to a registry office.

But you know best, and I can't argue that Mummy's getting any better as she gets older. The other day she had Eddy's wife in tears because little Iris had dirt on her dress after playing outside! I'd live in California, too, if I could!

Kisses always,

Your loving sister Caroline

'Does it seem to you unusual that Lieutenant Raynor only has three letters in his desk?' I asked the corporal, who had begun picking hesitantly through the officer's cupboard.

'I've only kept two letters in six years,' the lad told me. 'Not a lot of room for keepsakes in this life, even for an officer.'

I had not expected a sensible answer—I never expected a sensible answer from my assistants, with one shining exception—but I had to agree, the lad had it right. The rest of Raynor's quarters gave the same impression, of a tidy man who dealt with things as they came up, then rid himself of encumbrances.

Which left me with the question: Had Billy Birdsong become one of those encumbrances?

My missing-person mystery was now clearly two, possibly separate, mysteries: Who had killed Lieutenant Jack Raynor? And, what was I to tell the singer about her lover's intentions?

I did not go to the Blue Tiger that night, but I was not surprised, when I entered the speakeasy where we had left off the previous night, to find Martin Ledbetter leaning one elbow against the filthy bar, a cautious handkerchief resting between fabric and wood. He made his customary glass-raising gesture; I noted that he not only had sufficient funds to purchase his own drink, he'd had his hair cut and wore a crisp new shirt.

'How long have you been here?' I asked when I had ordered my own drink.

'Just a few minutes,' he replied; the slight difficulty he had with the letter s made clear that he had not begun his evening here. 'No sign of Mr Winkle.'

'Winkle,' I corrected him. He made a peculiar noise half-way between a snort and a giggle, then frowned at his glass accusingly. I picked it up, and mine, and led him to a minuscule table in a corner of the near-deserted establishment. We nursed those drinks, then two more, but before I was driven to a choice between permanent liver damage and being forced to leave, a man in a dress came into the bar.

His appearance answered a question: Other than the clothing, Merry Winkle had made no attempt to disguise himself as a female. A customer would have had to be blind, deaf, and dead drunk before making a mistake of gender. When I stood beside him at the bar, I could see that he had even neglected to shave that day.

'I'd like to buy the lady a drink,' I told the man behind the counter. The 'lady' turned to look at me, turned farther to stare in open disbelief, and only then remembered to assume a coquettish simper. I cut him off before he could launch into his spiel.

'Would you by chance be known as Merry Winkle?'

'I might, honey, if you're interested in a little company.'

‘I am very interested in a little conversation, if that can be arranged? I shall of course pay you for your time.’

‘Don’t care what you call it, honey, I’ve got the time. Oh, and you’ve got a pretty friend, too.’

‘Er,’ Ledbetter said from my shoulder.

‘Actually, it is mere conversation I require,’ I told Winkle. ‘Perhaps we might sit down with our drinks?’

It took some time to convince the man that in this case, ‘conversation’ was not synonymous with some variation on his usual professional activities, and he was still looking more than a little uncertain when Ledbetter went to fetch him another drink. I placed a dollar coin on the table, which he slipped into his flat bodice, then began.

‘Mr, er, Winkle.’

‘Look, I haven’t used that name in a long time. Why don’t you just call me Winfield?’

‘Mr Winfield, then. Nine days ago, on a Tuesday night, you were seen with a client, walking along Market Street.’

He shrugged. ‘You can see me most evenings, walking along Market with a client. Except Sundays,’ he corrected himself, adding piously, “‘Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.’”

Young Ledbetter narrowly avoided choking on his beer, and I opened my mouth, then decided this was not the place for a lecture on the difference between Sabbath and Sunday. ‘Most commendable of you, Mr Winfield. However, you had a client that night, a man somewhat shorter than you, who was probably a soldier.’

Winfield laughed, revealing a mouthful of teeth that explained the state of his breath. ‘They’re all soldiers and sailors, honey. Anyway, who is it says he saw me?’

I hesitated, loath to bring my client into this. ‘Just a singer, who was going home late from the cabaret.’

‘Well I—Wait a minute. You don’t mean Billy Birdsong?’

‘Do you know her?’ I answered noncommittally.

‘Sure I know her, I used to sing in a revue when she was first hired. I had an accident, broke my foot. If I hadn’t, I’d be on the stage like she is now. I’d’ve been the one to go off to France and get famous. I sing, too, you know.’

‘I can tell from the timbre of your voice,’ I replied. ‘So you noticed Miss Birdsong one evening two weeks ago?’

‘Her and a fancy man. She pretended she didn’t see me, but she did, and she ran away down an alley before she had to talk to me.’

‘Do you remember who you were with that evening?’

‘Oh yeah. He calls himself “Smith”, like I’d believe that. I call him Smitty. He’s a regular, shows up about once a week. Although, come to think of it, he hasn’t been by in a while.’

‘Since that night, perhaps?’

‘Damn! Excuse my French, but you’re right. Wonder if it scared him off? If it did, it’s mixed blessings. The man’s a real bastard.’

‘In what way?’

Winfield played with his drink, then fortified himself with a deep swallow. ‘My regulars are what you might call a “specialised clientele.” Not quite honest enough with

themselves to walk up to a boy on the street, or even in a place like this. Smitty likes to make a kind of game out of it, that he thinks I'm a girl until... Well, I don't think I have to spell it out for you.'

'Quite.'

'He's not the only one, looks nice and talks all polite and then when the door's shut you're something stuck to the bottom of his boot. I mean to say, I know I'm just a . . . a... vessel, but don't know why that makes me any more scum than the men who use me.'

Ledbetter, who had just returned from another trip to the bar, stopped dead to stare at Winfield. The man in the dress saw the glass hovering above the sticky table, took it from Ledbetter's hand, and threw half of it down his throat.

However, it was a sentiment I had heard before, in other parts of the globe; I smiled in sympathy. 'Can you describe "Smitty" for me?'

'Little bit shorter'n me. Black hair, greeny-brown eyes, soldier's tan—face and hands, that is, pale under his clothes. Like a hundred others I've seen this year.'

'What about what they call identifying marks? A tattoo or scar, perhaps? An accent, a ring, an unusual pocket watch, the manner in which he combed his hair? Anything that stands out in your mind from a hundred others?'

'Smitty's not exactly what you'd call well endowed. Maybe explains something about his short temper,' Winfield added with a brief flare of bitterness.

I kept my face straight, not only at the unintended humour of this psychological revelation but at the thought of checking a line of suspects for that particular trait. I nodded encouragement; he played with his glass, thinking.

‘His finger!’ Winfield raised his eyes to mine. ‘The little finger of his, let’s see, his left hand. It stuck out a little when he moved the other fingers, all stiff, like he’d broke it. And it had dark spots in it, like . . .’

‘Like he’d crushed it, embedding bits of gravel under the skin,’ I finished ungrammatically.

‘Exactly. Why, you know him?’

‘Not yet,’ I said with satisfaction. A few minutes later, sure I had received all that Winfield knew, I gave the man enough money to allow him the rest of the evening off, if not the week.

I was smiling as we left the speakeasy, holding to myself the vision of a misshapen finger with gravel beneath the skin, draped across the front of a slim book, as Jack Raynor’s neighbour, Lieutenant Gregory Halston, came into the corridor to see who was moving about next door.

I did not smile for long. Always, the proof of villainy is far more tedious than merely identifying the villain.

My young assistant—who, I reflected, might be one of the more unlikely Irregulars I had employed, but also one of the more effective—was in favour of rushing to board the last Sausalito ferry of the night and storming the fort then and there.

Instead, I was leading him in the opposite direction, while he positively hopped about with frustration.

‘But we know who it is!’ he protested, his voice ringing loudly through the silent canyons of the financial district. ‘We need to go and catch him.’

We, I reflected, the smile returning briefly to my lips: We from a boy who had introduced himself by picking my pocket three nights before.

‘And when we have caught him, what do we do with him?’ I asked. ‘Well, turn him over to the authorities,’ he replied indignantly.

Such innocence and trust was, in its way, an encouraging sign. I stopped to look at Ledbetter’s face in the light of the street-lamp, and found him looking at me with the enthusiasm and urging of a dog whose master held the ball. I had intended merely to take myself to my rooms and grimly contemplate the walls, but instead I found myself thinking, Why not? I placed my hand on his shoulder, and said, ‘Mr Ledbetter, perhaps you might be of assistance by allowing me to review the case aloud.’

We adjourned to my rooms, ignoring the raised eyebrows of the doorman, the night desk clerk, and the elevator boy along the way. Inside, I turned up the lights and told him to help himself to a drink. When I came back from washing my hands, having exchanged my outer coats for a dressing-gown, he was sitting in a chair far from the desk.

‘You really must learn to return drawers to their original state,’ I advised him as I poured my own glass. I pulled open the offending drawer, saw with interest that he had merely looked, not taken, then closed it again and went to sit in the chair across from the furiously blushing, possibly reformed young thief.

‘The man’s name is Gregory Halston,’ I began without preamble. ‘He, too, is a junior officer stationed on Fort Barry, and as he has been there longer than Raynor, he is technically in a superior position.’

‘Either happenstance, or some unconscious awareness of a degree of similarity on the part of their commanding officer, brought these two young men together. And once

they were assigned to the same post, they of necessity lived together, the only two officers in their half- deserted fort.

‘Both men had a secret, the same secret, unbeknown to the other. I do not know if sodomy is a hanging offence in the United States Army, or merely cause for corporal punishment and dishonourable discharge, but once they had seen each other on the street, in similar circumstances, neither was in doubt.

‘The two might have cast their eyes in opposite directions and agreed that the evening had never happened, uneasy but content that their blackmail was mutual, except for one thing: The following day a letter arrived, and Raynor determined to leave the Army altogether.’

‘What letter?’

‘From a legal gentleman in the southern part of the state. I believe Lieutenant Raynor made the fatal mistake of telling his neighbour and fellow officer his plans, possibly under the assumption that Halston would feel reassured at his future absence. Instead, it had the opposite effect: Halston panicked, believing that once Raynor was safely out, their mutual hold over each other would fail. Guilt,’ I mused, ‘has an interesting way of twisting one’s thoughts.’

‘So, Halston bashed him and hid him in the gun room. We need to go tell his commanding officer.’

‘How do you propose that we approach that revelation? None of us on this side of the Gate would make the most solid of witnesses on the stand. I, after all, presented myself as a Raynor family lawyer, which I am not. Or perhaps you would like to go in

my stead?’ I allowed him to consider that distasteful turn of affairs, then added, ‘Or perhaps Miss Birdsong?’

‘So we can’t pin the bastard down because none of us could testify?’

‘There is little proof other than our word.’

‘But, his hand!’

‘Ah, so you wish to place Mr Winfield on the stand?’

‘Yeah, he’d be just great,’ Ledbetter admitted, and took a hefty swallow from his glass. ‘Come on, now, there’s got to be some kind of evidence. Detectives always find evidence.’

‘A foot-print that matches the shoe of a man who spends many hours down on his knee before a target with a rifle. As do half the men on the base. The cryptic note of a meeting-place, which again could have come from any side. Letters leading to inescapable conclusions that would mortify a family and turn their wrath against your friend the singer? I believe Jack Raynor would prefer to go unavenged, than have that path of destruction.’

Ledbetter slapped his glass down on the table, sending the contents flying, although fortunately the glass was nearly empty. ‘So he’s got away with it?’

‘I did not say that.’

He looked at me askance. ‘You’re going to sneak up on him and shoot him in the back?’

‘Mr Ledbetter, what sort of fiction do you read?’ I asked, more than a little shocked. ‘Certainly not. We simply need a better grade of witness.’

‘Do we have one?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Damn it, you sound awfully complacent about all this.’

‘Perhaps,’ I said, ‘because I have done this before.’

I waited, to see if he could work it out on his own. His eyes narrowed in thought, and after a minute, began to take on a twinkle of excitement. ‘You want to set a trap for him.’

‘Something of the sort.’

‘A secret meeting at night,’ he said, his words tumbling in excitement, ‘like the one he and Raynor had! Say, this is as good as a Sherlock Holmes story!’

Indeed, the unnecessarily melodramatic twist he proposed was just the sort of thing Conan Doyle would have enjoyed, and my immediate impulse was to dismiss it out of hand. However, I held myself and considered, and on thinking it over, I decided that it was true: a parallel meeting by night could be, as Ledbetter might put it, just the ticket. I found myself smiling.

‘Mr Ledbetter,’ I told him, ‘you are a man after my own heart.’

Now it was just a matter of suborning a major of the United States Army.

VII

It was a curious sensation, to find myself the conservative and hesitant half of a pair, but young Ledbetter had the bit in his teeth now, and nothing would do but that we compose a deliberately mysterious note and arrange to deliver it to Lieutenant Halston before morning. I sat at the desk with a piece of anonymous white paper and, after a moment’s thought, wrote the following:

Gregory Halston, you were seen that night, but 50 dollars in cash will purchase my continued silence. Tonight, at the same hour and place he died.

‘Hey,’ my novice accomplice exclaimed, ‘you’re pretty good at this.’

‘I ought to be,’ I told him, which served to remind him that, in truth, he had little idea who I was or on which side of the law I walked. I retrieved the note, and placed it in a plain envelope, writing Halston’s name on the outside. ‘I shall take this over to Fort Baker in the morning, and have it delivered to him.’

‘Oh no, you can’t just give it to him.’

‘I could, actually, simply telling him that some person unknown to me had handed it to me as I approached the grounds. However, I did not intend to do so. I shall merely leave it anonymously with the fort postmaster.’

‘Let me do it.’

‘Your presence in the fort would take explanation, where I already have reason to be there. Don’t worry, Ledbetter, I shall call on you for the evening’s efforts.’

‘You won’t try to take this guy on all on your own?’

‘By no means. It is a long-time habit of mine to depend on others when it comes to open warfare. And now, young man, you need to take yourself home and sleep through as much of the day as you can manage. I shall expect you at Fisherman’s Wharf at ten-thirty tonight. Dress warmly, in dark clothing, and be sure nothing you wear rustles or rattles.’

He left me, reluctantly. I waited at the window until I had seen him pass down the street and round a corner, then resumed my outer garments and let myself out. By good fortune, a taxi driver was sleeping at the kerb, and interrupted his slumber to take me to Fisherman's Wharf. I arranged with him to continue his sleep there, as paid employment, and I was standing at the oddly-rigged fishing boat when the Chinese crew came up two hours later.

They were not pleased to see me at first, but the bills in my hand softened them considerably, and the promise of more bought me their services for all of Friday night.

Well pleased, I woke my snoring driver a second time and had him deliver me to the ferry terminus. At Fort Baker, I arranged for the letter to be given to Lieutenant Halston, concluded business with his commanding officer, and again crossed over to the city on the Bay.

Upon returning to the hotel, I tacked a note onto my door threatening violence to anyone who disturbed me, and slept through what remained of the daylight hours.

I woke, persuaded the hotel kitchen that I did require a meal at that hour, and dressed in the sort of clothing I had recommended to Ledbetter.

When the sun was well down on the horizon, the Chinese crew and I set out from the fishing boats and made north across the fierce currents. A small pier serving the emplacements at Fort Barry was tucked into a cove laid about with jagged rocks, with the Bonita lighthouse sitting at its outer edge and a single track of tramway leading straight up the cliff behind. As I rode the deck, in the fading light I noted the curious difference of colour in the ground on the right and left of the pier, brought together at a sharp fold of

earth. I speculated about the presence of a fault here, what it meant for the future of the city behind me. And then the light winked out, and all was darkening outline.

The crew negotiated the dangerous rocks of the small bay, the captain directing them with terse commands as the rush of waters attempted to drive us onto one set of rocks or another. When we reached the pier, it was nearly dark. I stepped off the boat onto the boards, turning back to accept two lanterns from one of the crew. The first I placed at the westernmost corner of the pier's end. The other I set fifty feet up its ramp. Then I went back to call across the intervening water at the captain.

'Do you want me to light them for a few minutes?'

'No, is fine,' he answered; the concentrated expertise with which he studied his surroundings assured me that he had a chance of making it in with nothing but those two lamps to mark his way. After all, smuggling, which required night-time markers such as my two lanterns, was a common occupation along this coast. I nodded.

'Eleven o'clock, then.'

'Yes.' And his engines reversed him into the cove and back to the shipping channel. When he had gone, I settled my rucksack onto my shoulders and set out up the steep slope of the track leading away from the pier.

The hours passed slowly, aided by a flask of tea (coffee being too liable to give one away by its stronger aroma). The night's blackness was complete, three days short of the new moon, and the wind dropped by the time I made my way back down to the pier at half past ten.

Ledbetter arrived at the arranged time, and the lamps I had lit brought the Chinese boat in with neat competence. I led my young friend up the hill and settled him into his

position, adjuring him to absolute silence. Or more accurately, I told him that if he lit a cigarette or fiddled with the change in his pocket, I would throw him off the cliff.

We waited.

Waves pounded on the cliffs below, leaving faint stirs of white in the darkness as their crests broke. The lighthouse flared at its set pattern, silent for once with the absence of coastal fog. The occasional night bird rasped overhead, a fox yipped in the distance.

And at two o'clock in the morning, as the mists began to creep up over the hills, a voice spoke out of the darkness.

'Anybody there?'

'Lieutenant Halston,' I replied.

The sudden beam of a torch pinned me down, blinding me and, to a lesser but necessary degree, the man wielding it.

'You're that lawyer,' the young man said after a minute. 'You were searching Jack's rooms.'

'I was in Raynor's rooms, yes, although I am not a lawyer. It was necessary for me to tell your major something of the sort in order to gain access.'

'Why did you need to gain access?'

'When he died, Raynor had something of mine. In fact, I was following him that night, trying to figure out how to get it out of him, when I saw you and him, right here.' The story was thin to the point of breaking—how would I, a civilian, have skulked about the headlands unnoticed?—but I have found that a man's guilt often stands in the way of rational thought, and so it proved with Halston.

'That wasn't me.'

I squinted against the light. ‘There’s another man of your build, rank, and voice living on the base?’

‘Probably lots.’

‘Is that what you told Jack, when you were trying to convince him that he hadn’t seen you on the street in San Francisco with your friend Merry?’

Silence, with the waves beating at the shore. ‘What do you want?’ the lieutenant demanded.

‘Merely the fifty dollars. Jack Raynor’s death left me short of travelling money, and I need enough to get me home. Fifty should do it nicely.’

I thought for an awful moment that he would simply give me the money and walk away, but a man of Halston’s sort understands that when fear and greed jostle for the upper hand, fear will never win out. When he spoke again, his voice was scornful.

‘What did Jack have of yours?’

‘The same thing he had that belonged to you.’

‘He didn’t have anything of mine.’

‘He had your reputation in his hands.’ Silence answered the charge.

‘Lieutenant Raynor saw you with the person who calls himself Merry Winfield. An unfortunate fellow, who might have made something of a success on the stage had it not been for too great a thirst for drink and drug. Any superior officer would take one look at the fellow and condemn you out of hand. Raynor could have led your superiors to you, and that would have been the end.’

‘I didn’t—’

‘But the tragedy of this situation is, your friend Jack had no intention of turning you in.’

‘He was leaving. Resigning his commission.’

‘And he wished only for you to be happy for him.’

The torch-beam wavered, the waves and continuous breeze made the night seem alive, as we waited for Halston to decide what to do.

Then the beam held firm, and I prepared to throw myself to the side, for I knew what was to come: If Halston could not trust his friend, he would not trust me. He took a step back from me and his hand thrust inside the open front of his greatcoat. His arm went in, then drew out, and the speed with which he moved told me all I needed to know.

I gave a great shout and threw myself to the ground, and the hillside came alive.

With a click the lights we had strung from three hefty batteries came to life, centred on the man with the torch. They confused him, and he held up the gun, not to aim at me, but to shield his eyes. As it rose into full view, the United States Army moved onto the field of battle.

‘ATTEN-HUT!’ the major’s voice bellowed out, the one command to which even an officer reacted with immediate and unthinking response. The lieutenant’s back snapped up and his hand jerked down several inches. He caught himself in an instant and made to stretch out his arm again, but it was too late. Ledbetter tackled him from behind, and while they were struggling, Major Morris strode up and brought one large boot down on the scarred hand that was stretching out for the gun.

It was over.

No doubt in the end, the major altered the scenario somewhat to explain the actions of his black-haired lieutenant. A flimsy tale of rivalry over the affections of a young lady would provide a more satisfactory tale than one of fear, guilt, and the twisted secret lives of two young officers. It mattered not to me how the major constructed his case against Halston, so long as punishment was dealt. And as the major had personally witnessed his officer's guilt, as he had required of me when I went to him that morning, punishment would indeed be meted.

He sent us home on the launch, and with the eastern sky going light, our knock brought Billy Birdsong from her bed.

'Tell me again how it happened,' she implored half an hour later. Curbing my impatience, I reviewed in *précis* the lengthy tale I had recounted once already.

'Merry recognised you, and you him; Raynor saw Halston, and Halston him. Merry, who thinks you stole his deserved success, complained about you to Halston. And Halston believed you would do the same with Raynor, telling him who, and what, Halston had been walking down the street with. Which would leave Gregory Halston vulnerable.'

Billy Birdsong looked up sharply. 'Greg? You say his name is Greg?'

'Is that the name you were trying to recall?' I asked, but her face, crumpling in despair, had already told me the answer.

'Greg, yes, that was the name of Jack's friend! The only friend he ever mentioned to me. Jack said Greg was one of the blessings that made life possible, with long talks about books and music and life. How could he imagine that Jack would betray him?'

‘One sees what one is, and Halston saw someone with the potential to do him harm. His fears preyed on him, but did not come to a head until last Friday, when Raynor told him that he had decided to quit the Army and get married. With Raynor still in uniform, Halston was safe. But from the outside, anything Raynor said could put Halston behind bars, or worse.’

‘Married?’ she cried. ‘Jack?’

I put up a hand to quiet her, and continued, for from here on, we were covering new ground.

‘It was no surprise to me that Raynor had matrimonial aspirations. The jeweller who made your necklace told me that Raynor had been looking at wedding rings at the same time. And his commanding officer said that he thought Raynor had recently begun to contemplate leaving the Army. Then in Raynor’s desk, I found two family letters referring to his previous mention of marriage.’

‘No,’ the singer moaned, tears gathering along her lashes. ‘Oh, no. It was all a ...a farce? Oh, God, I thought Jack wasn’t like the others. Do you know who she was?’

‘She was you.’

The green eyes snapped up, the tears drying on the instant with astonishment.

‘What?’

I smiled: The voice had been that of a man, not the singer’s controlled contralto. I took from my pocket the two letters from the lawyer in Los Angeles. The first, couched in necessarily enigmatic terms lest other eyes see it, brought a small frown line into being between her eyes. The second, however, had arrived at my hotel as I slept that very afternoon, hand carried by special messenger from Los Angeles.

Dear Mr. Sigerson,

I received your wire, and as you suggested telephoned the police to confirm its facts. Thank you for telling me of my client's unfortunate death.

I am sorry never to have met the man, who struck me even in his letter as a creative and forceful individual. As you suggest, his letter to me concerned the potential repercussions of an unconventional form of marriage. At first blush, I laughed it off as ridiculous, but when I had looked more closely at the actual wording on the books, I thought it might be open to a certain degree of interpretation. It is generally assumed that the legal contract we know as 'marriage' is drawn between a man and a woman. However, as with the case of the innkeeper you mentioned, there is no clear law against it.

Essentially, however, the simplest way ahead for the young man would have been simply to allow the world to assume that his wife was indeed a woman. He assured me that no casual acquaintance would know it to be otherwise, which is when I wrote to urge him to choose his servants, and especially doctor with great care, for any illness could bring disaster down on their heads.

The elements of the marriage contract that involves inheritance would have to be handled somewhat differently, for fear that after his death, the true nature of his spouse be brought to light, leaving her penniless and liable for prosecution to boot.

I hope this has helped to clarify the matter on which Mr. Raynor consulted me, and again, I thank you for your information. Please convey my condolences to Raynor's would-be fiancée, and assure her that the young man had every intention of caring for her as a wife.

Yours sincerely, Samuel Kapinsky

The singer read the letter again, running her thumb over the lawyer's signature. 'Fiancée?' she breathed in wonderment, 'Me?' and read it again. When she had done so, she looked up.

'Who is this innkeeper he mentions?'

'You yourself provided that clue, when you said that Raynor had an interest in local history, specifically in its eccentric characters. Including the stage-coach driver who ran an inn south of Santa Cruz.'

'Mountain Charley?'

'Charley Pankhurst, who died in 1879, at which time it was discovered that he was a she. It causes one to wonder how many other women have worn trousers, cut their hair, and quietly placed themselves on the voting registry.'

'But I don't understand—what that has to do with me?'

'You told me that one of Raynor's discussion questions was, What one thing would make you give up your life as it was? You told him, love. I should say he was about to take, as they say, the plunge, gambling that you would consider life with him as an alternative to the stage. After all, if Charley Pankhurst could sign a voting registry, why should Billy Birdsong not sign a marriage contract?'

'But that's not possible! Is it?'

'I have no idea. I think it likely Raynor himself did not know if Mr Kapinsky would have succeeded in identifying a legal loophole that would permit it. However, the letter suggests that Raynor intended to try. In either case, his sister's letter makes very

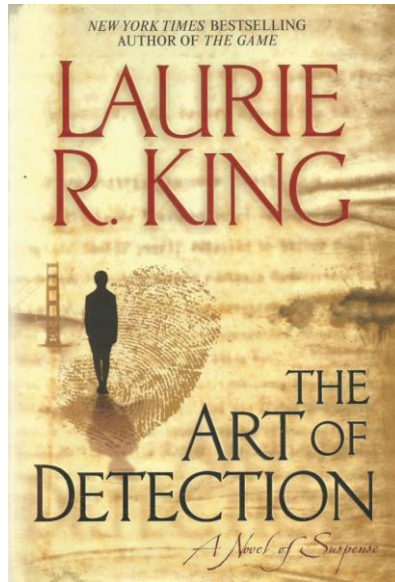
clear that he was determined to proceed without benefit of law, were you willing to undertake the performance of a lifetime.’

When she and Ledbetter put their arms around each other’s shoulders and began to weep copious bittersweet tears over the lawyer’s letter, I took up my hat and left them to their romantic phantasies.

It was my opinion that, had Jack Raynor lived, it would have all ended in tears, mostly bitter, few sweet. Birdsong would have agreed to Raynor’s proposal, telling herself that she was happy to trade her gay, free life for one of true love. But how long would it have been before the constraints of deceit ate into their bond? Even in the free air of California, the pair would have been constantly on guard, against doctors, servants, friends, family. Granted, everyone in California is from somewhere else, which means everyone in the state has had to re-invent themselves. But habits die hard, and a new identity that lies too far from the old can become an intolerable burden. Every man’s death diminishes me, but some deaths create their own rightness.

As I strolled through the streets of San Francisco on that pleasant spring dawn, I grew aware that my spirits were more elevated than they had been before I set out on this case. I was, in fact, conscious of a veritable bounce in my step, and found that my throat was humming a little tune.

Yes, I would admit it freely: San Francisco had proved a most educational place, in the end.



For the rest of this tale, including the 2004 portion that wraps around this 1924 excerpt,

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