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**DEATH ON THE
PALETTE**

by **LAWRENCE TREAT**

**DIG A GRAVE
FOR ME**

by **G.T. FLEMING-ROBERTS**

**DALE CLARK-JULIUS LONG
AND OTHERS**

DEATH ON THE PALETTE

By LAWRENCE TREAT

Author of "Death's Old Sweet Song," etc.



One small, unhappy family, the Mortons, and more than slightly wacky. Why they ever wanted Drusilla's whiskey-bloated face perpetuated in oils Ned Scott couldn't imagine—but he didn't have long to ponder the question. Drusilla had done her last tipping. She had tossed off a swig of brandy and was now quite dead. Poison—or the one drop of alcohol that broke the camel's back?

An Edward Asa Scott Novelette



Drusilla had sat for her last portrait. She was dead—the corners of her mouth seared with acid.

CHAPTER ONE

Posthumous Portrait

THE only question an intelligent person could possibly have asked was who would kill whom—and when. And so Edward Asa Scott was asking himself just that, while he sat around with the three Mortons and discussed the portrait he was going to paint.

He'd known Harry Morton for quite a few

years. Descended from an old American family, he was a criminal lawyer who'd twice faced disbarment and twice managed to get away with it. As a result, he'd grown cautious and had changed his practice from protecting gangsters to protecting tax-dodgers. He seemed to think there was a difference.

He usually invested his money in shady enterprises that either blew up in his face or else brought him a fortune, which he'd promptly squander. In a conservative moment, he'd once put a hundred thousand or so in paintings he didn't appreciate. There was no way of telling when he was broke or when he had a half million dollars stashed in the bank.

Besides Harry Morton, there were two other people in the room. Harry's sister, Drusilla, sat all by herself on the couch and whined about why people never came and visited her. Scott could have told her. She was as bloated and stingy an alcoholic as had ever survived the rotting of her own liver, and people didn't want to be contaminated.

Craig, the Morton nephew, had stuffed his oversized carcass into the biggest and most comfortable chair in the room. Occasionally he grunted, cleared the boredom out of his throat and seemed on the point of saying something, but he never did. He kept looking at the door as if he expected someone to come in and rescue him.

Scott wondered why Craig Morton was included. He had a big round face and was as useful as an overgrown weed. He was probably the only surviving relative and he lived off the fat of his aunt. Or his uncle. At any rate, he treated them both as if he couldn't wait till they died and made him an heir.

The portrait of Drusilla had been Harry's idea and now they were haggling over the price in the downstairs living room of Drusilla Morton's shabby, antique brownstone.

"Fifteen hundred," Ned Scott announced, and promptly lost interest in the discussion. They'd pay it, or they wouldn't get a portrait.

It was an effort to let his eyes take in so much ugly furniture all in one room, but he kept at it as a sort of test of his own will power. That was how he happened to notice the revolver lying on the console table. He got up and walked over to it.

"Whose is this?" he demanded, but he never picked up the gun.

The door seemed to open mysteriously and a long arm reached out and scooped up the revolver. Timmons, the butler, smiled thinly at the other end of the arm.

"It's Bridget's," he said. And then added: "Just a toy."

"Who's Bridget?" demanded Scott.

"She's my cook," declared Drusilla sharply. "If she wants a gun, she can have it."

Scott walked out of the room.

HE WAS tall, lanky, and had a nondescript, sandy-colored mustache. When it was waxed up he looked like a Beau Brummel, and when it wasn't he looked like a tramp with a second-hand toothbrush pasted across his upper lip.

His eyes were his outstanding feature. They were a clear, cool blue and they stared with a challenging directness. At times they seemed to go right through you and land miles beyond, at times they stopped in the middle and spread like a dum-dum bullet, and at other times they seemed to turn inward and open up a view of bottomless depths.

He was at his best in his studio, in the evenings, with a few unfinished canvases scattered about, the inevitable salami, piles of stale rye bread and hard, sharp-tasting cider there for the taking, while Scott unwound his mind and threw ideas around like a mad woman breaking up crockery.

He strolled into Drusilla Morton's library and the first thing that caught his eye was the damaged wall-safe. He stuck his hands in his pockets and stared. He heard the footsteps slink up behind him, but he didn't turn. He had a queer, unreasoning sense of danger, as if he'd opened up the closet and seen Bluebeard's seven wives hanging by their hair. He had to exert all his will power to keep from shuddering.

Then the voice of Timmons whispered in his ear. "It was broken into three days ago, sir, but nothing whatsoever was taken. Very mysterious."

"Who?" asked Scott.

"Everyone. Haven't you noticed, sir, the way they're always plotting against each other?"

Scott turned around. Timmons, dark, frowning, staring with dilated eyes, gave him the creeps.

"Let's see that gun," said Scott.

Timmons handed it to him, and it was a toy, at that. An imitation in plastic.

"Bridget plays a game," explained the butler in a low voice. "She leaves it on a table, and whoever picks it up is going to commit a murder."

"You picked it up," said Scott.

"So I did, sir. But I don't count."

Scott shivered. The dark, shadowy face, the glinting eyes, the cleft chin—the butler would make a perfect model for a Mephistopheles.

"You're off to a nice start for that sanatorium," remarked Scott blandly. "Why don't you take a good dose of mental castor oil and go off on a bender?"

"It would be undignified," said the butler, and dematerialized through the door. Scott turned and strolled out to the dim, stuffy foyer.

This time it was the maid. She was listening at the living room door, and she looked less like the kitchen than the chorus. There was nothing but challenge in the gray eyes she turned on Scott.

"They just agreed to offer a thousand," she said, "but they'll go higher if you insist."

"Nice eavesdropping," said Scott. What with sexy maids and mysterious butlers, Ned Scott was beginning to pick up interest. "Just stick around," he added, "and bet your money on me."

He opened the door, and the Mortons shut up with the precision of a Nazi gathering under orders from the Gestapo.

Scott looked them over. In the good old days, people like this lined up outside his studio and he socked them two thousand smacks per. But those times were gone, and he had a fourteen-year-old daughter at boarding school and the bills were rolling in.

"You don't know a damn thing about art," he said crisply, "but you wouldn't have asked me here unless you thought I was good. So the price is still fifteen hundred."

"Highway robbery!" exclaimed Morton. "Besides, with taxes so high—"

"Skip it," snapped Scott. "And every time you mention taxes, the price goes up a hundred. I don't mind being called a robber, but I like a little patriotism. Just a little."

"I've bought original Cezannes and Renoirs and paid less," declared Harry Morton.

Scott fixed him with a penetrating glance. "You bought a bunch of phonies, and what you're getting from me is a genuine Edward Asa Scott."

Drusilla giggled gleefully. Morton's lips clamped shut and his eyes went dark with hate.

Morton was sensitive about his collection and he couldn't stand the thought of being exposed as a sucker. Which he was. Scott had seen the Morton gallery previously and he knew that half of the old masters there had been painted within the last twenty years.

Scott saw he had Morton in a corner, and now he turned on Drusilla and delivered the coup de grace.

"I have a reputation and you're using it to squeeze into immortality on a hunk of colored canvas. All right. You put your dough on the line and I'll do the portrait."

Craig Morton got up and put his hand on the old war-horse's shoulder. "It's worth it, Aunt Drusilla," he said, and she nodded her approval.

Timmons had sneaked in again. Scott said: "I'll start Thursday. When I finish working, I like a drink of brandy. Fundador. Don't forget, Timmons."

Scott went out. Harry Morton ran after him and said: "You drive a hard bargain, Ned."

Scott replied: "It's dirt cheap, and when she dies you can hang her up in the middle of all your fakes and she'll be the best thing in your collection."

"Don't talk about her dying," said Morton. "It's bad luck."

"Superstitious?"

"Call it that," said Morton. "But she promised me five thousand dollars the first of the month, and I want her to live until she pays up."

He coughed and stepped away. While the sexy maid held Scott's coat, Morton slipped his hand into his pocket and handed Timmons a few bills. Timmons and Morton exchanged a look of understanding.

Scott was sorry he hadn't held out for two thousand.

ON the Thursday that Scott started work on the portrait, a detective happened to go into a pawnshop on a routine checkup, and found something. In a little while the dick sent for a radio car. It parked in front of the store while the pair of cops went inside. A few loiterers on the sidewalk stood staring or else milling around and asking questions, but after a while they drifted away. No excitement.

When the first car from Headquarters arrived, people began to sense that something was up, and by the time Inspector William Donnigan, Captain of Detectives, came he had to push his way through a small mob.

There were, however, no fireworks. Donnigan strode in and the pawnbroker ran forward and cried: "Mr. Captain Detective, I didn't mean nothing, honest. He came in with it and it was big and it was Washington, and why shouldn't I loan him a few dollars?"

Donnigan hardly looked at him. He said, "Let's see the thing," and the dick who'd spotted it in the first place held it up for Donnigan to study.

It was a canvas portrait measuring about two and a half feet by three and the edges were ragged, as if it had been hacked out of its frame. The background had red curtains and the features of the subject were the strong, familiar ones of George Washington.

Donnigan said: "Looks like it from the description, but I'm no art expert. I'll tell you what. Call up Ned Scott and get him down here. Gramercy 4-4728. He'll know." Then Donnigan turned to the pawnbroker. "How'd you get it?"

"Like I get everything. I'm an honest man. I wrote it all down in the book, like the regulations say. Some dark, Latin-looking guy brought it in. Black hair and a lot of pomade on it. He said he needed cash and he'd take what he could get. How was I to know it was stolen?"

"Maybe it wasn't," said Donnigan. "That's what I'm trying to find out."

The cop who'd phoned the Gramercy number came back and made his report. "Scott ain't in, Inspector."

"He never is when you want him," said the inspector. "Go on up there and wait for him. You'll find Becky, his housekeeper. Tell her you're hungry, and you'll get the kind of food you dream about. With salami on the side."

"I never dream," answered the cop.

Donnigan grunted. "You're missing the finer things of life. Scott is an epicure of food and friendship. He taught me." Then the inspector grimaced. What was the sense of trying to explain Ned Scott? He existed, and you had to see him to believe him. The whole six feet of him sprawled in a chair and spouting words at you till you got dizzy from the impact.

Language. You'd think a man who could talk like that would be a writer instead of a painter. Until you saw Ned Scott's stuff, of course. Then you knew he was doing what he was born for.

Donnigan turned to the pawnbroker. "We're taking that along on suspicion that it's stolen property. You'll get your receipt for it, and if it isn't what we think it is you'll have it back by tonight. But if this fellow who hocked it ever shows up, keep him here while you phone the police."

The pawnbroker whined monotonously. "I tell you, it was big and it was Washington. Who wouldn't give him a few dollars?"

Donnigan went out.

MEANWHILE, Ned Scott had started the portrait. He'd set up his easel and stuffed Drusilla into a chair. He'd squinted at her and couldn't concentrate because in the back of his mind he'd felt something was wrong.

Then it came to him. Timmons had forgotten to get the brandy. So Scott rang the bell, gave the butler money and sent him to the nearest liquor store for a bottle of Fundador.

When Timmons slipped into the room with the brandy and a couple of glasses on a hammered silver tray some time later, Scott barely noticed. By that time he was deep in his work.

He was standing near the window mixing yellow ocher on his palette. With a red ground, that ought to give him the right color for the small, bulbous nose.

The Wreck of the Hesperus, he'd call it. A

fat, dumpy little hangover in a shiny black dress, with a black velvet band around her throat. She'd spilled a bottle of liquor on her dress and the stain filled her lap. She smelt like a bar, too.

She said in a thin, plaintive voice: "Aren't you tired, Mr. Scott? Wouldn't you like a small refresher?"

He squinted at her nose again and studied his canvas. It needed another touch or two to give the faint suggestion of a sot. The tip of his brush moved lightly. He squinted again, mentally dividing her face into planes and apportioning the light that hit it.

"Don't bother me," he said. "I know damn well you're aching for a hooker and that your guts are as dry as the Gobi Desert. You can have your hooker when I finish."

"Everybody likes a drink once in a while," said Drusilla righteously. "I haven't had one since yesterday, because Harry bribes Timmons to ration me. I used to keep a bottle or two in the safe, but it was broken into and all the rum disappeared. I bet Harry did it. I like rum and I had a bottle this morning, but it fell out of my hands and broke. The way I feel now, I'd even drink brandy. If you'd open it for me—"

She lifted her crooked, useless little hands and exhibited a bandaged finger.

But Scott ignored her and kept on squinting. While he painted all he wanted was to be left alone. People thought that when he had a brush in his hands his mind was a blank, and that he painted the way a carpenter sawed a block of wood. Alice, his wife, was the only one who had ever understood. She had died ten years ago and he felt closest to her when he was painting. He could almost think of her now without bitterness.

"Drusilla," he said, "you can rattle away till your teeth crack, but don't rile me with silly questions. If you don't know what to say without driveling about a brandy bottle, tell me what you were like forty years ago. Were you pretty? Did you have any lovers? Whom did you hate most in the world and what for?"

"People never treated me right," she said promptly. "And there was always Dopsy. He hated me. I did him out of a hundred thousand dollars and some day he's going to get back at me. I hate him most in the world, but he hates me even more. What did you say about lovers?"

Scott didn't answer. He let her chatter, noticing what it did to her face, but scarcely listening to her words. He worked on the nose, delicately, then took a larger brush, smeared it across his palette and worked color richly into the background. Drusilla kept talking until the muscles of her jaws drooped slightly with fatigue and the contours of her face began shifting. Then he put down his

brush and said: "There. Now for your drink, Drusilla."

She hoisted herself out of the chair and tottered over to the long console table and the bottle. The two large brandy glasses shone brightly.

"Just a snifter," she simpered. "About half full."

Scott worked the corkscrew into the bottle and wondered how old it was. The cork was green with mildew and the label was marbled with the flecks of age. He dumped liquor into her glass till it was half full, and then gave himself a splash. He didn't drink it immediately.

She smiled gratefully. Then, before tasting the brandy, she handed him a check.

"This is the first payment for the painting. Five hundred." She had a second check in her hand and she frowned slightly. "You don't expect to see Harry today, do you?"

"I could. I pass his house on my way home."

She gave Scott the second check. "Then maybe you'd give him this. I promised I'd pay his share toward the Morton Foundation if I had enough money in the bank, and I have. He doesn't expect it till the first of the month and he'll worry himself sick about why I'm paying now."

"Why are you?"

"To annoy him. He likes to do things on schedule, neither beforehand nor late."

She screwed her chubby little face into a fleeting smile. Then she sighed contentedly, as if she'd just done a good deed. Scott stuffed the checks in his pocket without looking at them. Unconcerned, he watched her pour her drink down her gullet, then he held up his hands, saying, "Wash," and strode from the room. He slammed the door behind him and felt as if he were leaving a garbage dump.

The bathroom was down the hall and around a turn, and he cleaned up leisurely. There was a daub of paint over his eyebrows and he stared at himself in the mirror. Blue eyes with a quality he'd tried to get down on canvas and never could.

It was five or ten minutes later when he returned along the length of the corridor and opened the door. Drusilla had sat for her last portrait. In fact, as a subject she was posthumous.

CHAPTER TWO

A Sense of Poison

H EART, he supposed. It took a pump in good mechanical condition to force blood through her fat little body, and the machine had been wearing out. He bent down to make sure.

She was dead all right, but the stuff at the

corners of her mouth had burned like acid. There was too much alcohol around her lips to smell anything else, and besides, he was no toxicologist.

He did the things he supposed a doctor would have done. Felt for her pulse and her heart-beat and held a broken sliver of the brandy glass to her mouth. There was no breath. Poison, eh? Or the drop of alcohol that broke the camel's back?

He sniffed at the bottle, but it merely smelled like brandy. Then he lifted the glass which he hadn't tasted and held it near his lips. That was a little dumb. He poured a single drop on the back of his hand and smeared it. Then he did the same thing with a couple of drops from the bottle. Both samples were the same. The stuff had to be strong to burn his skin like that. He wondered how long it had taken to sear the inside of Drusilla.

He walked over to the door and yelled. Timmons had been around and he'd glimpsed the gray uniform of the sexy maid, but nobody answered now. He went to the stairs and called again. Then he returned to the room.

It began to dawn on him then. Poison in a brandy bottle can't be an accident, ever. And it wasn't suicide because she'd been chipper just a few minutes before and he'd seen her take the drink with gusto. But how the devil had the stuff got in? And how could he ever prove that the cork had been in there for years? And that he'd known nothing about the poison and had damn near drunk it himself?

His fingerprints were all over the bottle, too. He supposed he could prove his innocence by taking a drink and committing suicide. Then the police would have two corpses and no clues, and would have to decide how anybody could have slipped poison into a bottle that had been corked in a Spanish distillery along with a few hundred thousand other bottles.

This was screwy. The poison couldn't have been put in years ago and still have been intended for Drusilla or himself. It had been just a bottle of death sold in a liquor store to whomever was unlucky enough to buy.

But that was impossible, too.

He picked the thing up. No sense worrying about fingerprints now. The bottle was the right shape and the label looked normal and he was still stumped. And worried.

He could phone Headquarters and ask for his old friend, Inspector Donnigan, and say: "This is Ned, Bill, and I'm in a room with a stiff and a quart of poison and my prints prove I served it to her. A bottler with a sense of poison must have corked that bottle ten or fifteen years ago in Spain. The problem that bothers me is this: I'm the only person in the world who knows that the bottle hasn't

been uncorked in years, but I can't prove it. Only a stupid man or a firm friend would believe me. What would you do if you were me, Bill?"

And if Bill were honest he'd say: "Scram."

With the bottle, too.

So Edward Asa Scott, portrait painter and creator of the latest and best war poster, walked out of the house and became a fugitive from the police.

INSPECTOR Donnigan sat in the commissioner's office and digested what the commissioner had told him.

"I know Ned Scott pretty well," said Donnigan.

"What's that got to do with it?" rumbled the commissioner. "Because you know a man socially doesn't give him a clean bill of health. Scott was painting a portrait of Drusilla Morton, and it's still standing there on the easel. She's dead. Poisoned. The pieces of the broken brandy glass are on the floor, and they show her prints. There's another glass, untasted, on the table. In that one, there's a foreign substance which may be the poison. Looks like cyanide, but the laboratory report ought to be along pretty soon to tell us for sure. As for your friend, Scott, and the bottle from which she drank, they're both missing."

"Any more details on the butler and the maid?"

"Just what I told you. This cook, Bridget, has been with Miss Morton for years and apparently was fond of her. Bridget came back from her marketing and found a couple of kids playing stoop-ball. She's a crank and she chased them and called them names and one of their mothers came out and objected. There was a mild sort of ruckus, and the butler and maid came out on the street and persuaded Bridget to come into the house. It took quite a while, and by that time Miss Morton was dead and Scott had disappeared. The maid, who works part time, went home without even knowing anything had happened. We haven't located her yet."

"How about the bottle?" asked Donnigan.

"Where did it come from?"

"An ordinary liquor store. At Scott's request, Timmons went to the corner to buy some brandy. And Scott specified Fundador. The dealer couldn't have taken poison from his shelf and sold it as liquor. It follows that, after the brandy was poured out, the poison was added to the glasses. Or else a poisoned bottle was substituted."

"Timmons could have done that."

"Why would he?"

Donnigan bit his lips. "I don't know."

"The butler couldn't have put poison in the glasses because he wasn't there when the bottle

was opened," remarked the commissioner. "Scott's fingerprints were all over the cork-screw. So it boils down to Scott or a pixy."

"Why would Scott kill Drusilla?" asked Donnigan. The commissioner didn't answer. Donnigan sighed deeply and went on: "Just keep Scott's name from the reporters until you have something definite on him, will you? I know how he feels about publicity."

The commissioner didn't commit himself either way, which was a qualified consent. "What's at the back of your mind, Donnigan?" he asked.

Donnigan shook his head wearily. "I'm not sure. But, yesterday Harry Morton reports the theft of a hundred thousand dollars' worth of paintings. This morning, one of them, a Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington, shows up in a pawnshop. Later this morning, Morton's sister is found dead. Any connection?"

"You're at perfect liberty to find one. Personally, I don't see it. Let me ask you, Bill, why did you doubt the authenticity of this Stuart portrait?"

Donnigan shrugged. "I didn't—I was merely checking, as a matter of ordinary caution. But Morton will be here pretty soon, and I guess he can identify his own painting. All I'm asking you to do is hold off on Ned Scott. He'll come home and he'll have a perfectly reasonable explanation. There's no point in making him a fugitive from justice while he's taking an ordinary subway ride."

"If it were an ordinary subway ride, he'd be home now. Let Homicide handle it, Bill. That's their job. If your art robbery ties in with a killing, you'll work together. Meanwhile, you can keep each other informed. After all, you both want to talk to Scott. And to Morton."

"But we have slightly different approaches." Donnigan stood up. There was nothing he could do about it. Ned had pulled some queer ones in his time, and Donnigan hoped feebly that this wasn't one of them.

IT was one of Ned Scott's peculiarities that he always wrapped his packages in old newspaper and tied them loosely with a piece of string. The habit went back to the days he'd lived in France, where people hoarded threads and pins and where good-quality wrapping paper was a luxury that only the better stores could afford.

Therefore, he had picked a piece of old newspaper from the nearest rubbish bin, and rolled the bottle into it. It was under his arm when he stepped into a phone booth and dialed his own number. Becky, who had to be content with being his housekeeper instead of his wife, answered.

"Becky, my girl, this is Ned. I may not be home for a while. If anybody shows up

for dinner, feed 'em and make 'em feel at home, as usual. Anything happen?"

"The police are here."

"Already? Then tell them to wait, Becky. It's as comfortable a place for them as any. I'll call back."

"You'd better come home, Ned. That policeman's eating up all the salami."

"I'd better hang up. You can buy more salami but you can't buy the police. Not on my income, anyhow."

He put the receiver back on the hook. They couldn't trace him unless they put a call through to the operator while he was still talking on the wire. But he was surprised they were at his house already. That meant the body had been found and someone had blundered on the inspiration to plant a cop at his studio and send out a general alarm.

He thought it over quietly. He was in the jam of a lifetime. He was number one suspect in a murder that wasn't a murder, because that cork hadn't been out in ten years. Whomever the bottle was intended for, it couldn't have been Drusilla.

And why the hell not?

He wondered who had a motive for killing her. Craig? Obviously, because he was the heir apparent. Harry? Hardly. He'd been expecting a five-thousand-dollar check and he wanted Drusilla alive to sign it on the first of the month. He'd said so himself.

As for Ned Scott, the chief thing in his favor was that he had no motive. But he had everything else. Means, opportunity. . . He wondered whether that were enough. But even if it wasn't, it was plenty for the papers and the police.

Well, he had one meager, meaningless clue. Dopsy, who hated Drusilla.

The newspaper wrapping had come loose and he took it off and studied the bottle. He had the eyes and the trained faculties of an artist, and he put them to work.

The bottle had a deep scratch mark near the neck. The cork was dry and old. He pulled it out and smelt the bouquet. It lacked the full and delicate richness to which he was accustomed, but that might be because of the poison. That might be death, invading his nostrils. Still—

He examined the label carefully. Then he rewrapped the bottle, stuck it under his arm and sought out a liquor store. He bought another bottle of Fundador and headed for the subway. There, in the privacy of a men's room, he compared the two labels.

There were differences. Not many and not important, but enough to show that the two hadn't been engraved from the same plate—which might merely mean that they'd been stamped out a few years apart.

Ned Scott left the men's room, took a train

down to the Fifty-ninth Street station and strode to the row of steel package lockers. He dropped a coin in one and opened it, placed the two bottles inside the locker and closed the door. He stuck the key in his pocket and headed east. Harry was the one person who might know something about Dopsy.

Scott went past Morton's lavish home, on the opposite side of the street without stopping. There was a police car at the door.

It was logical, of course. The first people the police would question would be the brother of the murdered woman and the man who had been with her when she'd died.

Near the corner, Scott saw the lobby of a walk-up apartment. He turned in, telling himself he could wait there without being noticed. When the police car left, he could return to Morton's.

The man who was standing in the miniature lobby was young, dark, sharp-featured, with black, pomaded hair. He gave Scott a penetrating glance, took a quick step forward as if he were about to leave, and then changed his mind. He took out a cigarette and lit it.

"Cops," he said, jerking his head in the general direction of the Morton house. "Wonder what they want around here?"

Scott shrugged. "Probably selling tickets to the police show. Or else one of the cops has a girl friend in there."

"I don't like cops," blurted the dark man. Then, aware that he'd said the wrong thing, he added: "Always means trouble for somebody. Me, I keep thinking of the guy they're after."

"They're after me," remarked Scott.

HE said it brazenly, sensing that the dark man was no casual observer and in no position to turn Scott over to the police.

The dark man blinked. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Just a friend of Morton's. I want to see him and find out why the police are there."

"I'd like to find out myself," said the dark man.

"Go ahead," challenged Scott. "Walk right in. The police won't stop you."

The dark man whirled and grabbed Scott's wrist. His cold, vicious eyes stabbed at Scott and his voice crackled with menace.

"Who the hell are you? Where do you come in?"

Scott didn't move. Suddenly, he was afraid. Somehow, because of some cold, twisted hate, his life was threatened and this danger would follow him until the mystery of Drusilla's death was cleared up. He'd touched the wrong button in a man's mind and anything was liable to happen.

A pulse began drumming in Scott's temple. Almost, he felt he had something. Almost

he seemed to bridge a gap and get inside the dark man's mind. But not quite.

Then the moment passed. Scott was just staring at the murky eyes and sharp jaws of a man of Italian extraction. Slowly, the dark man's fingers relaxed and he backed away. Scott reached up and wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead.

"If you don't know who I am," he said quietly, "then why get so excited? And why expect me to tell you anything when I don't even know who you are?"

"I'm Tony," said the dark man, nervously. "That mean anything to you?"

"Tony who?" demanded Scott. And when Tony didn't answer, Scott went on. "There are a half dozen Tonys who were clients of Morton. Are you the one who worked on the killing of Drusilla Morton, or are you just a spindle-brained punk who happens to be hiding in the same doorway with me? And if you're not a cheap crook, tell me where I can get hold of Dopsy."

"Who's Dopsy?" said Tony. "Are you nuts, or me?"

"You are," said Scott. "You begin a conversation by stating you don't like cops, which is a bromide and a complete autobiography in one phrase. I suggest you visit Morton's house, and you stop three millimeters from an epileptic fit. I ask your name and you tell me it's Tony. You don't even know who I am yet you're all set to kill me. Without question, you're psychopathic."

"Nuts!" said Tony. He glared at Scott and then, suddenly and angrily, he spat at the tiled wall of the lobby.

Scott didn't move. Tony turned and walked away.

Frowning, Scott watched him. Tony knew Morton but he didn't react to the names of either Dopsy or Drusilla. Scott snorted. He supposed he was on edge, seeing death and miraculous clues in the chance presence of a bum in a doorway.

He told himself he was losing his grip. Tony had nothing to do with the Drusilla Morton case. He might be a client of Harry Morton's left over from the old days of criminal law. Except that clients went to Morton's office and not to his home.

Scott stepped out of the lobby and then ducked back into the doorway and waited. Timmons, Drusilla's unctuous butler, the man who had gone to a liquor store to buy a bottle of brandy and had returned with a quart of poison, had just walked out of Morton's house, nodded to a cop and crossed the street. It meant either that the police weren't working on the murder case or else that Timmons, for some strange reason, had already been questioned and set free.

On second thought, the reason wasn't so

strange. Timmons had been turned loose because the police had a much better suspect. A man by the name of Edward Asa Scott.

Scott stood in the doorway, wondering whether to step out and show himself. But he didn't have to decide. Timmons turned into the house and tipped his hat.

"Mr. Scott," he said quietly, "I'm very glad I saw you. But really, you shouldn't be here. There's a police car across the street and they're looking for you."

"Maybe you'd better hand me over."

"I'd be glad to," said Timmons, "except that Mr. Morton said you weren't guilty and that I should take care of you if I saw you anywhere."

"Why would you do that, Timmons? Why expose yourself to a charge of harboring a fugitive from justice just because Morton tells you to?"

Timmons smiled unpleasantly. "I think we'd better start," he said. "I'll tell you on the way."

Scott shrugged and headed for the street. "Well?" he said. "Still thinking over the answer to my question?"

"I don't have to think, sir. Mr. Morton is a very fine man and I've learned the value of his advice. He's been good to me. You see, I used to work for him."

"Then why did you leave him for Drusilla? It wasn't love, Timmons."

"Mr. Morton wanted someone to watch over his sister and keep her from disgracing the family name." Timmons' voice dropped to a hoarse whisper and his eyes widened meaningfully. "He felt he could trust me, and I was grateful for his confidence. As you probably realize, she had a tendency to drink."

"It was the death of her," observed Scott drily. "But, as for disgracing the family name, Morton escaped disbarment by the skin of his teeth. Twice. Seems to me that in comparison, an occasional binge is small potatoes."

"I beg to differ with you, sir. Shall we take the bus? It's harder to trace than a taxi."

CHAPTER THREE

Domestics Can Be Dangerous

ON the trip downtown, Scott didn't talk because the only question he wanted to ask was who had killed Drusilla Morton. So he sat and stared at Timmons and wondered in exactly what way Morton had been so good to his butler. Maybe Timmons was alluding to the bills that had changed hands the night the portrait had been commissioned. Maybe Timmons was just naïve.

At Twenty-third Street, Timmons nodded and stood up. Scott followed him to the street.

"Where to, Timmons?"

"To my apartment, sir. It's the safest place I can think of."

"I thought you lived at Drusilla's."

"I do. But Bridget and I—you see, we're married."

"I don't see."

Timmons blushed, and for a moment his dark, saturnine face was actually appealing. "Having a home of our own, even though we use it only once a week, is somehow a symbol. It makes us feel that we're not really in service."

"What's the matter with being in service? If you don't like butlering, there are plenty of jobs. I'm told there's a war on."

"Oh, I'm not complaining of the work. Or our quarters. We have the entire upper floor to ourselves. Dora is only there mornings, and one evening a week."

"Dora? She's the maid with the oomph, isn't she?"

Timmons nodded. "Rather neatly phrased, sir. Our apartment is in here."

It was a quiet, residential hotel, and a rather lavish indulgence for Timmons and his wife. Still, Scott supposed they made plenty.

Timmons unlocked the door to a modern two-room suite. "You see the difference, sir," he said. "It's ours. We own it. It gives us a completely different outlook on life."

Scott sat down on the couch. "Is it going to help find out who killed Drusilla? I take it that's why we came here."

"I don't know who killed her. The police questioned me at some length, but they didn't tip their hand."

"How come they let you go? I asked you for a bottle of liquor and you showed up with a load of cyanide. They knew that much."

"I didn't show up with it, sir. Someone apparently substituted the poison for the bottle I brought."

"How? When?"

"After I'd brought the bottle upstairs, ready to serve, I noticed that the corkscrew was stained. Dora hadn't polished it."

"So?"

"I left the tray on the hall table and went downstairs to the kitchen for another corkscrew. While I was downstairs, anyone could have walked into the house and put a different bottle on the tray."

"Wasn't the front door locked?"

"No, sir. That's why the police let me go. Dora had cleaned the lobby and had left her mop outside, and she hadn't closed the door."

Scott leaned back. An open door, by accident or otherwise. That made the whole world a list of suspects. It made Timmons the kingpin of the case, because he'd been smart enough to leave his tray near the open door. And it made Scott wonder how he could get

an opportunity to search Timmons' apartment.

"I could use a drink of brandy right now," said Scott suddenly. "Suppose you go out and get a bottle."

Timmons blinked. "It won't be necessary for me to go out. I'll just phone downstairs and the boy can get it for me." He smiled cannily. "Service," he added. "That's what Bridget and I like about our little love nest."

Scott noticed the sugar bowl in the kitchenette and he ambled toward it.

"Nice little setup," he observed. His fingers lifted the sugar bowl, scooped out a few grains and dropped them in his pocket. Timmons, phoning, didn't see. When he turned around, Scott was lounging at the window and staring moodily outside.

A boy brought the bottle about fifteen minutes later and Timmons opened it. Scott, watching him pour two small drinks, said: "How about something solid? I don't like liquor on an empty stomach."

While Timmons opened a cupboard, Scott dipped his hand into his pocket and slipped a pinch of sugar into one of the glasses. He did it awkwardly, so that Timmons was aware that something had been done, but still was not sure that the drink had been doctored. Then Scott picked up the other glass and held it to his lips.

Timmons came forward hesitantly, lifted the glass and sipped. "Did you put something in this drink?" he asked.

Scott nodded affably. "Sure. Like it?"

Timmons chuckled, as if Scott must have his little joke, and then gulped the rest of the drink. "What did you put in?" demanded the butler. "Knockout drops?"

"Timmons, if I'd killed Drusilla, I'd be likely to kill you, wouldn't I? And by the same method?"

"Perhaps. But you didn't."

"No," said Scott. "But I just proved a point."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"I think you do, Timmons. It happens that all I put in your drink was a few grains of sugar. But you didn't know that." Scott smiled and poured himself a second drink. "You see, you couldn't be sure I wasn't the murderer unless you knew who the murderer was. And you just admitted, by taking the drink, that you knew it wasn't I. Only the real murderer could be absolutely certain of my harmlessness. Tell me, Timmons, why did you kill Drusilla?"

TIMMONS took a long time to answer. When he did, his voice was unnaturally quiet. "I didn't like the birthmark on her little finger."

Abruptly, Scott flung the contents of his glass into Timmons' face. Timmons went

black with anger and his jaw muscles shook with uncontrollable rage. He tried to speak and he couldn't. A blubbing sound came from his lips. He wiped them off slowly and gulped. Then, finally, the words came.

"I wouldn't do that," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because all I have to do is pick up the phone and call the police."

"Go ahead," said Scott. "There's the phone."

Timmons didn't move. His dark, scowling face, his cleft chin and his cold, glittering eyes were a mask of evil. But he knew he'd lost his chance to bring the police. He'd lost it when he'd failed to call the patrol car across the street.

Scott wondered why Timmons had brought him here. There was a reason. There had to be one. Everything Timmons did was done for a purpose. He was shrewd and crafty and he thought his way through every step he took. He held every trump card in the deck, and he was using them with cold, sly precision.

"Go ahead," repeated Scott. "Call the police." And Timmons didn't.

The weak spot in Timmons' defense struck Ned Scott then. Scott had never been a man of violence. His pride was in the keenness of his brain. But it would have been sheer stupidity to throw away his one overwhelming advantage—the threat of physical force against a man who was a coward.

Ned Scott felt no real anger, but he could work himself into a frenzy at the flick of an eyelash. His voice lashed out in savage hysteria and he towered over Timmons.

"You killed her!" yelled Scott. "You murdered her and framed me!"

Timmons backed away. His breath came short and hoarse, and in his fear he was doubly dangerous.

"After I left her," roared Scott, "you went into the room and poured her a second drink, and then you poured more into my glass and into the bottle. And I'm going to beat you into a living pulp unless you sit down now and write out a confession!"

Timmons kept backing away and his mouth twisted to one side. "Don't hit me!" he whispered. "You try that and I'll kill you!"

His hand went to his belt and swept up with the long, shining blade of a knife. His glance dropped momentarily and almost caressed the knife.

"I could kill you!" he whispered. "I used to be able to throw a knife and I haven't lost the knack."

Ned Scott shrugged and sat down. His voice was normal, matter-of-fact. "You're out of practice," he said. "I bet you can't even hit the side of that table."

He nodded his head toward the gate-leg table at the other side of the room. There were a

couple of small ink stains on its surface.

Timmons gulped. "I could hit that ink stain ten times out of ten," he boasted.

Scott folded his hands. "Go ahead," he said.

Timmons couldn't make up his mind. If he threw the knife, he'd lose his weapon. On the other hand, if he made good his boast, he'd put the fear of death into Scott. No one wants to tackle a knife man.

Timmons made up his mind suddenly. There was just a blur of motion, a streak of silver and a dull thud. The hilt of the knife quivered lazily, and gradually came to rest. The blade was imbedded deep, and it bisected the small stain. The blade was streaked thinly with a coating of red.

Blood.

"You've lost your knife," said Scott.

Timmons shot forward in quick, running steps, but Scott leaped forward at the same time and blocked Timmons with his body. Timmons bounced back, grunting from the impact.

Scott hit him once, a booming thrust to the chin, and Timmons toppled and then started climbing to his knees. His hand was reaching for the heavy, metal-based ash tray. Ned Scott wheeled and dashed from the room. But, as he grabbed the door and slammed it, his fingers slipped along the latch and snapped it open. Then he went out.

Downstairs, he sat in a corner of the lobby and waited. He was convinced that Timmons was tied up with the killing and convinced that Timmons, in his fear, would lose his head and go running to the person or place that would give him away.

About ten minutes after Scott had taken up his position in the lobby, Timmons came down and walked quickly out to the street. Scott got up and followed.

He saw Timmons hail the first cab in the taxi line, slam the door and drive off. Scott signaled the second taxi and jumped in.

"Follow the cab that just left," he ordered. "Stick to him, and I'll make the tip worth it."

The cab lurched forward, sped for fifty feet or so and came to a stop. The driver turned around apologetically. "Red light," he said. "And a cop watching over there on the corner."

"Where's the other cab?"

The driver shrugged. "Lost him. What do you want, mister? Think it's as easy to follow somebody as it looks in the movies?"

Scott shrugged, and handed some change to the driver. Then he got out.

HE RETURNED to the hotel and went upstairs. The door to Timmons' apartment was unlatched, as Scott had left it, and he marched in. He began with the desk and ended

with the bureau drawers. He found nothing personal and nothing of interest, and there was no other place to look.

So far, beyond the facts of the murder, he'd learned little. A man by the name of Tony had given the impression of being involved, yet he had known nothing of Drusilla or Dopsy. Timmons, acting under Morton's orders, had hidden Scott from the police. As soon as complications had developed, Timmons had sped off—presumably to Morton, for instructions.

But Morton couldn't have killed his sister. The check proved that. Idly, Ned Scott took Drusilla's two checks from his pocket and then let out a long, low whistle. The check to Harry Morton was for five hundred dollars—his was for five thousand.

It was easy to guess what had happened. Drusilla, the sharp little spinster with the addled brain, had mixed up the two checks, and her mistake was worth forty-five hundred dollars to Ned Scott.

The case against him was complete. He had a motive.

He thought of calling Bill Donnigan, but he'd only have put Bill on the spot. Donnigan was a police officer and Scott was a fugitive, and that was that.

The footsteps in the corridor halted in front of the door and a key fumbled against the lock. Scott leaped up and took two long, silent strides to the kitchen.

He heard the door open and click shut, then the sound of footsteps and of low, heavy breathing. Bridget, unpinning her hat, saw him and stood there with her hands touching the hat brim and her eyes slowly widening in fear. Her jaw dropped open and the scream started.

Scott sprang at her and slapped his hand across her mouth. She made no effort to resist him, but her eyes rolled in terror.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "I'm not going to hurt you. I was here with Timmons and I'm waiting for him to come back. Understand?"

At the mention of her husband's name, her dilated eyes shrank to normal. Scott took his hand from her mouth.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I came to rest. I wanted to get away from that house. Miss Drusilla—" She took off her hat and dropped it on the couch.

"You know your husband killed her, don't you?" said Scott.

Her dull, drawn face jerked sharply and her voice came with cold anger. "You're lying," she said.

"I wish I were. I don't know how he got away with that story about the corkscrew. And between you and me, I don't think he did."

"Get out of here!" she said flatly. "Get

out this minute, or I'll call the police!"

"Look," said Scott. "I didn't do it. All I'm interested in is clearing myself. The way I see it, either Timmons or I had to kill her, and I didn't."

"Neither did Timmons. He's a good man," she said staunchly.

"Then who killed her?"

Bridget stared for a long time. Her eyes were blank and empty, but gradually they seemed to come alive as her slow brain found an idea and took hold of it.

"Dora," she said. "The maid who came mornings. She was always calling Miss Drusilla names and saying she hoped Miss Drusilla would die. The police couldn't find Dora, either, because they don't know her real name. They keep looking for Dora Latham, and that isn't her real name. But she told me."

"What is it?"

"I don't know," said Bridget. "She told me, but I forgot."

"Where does she live?"

"I wrote it down somewhere. I wrote it down, and then I lost the paper. Maybe it's in my pocketbook."

Scott picked up her purse and dumped the contents on the couch. He saw the slip of paper almost at once. It had Dora's name and an uptown address. He scooped it up.

Bridget meant danger. In her slow, stupid way, she could make more trouble than anyone else. She could call the police and tell them about Dora. She might even remember the address.

Ned Scott wished he could call Becky. Becky would take care of Bridget and worm out of her whatever information she had. But he couldn't risk calling Becky. Not with a cop there in the house.

"Bridget," he said, "I'll have to lock you in. I have to make sure you don't communicate with anybody for the next hour or so."

When he touched her, she tried to scream so he shoved his handkerchief in her mouth and tied the gag tight. He had to fasten her wrists, too. Then he hooked her under the arm and walked her to the closet. He pushed her in and locked the door from the outside. She didn't resist. He knew he'd have to call the hotel in an hour or so and send someone up to the room. He couldn't risk letting her suffocate.

He noticed a blank piece of paper on the table and began to sketch Tony's face from memory. It wasn't a masterpiece and he hated to sign his initials at the bottom, but he wanted to encourage the police to look up Tony and he wanted to tie Tony in with the Drusilla Morton case.

If he thought Bill Donnigan would see the picture, he'd have added a few lines of explanation. *Bill*, he'd have written. *Not my*

best work. A fair facsimile, but not art. Please keep it away from the papers. Ned.

But Bill would have nothing to do with the case. This was homicide, and Bill wasn't on the Homicide Squad.

CHAPTER FOUR

One-Man Crime Wave

INSPECTOR DONNIGAN picked up the empty picture frame which had once held a Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington when it had hung on the wall of Harry Morton's gallery. In a few places the ragged edge of the ripped canvas was still wedged between the frame and the wooden backing to which the canvas had originally been tacked.

He put the frame on a chair and then picked up the rolled canvas which he'd taken from the hockshop earlier in the day. The picture was too small.

The uniformed cop who'd been watching said: "She don't fit."

Donnigan nodded. "And Morton didn't think this was his, either. Said it looked like a copy."

"Want me to send it back to the hockshop?"

"No," said Donnigan. He didn't know why he said it.

The phone rang and he answered it. He said, "Yes, sure," a couple of times and then hung up. "That was Murphy, in Homicide," he remarked. "He has some new stuff on the case. I'll be down in his office for a while." Donnigan went out.

Murphy's office was as busy as a war plant. He interrupted himself in the middle of some instructions to a clerk and slid several papers to the left-hand side of the desk.

"Your pal Scott's on a one-man crime wave," he said. "The commissioner told me you'd gone to bat for him but that I shouldn't pay any attention to you. What makes you think he's clean on this case?"

"I know him. Maybe that doesn't cut any ice with you, Murph, but here's something that does. He had no motive."

"He had one, Bill. Look." Murphy held up a blotter. "She used this on a check she wrote this morning to Scott, for five thousand dollars. The painting only cost fifteen hundred. I'm guessing blackmail."

"How about the stub? What did that tell you?"

"She didn't keep stubs. She just wrote checks and let the bank handle the rest. When she wanted to know how much money she had, she'd call up the bank and ask. It's pure luck that she happened to use a fairly clean blotter."

"Five thousand dollars doesn't prove blackmail."

"When I get Scott, I'll find out what it proves. Here's the laboratory report."

Murphy turned back to the clerk while Donnigan glanced at the laboratory sheet. The brandy glass on the table at Drusilla Morton's had contained potassium cyanide. Drusilla had died as a result. In solution with the alcohol of the brandy, cyanide would form a tincture and would be stronger and work faster than otherwise.

Bill Donnigan put the report back on the desk. The clerk was leaving the room and Murphy said, without looking up: "Timmons, the butler, and Bridget, the cook are married. They have an apartment at the Yorkshire. Timmons met Scott on the street and took him up there. Scott tried to make Timmons change his story about the brandy bottle, and when Timmons refused, Scott beat him up."

"Doesn't sound like Ned."

"Scott pulled a knife. It was a meat knife he took from the kitchen and it had animal blood on it. Scott missed and the knife hit a table. Timmons managed to get his hands on the knife and then Scott beat it."

"You haven't heard Scott's side of the story."

"Sure," said Murphy. "Scott was only playing. So he waited downstairs, and when Timmons left, Scott tried to follow. Timmons shook him off and went straight to Morton with the story. Morton called us. I have a man getting the details now."

Donnigan walked over to the window. Something was bothering him, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Murphy's voice droned on relentlessly.

"Scott went back to the apartment for some reason. When Bridget came in, he beat her up and locked her in a closet. A neighbor heard her hammering on the wall and called the management. She was gagged and her wrists were tied. She said Scott had threatened to kill her."

"She's lying!"

"Bill, why don't you forget this case? Scott's a pal of yours, but he went haywire. Try and forget him."

Donnigan didn't say anything. He just stared, and Murphy turned away and blushed slightly. The door opened and the clerk came in with a big envelope.

"This just came," he said. "It's the picture from the Yorkshire."

"What picture?" snapped Donnigan.

Murphy opened the envelope and took out a pencil sketch of a dark, sharp-jawed man. Scott's initials were in the corner.

"They found this on the table, in Timmons' apartment at the Yorkshire," said Murphy. "Looks like a newspaper sketch."

"When a newspaper artist can do something like that," said Donnigan, "you'll buy a daily

masterpiece for three cents. What are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know. Maybe Scott was just doodling."

"Let me take it down to the Identification room," said Donnigan.

Murphy started to object, and then he shrugged. It was a good way to get rid of Bill Donnigan.

"Sure," said Murphy. "Go ahead."

NED SCOTT took the subway uptown to the address he'd found in Bridget's pocket-book. The house was a remodeled walk-up with a row of bells in the little rectangular lobby. He studied the name plates until his eyes stopped at the one marked *D. Latour*. It was the only one with the initial D and he pushed the bell button. When he heard the buzzer answer, he opened the door and went up to the second floor.

She was the Morton maid, but she looked different, now that she wasn't wearing her uniform. She still had the "I-got-it" look, the disillusioned mouth and the fancy hair-do, but she was wearing a simple print dress that draped carelessly over her figure. The combination struck Scott's painter's eye and he stood staring at her while she said: "Well? What brings you here?"

"I thought you worked for the Mortons," said Scott.

"Nine to twelve on weekdays, except Tuesday when I stay as late as they make me. And the old buzzard makes."

"What time did you leave today?" he asked.

Her answer was as cold as Drusilla's corpse.

"Say, what are you after?"

"Dora," he said, "I believe you were trying to pull something on Drusilla Morton. And Drusilla Morton was murdered this morning, just around the time you left for the day."

"It's lucky I left," remarked Dora. "How was she killed?"

"By poison, which she took in her brandy."

Dora threw her arms around him. "Mr. Scott," she said, "do come in. I'm not even pretending I'm sorry. Come in and tell me all the gory details. Did she suffer?"

She was tugging at his arm and he let her lead him into a living room that came straight from last Sunday's bargain ads. She sat him down on the red Victory couch. Her laughter was half hysteria and half relief.

"So somebody poisoned the old tank!" she exclaimed. "So she drank a glass of poisoned brandy! Tell me about it, Mr. Scott."

It was the carrying quality in her voice. It was the way she repeated the information. Scott guessed she was talking for the benefit of someone in the next room.

He got up and lit a cigarette. He didn't walk directly to the door, but marched up and

down the room while he spoke, passing the door casually without looking at it. While he talked, he kept staring at her.

"There isn't much to tell," he said. "I was there at the time it happened. The police questioned me and then let me go."

"Who gave her the brandy?" asked Dora.

"I don't know. It came out of a bottle, which is the usual thing. But I wonder what the police will think when they catch up with you."

"What are you talking about?"

"The fake name you gave Drusilla. What's your regular line, Dora? Chorus or what?"

She laughed, and Ned Scott jerked open the door. Craig Morton was there on his knees, with his eyes at the level of the keyhole.

Scott grabbed Craig's hand and yanked him to his feet. The palm was limp, sweaty, and Craig had a sheepish grin on his face.

"Congratulations!" snapped Scott. "Congratulations, Craig. You made it—you're an heir! Drusilla's dead and the police don't know how it happened and all her money goes to you. You have exactly what you want, and there's no reason for accusing you except for one thing—what the hell are you doing here with Dora?"

Craig blinked and swayed slightly, and Scott realized that he was very drunk. It was in his slow reactions and the fuzziness of his eyes. He frowned and tried to focus his eyes, and the sheepish grin returned to his face. He thrust back his shoulders and raised his head.

"I have a right to be in my wife's apartment, haven't I?" he said.

SCOTT wheeled about and looked at Dora.

"We've been married for two weeks," she said calmly. "It will make a nice newspaper story, won't it?"

"The police will be interested," observed Scott.

Dora walked to the table, scooped up her hat and started to put it on. "Craigie," she said, "you stay here a little while, won't you? It wouldn't be a very good idea to show yourself right now. And as for Mr. Scott, I'd like to talk to him. You don't mind, do you, Craigie?"

"Yes," he said, "I do."

She laughed gaily. "Mr. Scott and I are going out for a drink. We have things to talk about." She slipped her arm through Scott's. "Come on, Rembrandt," she said. "Put on your beard and let's go."

Scott shook her loose. "I'm staying," he said. "I want Craig in on this, and I want to ask him a few questions. The first one is, who's Dopsy?"

Craig lifted his head and began laughing. The laughter came in great, shattering gales

that rocked his whole body and brought the tears to his eyes. He staggered around the room and hurled his laughter at Scott and at Dora, at the pictures and the cheap new furniture. Finally he flung himself on the couch, lifted his head and tried to speak. But the laughter still had him. He choked and coughed and gasped, and spluttered out his words one at a time.

"Dopsy," he croaked, "is a galootinian!" And then he sagged back on the couch and passed out cold.

Dora stared coldly at her husband. "Imagine being married to a moron like that!" she said. "What a girl will go through, just for the sake of a little dough!"

Craig Morton stirred drowsily. Ned Scott said: "I was thinking pretty much the same thing. Craig didn't have any money of his own, did he?"

"Not a cent. Just what that old hag gave him. He said she'd die pretty soon, and I told him I wouldn't marry him unless he could support a wife. He caught on real quick, too."

"Combining a funeral and a honeymoon. Is that it?"

She nodded. "Funerals can be pretty nice. I don't get sentimental about them, either. Little Dora's a practical girl. If you come into the dough when somebody dies, why kid yourself and think you ought to mourn?"

"How about the bottle?" asked Craig, "the bottle of poison. Where did it come from?"

"Oh, that," she said. "It was hanging around. All the Mortons knew about it. Timmons showed it to me and warned me never to use it. It had a scratch mark to identify it."

"It was in Drusilla's house?"

Dora nodded. "She put it in the safe, and there it was until Craig broke in to get the will. I wouldn't marry him until I'd seen it, of course."

"What happened to the bottle then?"

Dora shrugged. "Ask Bridget. She hid it away because she was afraid Drusilla would drink it while she was on a jag. You know, the faithful old servant, scared her beloved mistress was going to knock herself off."

"How did you know Bridget hid it?"

"She admitted it, but she wouldn't say where." She pointed to Craig. "Ask him. Bridget never kept anything from him." Her lips curled in wry contempt. "You know, I never thought he'd have the nerve."

"For what?" asked Scott.

Dora made a face. "What do you think?"

That was when Craig opened his eyes. "Not drunk," he muttered. "Heard every word you said."

He sat up slowly, grinning sheepishly and rubbing his forehead.

Scott backed away. He felt a physical revulsion that almost made him sick to his

stomach. Dora, marrying Craig because he'd promised to kill his aunt, and then blabbing the story to the first person who came along. And Craig dead drunk.

Craig lurched forward suddenly and clawed at Dora. She screamed, and then her scream was choked off as Craig's fingers found her throat and squeezed on the windpipe.

Scott dived and smacked Craig in the face. Craig's fingers jerked loose and Scott grabbed his hand and twisted it. Dora began coughing. Her face was livid with anger and pain and she began swearing in a steady stream. She didn't bother to form sentences. She just spat out the words as fast as she could think of them.

Craig turned away from her. "Heard every word," he repeated. "Accusing me—murder. When everything I did—she was in on it, too."

Scott gritted his teeth and repeated the question he'd asked before. "Who's Dopsy?" he demanded.

The sheepish grin came back to Craig's face. "Never heard of him," he muttered.

The front door buzzer rang with a sharp, shattering insistence. Dora didn't answer it. Instead, she walked to the window and glanced out. "Cops," she said briefly.

Craig laughed, and unwound a long, looping blow. Scott ducked underneath, jabbed at Craig's stomach and danced back. Dora rushed at Ned Scott and clung to his arm.

There was no sense to what Scott did. It flashed across his mind that Craig had a motive and that Dora had accused him of murder, also that if Craig were convicted he wouldn't get his inheritance and neither would Dora. Scott thought of Tony and didn't see where he fitted in, and then he thought of Timmons and his talent with a knife.

Maybe Craig had killed his aunt and maybe he was just drunk and pretending he was guilty. But the police were downstairs and the side window opened onto a fire-escape. He tore loose and dived for the window.

INSPECTOR DONNIGAN came into the Identification room with Ned Scott's sketch in his hand. He called to a stocky man with glasses: "Ritchie, can you tell me who this is?"

Ritchie crossed the room and studied the picture. "Nice drawing," he said. "I've seen that face somewhere, but I can't place it. Who did this thing?"

"Edward Asa Scott. Friend of mine, and the best artist in America. Can you look this up?"

Ritchie nodded. "Sure. Just give me time to check through the files. I've seen that face and I'll get him."

It took only twenty minutes before Ritchie came up with the information. Bill Donnigan

smiled and read the material typed on the card. *Antony Tessa. Age, 24. Arrested five times on larceny charges. One conviction. Served three years of a five-year sentence. Now free on parole.*

"What do you want him for?" asked Ritchie. "With that parole business, you can send him back for almost anything."

"All I want to know is why he sat for a sketch by Ned Scott. I'm wondering . . ."

Donnigan picked up the phone and spoke crisply. "Joe? I'm in the Identification room. I want you to pick up a photograph here and take it down to the pawnbroker who had the Washington portrait and see if this is the man who hocked it. Let me know as soon as you have an answer, either way." He put down the phone. "There are some cases, Ritchie, that just don't make sense. And when Ned Scott gets involved in one, the police ought to start praying. Thanks for getting this, Ritchie."

When Donnigan got back to his office, his clerk handed him the phone. Murphy was on the wire.

"Bill," he said. "I sent a couple of men to talk to the Morton maid. The one who was there in the morning and left before all the excitement."

"They took their time," said Donnigan.

"They had a little trouble locating her. When they got there, they found her and Craig Morton together, claiming they were married. And they were both kind of mauled up."

Donnigan knew what was coming next. "How come?" he asked.

"Scott," said Murphy crisply. "Scott was there but he escaped through a window just before my boys broke in. According to Craig Morton and the girl, Scott came in and accused them of murder, just as he did with Timmons and Bridget. When they tried to calm him down, he went berserk and attacked them."

"Why believe their side of the story?"

"Scott was there all right and somebody handled them rough. The girl had finger-marks on her throat."

"This Craig—he had a motive, didn't he?"

"Yeah. We're working on him now. And his getting drunk and marrying a girl like her, there's plenty behind that. But Scott's still the Number One man. What does he go around beating people up for? Does he need the exercise, or what?"

"Listen, ever hear of Antony Tessa?"

"No. Who's he?"

"He's a crook out on parole right now, and it was his picture that Scott sketched. I sent out a pick-up order on Tessa. You'll let me know when you locate Scott, won't you?"

"Sure. But after we get through with him—"

"None of that, Murphy."

"Sorry, Bill, but I'm on a homicide case and I want this guy Scott. That's all." Murphy hung up.

Donnigan leaned back in his chair. He wondered what Ned Scott was after and why he didn't have the sense to march into police headquarters.

A few minutes later the phone rang and one of his own staff said: "Inspector? I'm at the pawnshop with that picture of Antony Tessa. The old guy here says Tony's the one that hocked the portrait. Anything else?"

"No," said Donnigan, and hung up.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mistaken Homicide

IT WAS dark when Ned Scott came down the street in the East Sixties and walked cautiously past Harry Morton's house. There were no police in sight. Scott turned, walked up the stoop and rang the bell.

The evening papers hadn't played him up. They'd mentioned the fact that the police were looking for him because he'd been doing a portrait of Drusilla at the time of her death, but the obvious inference had not been drawn. Scott supposed they were afraid of libel.

The butler opened the door and Scott stepped into the big, marble entrance lobby dominated by a stone fountain that shook his faith in art.

"Is Mr. Morton in?" asked Scott.

The butler hesitated. "He has a visitor, Mr. Scott. If you'll wait—"

"Sure. Where is he?"

"In the gallery. Would you care to wait in the library, sir?"

Scott let the butler usher him into a room whose bookshelves would never be touched by anything more personal than a dustcloth. The fact that the butler had recognized him was bad. And the statement that Harry Morton was busy in the gallery might be a ruse to hold Scott here while the butler phoned the police.

As soon as the butler had disappeared into his quarters at the rear of the house, Scott left the library, crossed the lobby on tip-toe and opened the door to the art gallery. At first, the two men didn't see him.

Three lamps were lit in the long, vaulted room. Morton was seated in a big chair, but he wasn't comfortable. His glasses had slipped down to the end of his nose, his hair was ruffled and his tie had been yanked over to the side of his neck. His hands, crossed awkwardly on his lap, were tied at the wrists with a handkerchief.

The other man was more at ease and he brandished his gun carelessly. Scott recognized him at once. Tony, the man who had

threatened him so inexplicably this morning.

Scott took in the pair with a rapid glance, then noticed something that was more important. The paintings. About half of them were missing. The frames were empty, with shreds of canvas wedged along the borders to show how the paintings had been ripped out.

The closing door squeaked and the dark man wheeled sharply. "You!" he exclaimed.

Scott moved forward almost casually. As he advanced, he noticed the gilt titles under the empty frames. He frowned. If he'd only had a couple of minutes to think this through, he might have hit on something. But instead, he's walked in on a situation that was supposed to be private, and this dark guy was liable to object.

"Put that thing away," said Scott. "Guns never solved a problem yet without raising two new ones. I'm going to write a book about it some day and get famous. Meanwhile, I give you the information gratis."

"Ned," said Morton in a hoarse, crackling voice, "take the gun away from him and get me out of this!"

Tony muttered from the side of his mouth. "Try it, pal. Just go ahead and try it."

"Thanks," said Scott, "but I have a well-developed sense of self-preservation. Who's your guest, Harry?"

"Tessa," croaked Morton. "Tony Tessa, and he's trying to blackmail me!"

Tessa snapped: "Shut up! If you both know too much, I'll knock off the pair of you!"

Scott smiled. "Just stick to Harry Morton and don't let me bother you. What happened to all your paintings, Harry? Selling out?"

"I had a robbery," said Morton.

"So I notice," remarked Scott. "They're insured, of course. I didn't check them carefully, but it seems to me that the ones that were stolen were just copies."

"You couldn't prove that," mumbled Morton.

"Maybe not, but I could make a hell of a lot of trouble. And the insurance people wouldn't pay promptly."

Tessa brandished the gun. "Hey, what is this? If you tried to put something over on me, Morton—"

Morton's eyes flashed. "Leave the thinking to me, Tessa. You did your work and I'll protect you, the way I promised. Scott has nothing on you, and as for the evidence, it's been destroyed. I said I'd take care of you and I've done it."

"Yeah," said Tessa. "In a pig's eye, you did!"

"I tell you, Tessa, the evidence went into the garbage can last night. They're gone—every one of them."

Tessa jerked the gun up and down while a slow, worried expression crossed his face. "I kept one of 'em out," he said. "I hocked it."

"You fool!" cried Morton, and jumped up. Tessa swung the gun and whacked him in the stomach. Morton dropped back, coughing and gasping for breath. "You fool!" he repeated.

"LET me get this straight," said Scott suddenly. "Tessa, you were paid to steal some paintings from this gallery. That's right, isn't it?" Tessa didn't answer and Scott went on. "You were told which ones to take. They were copies, of course. The genuine ones had probably been sold, but the insurance company didn't know that. Tell me, Tessa, what did you do with them?"

"Gave them to the guy that spoke to you this morning, right after I left. All except one, like I just said."

"You gave them to Timmons," said Scott, "Morton's man Friday. Morton has something on Timmons, of course. So you gave them to Timmons and now you're trying to blackmail Morton for his part in the conspiracy."

Scott turned his back to Tessa and addressed Harry Morton. "I don't see how you expected to get away with it, Harry. The genuine ones are sure to show up eventually, and then where are you?"

Morton smiled craftily. "They won't show up. I needed money a few years ago and I sold them. And do you know where? In France! There's no record in this country and the paintings themselves are probably in Berlin. You can tell every word of that to the police, and all I have to do is deny it and there isn't a shred of evidence against me."

Scott nodded and looked at Tessa. "He's right, Tony. How much are you trying to get out of him?"

It was Morton who answered. "Fifty grand. If I had that much, I wouldn't try to collect on my paintings, would I?"

"Sure," said Tessa. "This house. Marble fountains. A butler in a full dress suit. No dough, huh? Nuts!"

"A man like me," said Morton, "lives big but has no cash. I've been depending on my sister. Taxes, you know what they are?" he

A WORD TO THE WISE

Waste paper is still an important war material—it's essential for packing ammunition. So in order to make sure there's enough left over to go 'round for your favorite publication, don't forget to save all waste paper and turn it in for scrap.

cried. "Taxes, that's where all my money goes! Taxes!"

"Look," said Scott, "this isn't the time to get worked up over an obligation to your country. This guy's going to kill you if you don't raise some cash. Just promise him, Harry. Sell the house and sell the butler and sell the paintings, too—what's left of them. As for the fountain, blow it up. It's ugly."

"You button your lip," said Tessa. "I don't like you."

"I'd be glad to button it," said Scott, "except that there's a little matter of a murder. And Dopsy." Ned Scott burst out laughing. "Harry, you're Dopsy! That was Drusilla's pet name for you! That's why Craig burst out laughing when I asked him. Uncle Dopsy! Who wouldn't laugh?"

"You can forget the murder," remarked Morton. "The police arrested Craig. This Dora person talked, and they have everything from Craig except a straight confession. He admitted the whole murder scheme and merely claims that he didn't go through with it. Which is a pretty weak defense."

"How about the bottle?" asked Scott.

"A relic from bootlegging days. There were gang feuds that used to be settled at conference tables." Morton grimaced. "Somebody was poisoned at one of those conferences and it was customary to insist on an unopened bottle. One of my clients made up a bottle of poisoned brandy, in the old days. When he went to jail he gave it to me. I've kept it ever since, as a sort of souvenir."

Tessa burst out suddenly: "Who the hell cares about that? I been kidding around here long enough. You two are stalling. What for, huh? Maybe you want to make me the goat! I'm on parole. All you gotta do is whisper to the cops—"

Tessa's mouth began working and he jerked the gun from Morton to Scott. Something had pushed the homicidal button in his brain and he was a killer now.

"THE pair of you, slick, talking fools! I want dough and I want it quick, see? Otherwise . . ."

He stood there, breathing the quick, panting breath of physical exhaustion. His fingers grasped the gun and twitched slightly.

Morton licked his lips. "Tony," he said, "take it easy. Let's get everything straight.

You want money from me, and I haven't got it. Scott has money and he's just as dangerous to you as I am. So you take Scott instead of me."

"I'm going to take the both of you!" whispered Tessa.

Scott folded his arms and spoke in a low, soothing voice. "Tony," he said, "use your head. You can't get any money out of Morton because he hasn't got it. Neither have I, but I have something a lot better—the evidence in the Drusilla Morton case."

"Who cares about her?" snapped Tessa.

"Nobody. But the person who killed her and the persons the police suspect will pay plenty to anyone who has the bottle of poisoned brandy. And if you lay off, I'll give it to you—a fortune in blackmail!"

Tessa glided forward until his gun was six inches from Scott's belly. "Where is it?" sneered Tessa. "Hidden under your cuff button?"

Ned Scott shook his head. "It's in a public locker," he said softly, "and I have the key. Right here, in my pocket."

"Move your hands slow," said Tessa. He moved slightly to the side so that he could see Morton. "All right, Scott. Let's have the key."

Cautiously, staring at the narrow, filmy, merciless eyes of Tessa, Scott slipped his hand into his vest pocket. Then he blinked. The key wasn't there.

"Well?" asked Tessa.

Ned Scott's voice was hollow. "I'm looking," he said.

Tessa just laughed.

Scott searched slowly, playing for time and realizing there was no other way out. He knew he'd put the key in the lower lefthand pocket of his vest. But it was no longer there. He supposed he'd dropped it going down the fire-escape at Dora's.

He searched methodically. Lower vest pockets, upper vest again. Trouser pockets, two side, two hip and one watch pocket. Jacket, three more pockets. Then he took out his wallet.

If only he had another key. Tessa wouldn't know the difference. Any key at all would save Ned Scott's life, and he had none. He never carried one. He lost them too often, just as he'd lost this one, and years ago he'd given up the custom of ever locking anything.

IF YOUR COPY OF THIS MAGAZINE IS LATE—

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Finally, he gave it up. "No key," he said sheepishly. "Sorry, Tony. Go ahead and shoot."

Tessa didn't fire. He just keep staring at Scott, staring past him and not moving a muscle. Then the gun dropped from his fingers, he raised his hands and stepped back.

The police were here. Harry Morton's butler had phoned them on Scott's arrival.

Ned Scott began laughing. He wondered whether he'd known that all along, subconsciously. It could be, of course. It would make him sound pretty clever when he told the story.

Except that it wasn't true, and he knew it.

BILL DONNIGAN was merely one of the group of detectives that sat around the room at Headquarters and asked Scott questions.

"You left the scene of a murder," said the Homicide man whom everybody called Murph, "and all the talking in the world can't explain that. Maybe everything else you've told us is straight. But you still left the scene of a crime and withheld material evidence."

"Look," said Scott. "I'll make a deal with you. You say you have Harry Morton for claiming insurance on the fake Gilbert Stuart which was left in the hockshop. You have my statement to prove it's a copy, and you have Tessa's testimony that it was one of the paintings he stole, in collusion with Morton. Further, in Tessa's room you found the missing strip of border which he cut off, so that now it fits the frame."

"What's that got to do with the charges against you?"

"Nothing. I'm just going over the whole business before I make my proposition."

Murphy laughed sarcastically. "What kind of a proposition do you think you can make to the homicide squad?"

"I can keep you from making fools of yourselves. Craig Morton didn't kill his aunt. Maybe he planned to, but he never did."

"No kidding," said Murphy. "I'll tell you what. If you can prove that, you can walk out of here free."

In the ring of detectives, Inspector Bill Donnigan was the only one who didn't laugh.

"Thanks," said Scott. "You got the bottle of Fundador, didn't you? Whose prints were on it?"

"Yours. And nobody else's. And if you had a motive, you'd be charged with murder.

But it's pretty clear that whoever put the bottle there, wiped off his prints. So who do you think murdered Drusilla Morton?"

"Nobody," said Scott. "She wasn't murdered."

Murphy's voice sounded as if he were getting pretty tired of the whole business. "Then who was?" he asked.

Ned Scott leaned back and smiled. "Me," he said. "Now listen to your facts. The safe was broken open—that was Craig getting a look at the will. And Harry Morton bribing Timmons—that was to keep Drusilla from getting drunk. So those points don't mean anything. But this one does: Drusilla Morton never drank brandy. She hated the stuff."

"That's why she only drank about a half pint," jeered Murphy.

"She was an alcoholic, and she didn't have anything else. She was starved for it and she'd have lapped up anything. She'd hurt her hand and broken the only bottle of rum in the house earlier in the morning when she was trying to open it. But nobody could possibly have foreseen that, and so nobody could possibly have tried to murder her with a bottle of Fundador. She'd have taken rum, every time. It was me they were after."

Murphy wiped his face and Scott went on. "All your suspects knew Drusilla's habits. She drank rum. She'd have sent out for another bottle, except that I wouldn't stand for the interruption while she was posing. So it was pure accident she was killed. The murderer wanted to kill me, and the only person with a motive against me was Morton. His motive was to get me out of the way so that I wouldn't expose his picture fraud. Even if I couldn't prove anything, I'd delay the insurance payment. So he concocted a scheme that was supposed to get me—not Drusilla, certainly, since she was advancing him some money. After it backfired, he sent Timmons to watch over me until a second chance to kill me came along. Get it?"

Murphy bit his lips, turned his back to Scott and walked over to Donnigan. "Bill," he said, "you win."

Quietly, the ring of detectives broke up. When Murphy admitted he was wrong, and did it with a half dozen of his own men watching, that was history.

Scott said: "Come on down to my place and have a drink of my private stock. Fundador, without poison."

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