

***THE
BLACK-EYED
BLONDE***

A PHILIP MARLOWE NOVEL

BENJAMIN BLACK



MANTLE

It was one of those Tuesday afternoons in summer when you wonder if the earth has stopped revolving. The telephone on my desk had the air of something that knows it's being watched. Cars trickled past in the street below the dusty window of my office, and a few of the good folks of our fair city ambled along the sidewalk, men in hats, mostly, going nowhere. I watched a woman at the corner of Cahuenga and Hollywood, waiting for the light to change. Long legs, a slim cream jacket with high shoulders, navy blue pencil skirt. She wore a hat, too, a skimpy affair that made it seem as if a small bird had alighted on the side of her hair and settled there happily. She looked left and right and left again—she must have been so good when she was a little girl—then crossed the sunlit street, treading gracefully on her own shadow.

So far it had been a lean season. I had done a week playing bodyguard to a guy who had flown in from New York on the clipper. He had a blue jaw and wore a gold wristband and a pinkie ring with a ruby in it as big as a boysenberry. He said he was a businessman and I decided to believe him. He was worried, and

sweated a lot, but nothing happened and I got paid. Then Bernie Ohls in the Sheriff's office put me in touch with a nice little old lady whose hophead son had pinched her late husband's rare coin collection. I had to apply a little muscle to get the goods back, but nothing serious. There was a coin in there with the head of Alexander the Great on it, and another one showing Cleopatra in profile, with that big nose of hers—what did they all see in her?

The buzzer sounded to announce that the outer door had opened, and I heard a woman walk across the waiting room and pause a moment at the door of my office. The sound of high heels on a wooden floor always gets something going in me. I was about to call to her to come in, using my special deep-toned, you-can-trust-me-I'm-a-detective voice, when she came in anyway, without knocking.

She was taller than she had seemed when I saw her from the window, tall and slender with broad shoulders and trim hips. My type, in other words. The hat she wore had a veil, a dainty visor of spotted black silk that stopped at the tip of her nose—and a nice tip it was, to a very nice nose, aristocratic but not too narrow or too long, and nothing at all like Cleopatra's jumbo schnozzle. She wore elbow-length gloves, pale cream to match her jacket, and fashioned from the hide of some rare creature that had spent its brief life bounding delicately over Alpine crags. She had a good smile, friendly, so far as it went, and a little lopsided in an attractively sardonic way. Her hair was blond and her eyes were black, black and deep as a mountain lake, the lids exquisitely tapered at their outer corners. A blonde with black eyes—that's not a combination you get very often. I tried not to look at her legs. Obviously the god of Tuesday afternoons had decided I deserved a little lift.

"The name is Cavendish," she said.

I invited her to sit down. If I'd known it was me she was coming to call on, I would have brushed my hair and applied a dab of bay rum behind my earlobes. But she had to take me as I was. She

didn't seem to disapprove too much of what she was seeing. She sat down in front of my desk on the chair I had pointed her to and took off her gloves finger by finger, studying me with her steady black eyes.

"What can I do for you, Miss Cavendish?" I asked.

"Mrs."

"Sorry—Mrs. Cavendish."

"A friend told me about you."

"Oh, yes? Good things, I hope."

I offered her one of the Camels I keep in a box on my desk for clients, but she opened her patent leather purse and took out a silver case and flipped it open with her thumb. Sobranie Black Russian—what else? When I struck a match and offered it across the desk she leaned forward and bent her head, with dipped lashes, and touched a fingertip briefly to the back of my hand. I admired her pearl-pink nail polish, but didn't say so. She sat back in the chair and crossed her legs under the narrow blue skirt and gave me that coolly appraising look again. She was taking her time in deciding what she should make of me.

"I want you to find someone," she said.

"Right. Who would that be?"

"A man named Peterson—Nico Peterson."

"Friend of yours?"

"He used to be my lover."

If she expected me to swallow my teeth in shock, she was disappointed. "Used to be?" I said.

"Yes. He disappeared, rather mysteriously, without even saying goodbye."

"When was this?"

"Two months ago."

Why had she waited so long before coming to me? I decided not to ask her, or not yet, anyway. It gave me a funny feeling, being looked at by those cool eyes behind the veil's transparent

black mesh. It was like being watched through a secret window; watched, and measured.

“You say he disappeared,” I said. “You mean out of your life, or altogether?”

“Both, it seems.”

I waited for more, but she only leaned back a farther inch or so and smiled again. That smile: it was like something she had set a match to a long time ago and then left to smolder on by itself. She had a lovely upper lip, prominent, like a baby’s, soft-looking and a little swollen, as if she had done a lot of kissing recently, and not kissing babies, either. She must have sensed my unease about the veil, and put up a hand now and lifted it away from her face. Without it, the eyes were even more striking, a lustrous shade of seal-black that made something catch in my throat.

“So tell me about him,” I said, “your Mr. Peterson.”

“Tallish, like you. Dark. Handsome, in a weak sort of way. Wears a silly mustache, Don Ameche–style. Dresses nicely, or used to, when I had a say in the matter.”

She had taken a short ebony holder from her purse and was fitting the Black Russian into it. Deft, those fingers; slender, but with strength in them.

“What does he do?” I asked.

She glanced at me with a steely twinkle. “For a living, you mean?” She pondered the question. “He sees people,” she said.

This time I leaned back in my chair. “How do you mean?” I asked.

“Just what I say. Practically every time I saw him, he was about to leave urgently. *I gotta see this guy. There’s this guy I gotta go see.*” She was a good mimic; I was beginning to get a picture of Mr. Peterson. *He* didn’t sound like *her* type.

“A busy fellow, then,” I said.

“His busyness had few results, I’m afraid. At any rate, not results that you’d notice, or that I noticed, anyway. If you ask him,

he'll tell you he's an agent to the stars. The people he had to see so urgently were usually connected to one of the studios."

It was interesting, the way she kept switching tenses. All the same, I had the impression that he was very much the past, for her, this Peterson bird. So why did she want him found?

"He's in the movie business?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say *in*. Sort of scrabbling at the edges with his fingertips. He had some success with Mandy Rogers."

"Should I know the name?"

"Starlet—ingénue, Nico would say. Think Jean Harlow without the talent."

"Jean Harlow had talent?"

She smiled at that. "Nico is firmly of the belief that all his geese are swans."

I got out my pipe and filled it. It struck me that the tobacco blend I was using had some Cavendish in it. I decided not to share this happy coincidence with her, imagining the jaded smile and the twitch of disdain at the corner of her mouth that would greet it.

"Known him long, your Mr. Peterson?" I asked.

"Not long."

"How long would not long be?"

She shrugged, which involved a fractional lift of her right shoulder. "A year?" She made it a question. "Let me see. It was summer when we met. August, maybe."

"Where was that? That you met, I mean."

"The Cahuilla Club. Do you know it? It's in the Palisades. Polo grounds, swimming pools, lots of bright, shiny people. The kind of place that wouldn't let a shamus like you put his foot inside the electronically controlled gates." That last bit she didn't say, but I heard it all the same.

"Your husband know about him? About you and Peterson?"

"I really can't say."

"Can't, or won't?"

“Can’t.” She glanced down at the cream gloves where she had draped them across her lap. “Mr. Cavendish and I have—what shall I say? An arrangement.”

“Which is?”

“You’re being disingenuous, Mr. Marlowe. I’m sure you know very well the kind of arrangement I mean. My husband likes polo ponies and cocktail waitresses, not necessarily in that order.”

“And you?”

“I like many things. Music, mainly. Mr. Cavendish has two reactions to music, depending on mood and state of sobriety. Either it makes him sick or it makes him laugh. He does not have a melodious laugh.”

I got up from the desk and took my pipe to the window and stood looking out at nothing in particular. In an office across the street, a secretary in a tartan blouse and wearing earphones from a Dictaphone machine was bent over her typewriter, tapping away. I had passed her in the street a few times. Nice little face, shy smile; the kind of girl who lives with her mother and cooks meat loaf for Sunday lunch. This is a lonely town.

“When’s the last time you saw Mr. Peterson?” I asked, still watching Miss Remington at her work. There was silence behind me, and I turned. Obviously, Mrs. Cavendish was not prepared to address herself to anyone’s back. “Don’t mind me,” I said. “I stand at this window a lot, contemplating the world and its ways.”

I came back and sat down again. I put my pipe in the ashtray and clasped my hands together and propped my chin on a couple of knuckles to show her how attentive I could be. She decided to accept this earnest demonstration of my full and unwavering concentration. She said, “I told you when I saw him last—a couple of months ago.”

“Where was that?”

“At the Cahuilla, as it happens. A Sunday afternoon. My husband was engaged in a particularly strenuous chukker. That’s a—”

“A round in polo. Yes, I know.”

She leaned forward and dropped a few flakes of cigarette ash beside the bowl of my pipe. A faint waft of her perfume came across the desk. It smelled like Chanel No. 5, but then, to me all perfumes smell like Chanel No. 5, or did up to then.

“Did Mr. Peterson give any indication that he was about to decamp?” I asked.

“Decamp? That’s an odd word to use.”

“It seemed less dramatic than *disappeared*, which was your word.”

She smiled and gave a dry little nod, conceding the point. “He was much as usual,” she said. “A little bit more distracted, perhaps, a little nervous, even—though maybe it only seems that way in hindsight.” I liked the way she talked; it made me think of the ivy-covered walls of venerable colleges, and trust fund details written out on parchment in a copperplate hand. “He certainly didn’t give any strong indication that he was about to”—she smiled again—“decamp.”

I thought for a bit, and let her see me thinking. “Tell me,” I said, “when did you realize he was gone? I mean, when did you decide he had”—now it was my turn to smile—“disappeared?”

“I telephoned him a number of times and got no answer. Then I called at his house. The milk hadn’t been canceled and the newspapers had been piling up on his porch. It wasn’t like him to leave things like that. He was careful, in some ways.”

“Did you go to the police?”

Her eyes widened. “The police?” she said, and I thought she might laugh. “That wouldn’t have done at all. Nico was rather shy of the police, and he would not have thanked me for putting them onto him.”

“Shy in what way?” I asked. “Did he have things to hide?”

“Haven’t we all, Mr. Marlowe?” Again she dilated those lovely lids.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On many things.”

This was going nowhere, in ever-increasing circles. “Let me ask you, Mrs. Cavendish,” I said, “what do *you* think has become of Mr. Peterson?”

Once more she did her infinitesimal shrug. “I don’t know what to think. That’s why I’ve come to you.”

I nodded—sagely, I hoped—then took up my pipe and did some business with it, tamping the dottle, and so on. A tobacco pipe is a very handy prop, when you want to seem thoughtful and wise. “May I ask,” I asked, “why you waited so long before coming to me?”

“Was it a long time? I kept thinking I’d hear from him, that the phone would ring one day and he’d be calling from Mexico or somewhere.”

“Why would he be in Mexico?”

“France, then, the Côte d’Azur. Or somewhere more exotic—Moscow, maybe, Shanghai, I don’t know. Nico liked to travel. It fed his restlessness.” She sat forward a little, showing the faintest trace of impatience. “Will you take the case, Mr. Marlowe?”

“I’ll do what I can,” I said. “But let’s not call it a case, not just yet.”

“What are your terms?”

“The usual.”

“I can’t say I know what the usual is likely to be.”

I hadn’t really thought she would. “A hundred dollars deposit and twenty-five a day plus expenses while I’m making my inquiries.”

“How long will they take, your inquiries?”

“That too depends.”

She was silent for a moment, and again her eyes took on that

appraising look, making me squirm a little. “You haven’t asked me anything about myself,” she said.

“I was working my way around to it.”

“Well, let me save you some work. My maiden name is Langrishe. Have you heard of Langrishe Fragrances, Inc.?”

“Of course,” I said. “The perfume company.”

“Dorothea Langrishe is my mother. She was a widow when she came over from Ireland, bringing me with her, and founded the business here in Los Angeles. If you’ve heard of her, then you know how successful she has been. I work for her—or with her, as she’d prefer to say. The result is that I’m quite rich. I want you to find Nico Peterson for me. He’s a poor thing but mine own. I’ll pay you whatever you ask.”

I considered poking at my pipe again but thought it would seem a little obvious the second time around. Instead I gave her a level look, making my eyes go blank. “As I said, Mrs. Cavendish—a hundred down and twenty-five a day, plus expenses. The way I work, every case is a special case.”

She smiled, pursing her lips. “I thought you weren’t going to call it a case, as yet.”

I decided to let her have that one. I pulled open a drawer and brought out a standard contract and pushed it across the desk to her with the tip of one finger. “Take that with you, read it, and if you agree with the terms, sign it and get it back to me. In the meantime, give me Mr. Peterson’s address and phone number. Also anything else you think might be useful to me.”

She gazed at the contract for a moment, as if she were deciding whether to take it or throw it in my face. In the end she picked it up, folded it carefully, and put it in her purse. “He has a place in West Hollywood, off Bay City Boulevard,” she said. She opened her purse again and took out a small leather-bound notebook and a slim gold pencil. She wrote in the notebook briefly, then tore out

the page and handed it to me. “Napier Street,” she said. “Keep a sharp eye out or you’ll miss it. Nico prefers secluded spots.”

“On account of being so shy,” I said.

She stood up, while I stayed sitting. I smelled her perfume again. Not Chanel, then, but Langrishe, the name or number of which I would dedicate myself to finding out. “I’ll need a contact for you, too,” I said.

She pointed to the piece of paper in my hand. “I’ve put my telephone number on there. Call me whenever you need to.”

I read her address: 444 Ocean Heights. Had I been alone, I would have whistled. Only the cream get to live out there, on private streets right by the waves.

“I don’t know your name,” I said. “I mean your first name.”

For some reason this brought a mild flush to her cheeks, and she looked down, then quickly up again. “Clare,” she said. “Without an *i*. I’m called after our native county, in Ireland.” She made a slight, mock-doleful grimace. “My mother is something of a sentimentalist where the old country is concerned.”

I put the notebook page into my wallet, rose, and came from behind the desk. No matter how tall you might be, there are certain women who make you feel shorter than they are. I was looking down on Clare Cavendish, but it felt as if I were looking up. She offered me her hand, and I shook it. It really is something, the first touch between two people, no matter how brief.

I saw her to the elevator, where she gave me a last quick smile and was gone.

Back in my office, I took up my station at the window. Miss Remington was tap-tapping still, diligent girl that she was. I willed her to look up and see me, but in vain. What would I have done, anyway—waved, like an idiot?

I thought about Clare Cavendish. Something didn’t add up. As

a private eye I'm not completely unknown, but why would a daughter of Dorothea Langrishe of Ocean Heights and who knew how many other swell spots choose me to find her missing man? And why, in the first place, had she got herself involved with Nico Peterson, who, if her description of him was accurate, would turn out to be nothing but a cheap grifter in a sharp suit? Long and convoluted questions, and hard to concentrate on while remembering Clare Cavendish's candid eyes and the amused, knowing light that shone in them.

When I turned, I saw the cigarette holder on the corner of my desk, where she had left it. The ebony was the same glossy blackness as her eyes. She'd forgotten to pay me my retainer, too. It didn't seem to matter.

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She was right: Napier Street didn't exactly advertise itself, but I saw it in time and swung in off the boulevard. The road was on a slight rise, heading up toward the hills that stood in a smoke-blue haze way off at the far end. I cruised along slowly, counting off the house numbers. Peterson's place looked a bit like a Japanese teahouse, or what I imagined a Japanese teahouse would look like. It consisted of a single story and was built of dark red pine, with a wraparound porch and a shingled roof that rose in four shallow slopes to a point in the middle with a weather vane on it. The windows were narrow and the shades were drawn. Everything about it told me no one had lived here for quite a while, though the newspapers had stopped piling up. I parked the car and climbed three wooden steps to the porch. The walls with the sun on them were giving off an oily smell of creosote. I pressed the bell but it didn't ring inside the house, so I tried the knocker. An empty house has a way of swallowing sounds, like a dry creek sucking down water. I put an eye to the glass panel in the door, trying to

see through the lace curtain behind it. I couldn't make out much—just an ordinary living room, with ordinary things in it.

A voice spoke behind me. "He ain't home, brother."

I turned. He was an old guy, in faded blue overalls and a collarless shirt. His head was shaped like a peanut shell, a big skull and big chin with caved-in cheeks in between, and a toothless mouth that hung open a little. On his jaw was a week's silvery stubble, the tips of it glittering in the sunlight. Sort of a Gabby Hayes gone badly to seed. One eye was shut and with the other he was squinting up at me, moving that hanging jaw slowly from side to side like a cow working on a piece of cud.

"I'm looking for Mr. Peterson," I said.

He turned his head aside and spat drily. "And I told you, he ain't home."

I came down the steps. I could see him waver a bit, wondering who I was and how much trouble I might represent. I brought out my cigarettes and offered him one. He took it eagerly and stuck it to his lower lip. I lit a match on my thumbnail and passed him the flame.

A cricket soared out of the dry grass beside us like a clown being shot from the mouth of a cannon. The sun was strong and there was a hot dry breeze blowing, and I was glad of my hat. The old boy was bareheaded but seemed not to notice the heat. He took in a big draw of cigarette smoke, held it, and expelled a few gray wisps.

I tossed the spent match into the grass. "You didn't ought to do that," the old man said. "Start a fire here, the whole of West Hollywood goes up in smoke."

"You know Mr. Peterson?" I asked.

"Sure do." He gestured behind him to a tumbledown shack on the far side of the street. "That's my place there. He used to come over sometimes, pass the time of day, give me a smoke."

"How long's he been gone?"

“Let me see.” He thought about it, doing some more squinting. “I guess I last seen him six, seven weeks ago.”

“Didn’t mention where he was off to, I suppose.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t even see him go. Just one day I noticed he was gone.”

“How?”

He peered up at me and gave his head a shake, as if he had water in his ear. “How what?”

“How did you know he was gone?”

“He wasn’t there anymore, is all.” He paused. “You a cop?”

“Sort of.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Private dick.”

He chuckled, stirring up the phlegm. “A private dick ain’t a sort of cop, except in your dreams, maybe.”

I sighed. When they hear you’re private, they think they can say anything to you. I guess they can, too. The old man was grinning at me, smug as a hen that’s just laid an egg.

I looked up and down the street. Joe’s Diner. Kwik Kleen laundrerers. A body shop where a grease monkey was tinkering in the innards of a very unwell-looking Chevy. I imagined Clare Cavendish stepping out of something low and sporty and wrinkling her nose at all this. “What sort of people did he bring here?” I asked.

“People?”

“Friends. Drinking buddies. Associates from the world of the movies.”

“Movies?”

He was beginning to sound like Little Sir Echo. “What about lady friends?” I said. “He have any?”

This produced a full-blown laugh. It was not a pleasant thing to hear. “Any?” he crowed. “Listen, mister, that guy had more broads than he knew what to do with. Every night, nearly, he come home with a different one.”

“You must have been keeping a sharp eye on him and his comings and goings.”

“I seen him, that’s all,” he said, in a sulkily defensive tone. “They used to wake me up, with all the ruckus they made. One of them dropped a bottle of something on the sidewalk one night—champagne, I think it was. Sounded like a shell exploding. The broad just laughed.”

“The neighbors didn’t complain about these shenanigans?”

He gave me a pitying look. “What neighbors?” he said with contempt.

I nodded. The sun wasn’t getting any cooler. I took out a handkerchief and swabbed the back of my neck. Around here there are days in high summer when the sun works on you like a gorilla peeling a banana.

“Well, thanks anyway,” I said and stepped past him. The air rippled above the roof of my car. I was thinking how hot to the touch the steering wheel was going to be. Sometimes I tell myself I’ll move to England, where they say it’s cool even in the dog days.

“You ain’t the first one asking after him,” the old man said behind me.

I turned. “Oh, yeah?”

“Pair of wetbacks come ’round last week.”

“Mexicans?”

“That’s what I said. Two of them. They was all gussied up, but a wetback in a suit and a fancy necktie is still a wetback, right?”

The sun had been shining on my back and was now shining on my front. I could feel my upper lip getting damp. “You speak to them?” I asked.

“Naw. They drove up in some kind of car I never seen the likes of before, must have been made down there. High and wide as a whorehouse bed, and a canvas roof with holes in it.”

“When was this?”

“Two, three days ago. They prowled around the place for a

while, looking in the windows like you did, then got in the car again and moseyed off.” Another dry spit. “I don’t care for wet-backs.”

“You don’t say.”

He gave me a surly look, then sniffed.

I turned away again and started toward my hot car. Again he spoke—“You think he’s coming back?”—and again I stopped. I felt like the wedding guest trying to unhook himself from the Ancient Mariner.

“Doubt it,” I said.

He gave another sniff. “Well, he ain’t much missed, I guess. Still, I liked him.”

He had smoked the cigarette down to about a quarter inch of stub, which now he dropped into the grass. “You didn’t ought to do that,” I said, getting into the car.

When my fingers touched the steering wheel, I was surprised they didn’t sizzle.

Instead of going back to the office, I tootled around the corner to Barney's Beanery in search of something cool to pour into myself. Barney's was a bit too self-consciously bohemian for my taste—too many folks hanging about there with *artist* written all over them. That tired old sign reading, "Fagots—Stay Out" was still behind the bar. That's a thing I've noticed about Barney's kind of people: they're not very good at spelling. Barney must have been thinking of some other word with one *g*, like *bigot*. But the barkeep was a decent guy who had lent a tolerant ear to my late-night grouings on more occasions than I cared to remember. He called himself Travis, but whether that was his first name or his last I couldn't say. Big fellow with hairy forearms and an elaborate tattoo on his left bicep showing a blue anchor entwined with red roses. I doubted he was ever a seaman, though. He was very popular with the "fagots," who, despite the warning sign, kept on coming here—because of the sign, maybe. He used to tell a funny story about Errol Flynn and something he did here at the bar one

night with a pet snake he kept in a bamboo box, but I can't remember the punch line.

I sidled onto a stool and ordered a Mexican beer. There was a bowl of hard-boiled eggs on the bar; I took one and ate it with a lot of salt. The salt and the dryness of the egg yolk left my tongue feeling like a piece of chalk, so I called for a refill of Tecate.

It was a slow early evening and there were few customers in the place. Travis, not being an overly familiar sort, had given me the barest nod when I came in. I wondered if he knew my name. Probably not. He knew what I did for a living, I was pretty sure of that, though I didn't remember him ever mentioning it. When the place wasn't busy, he had a way of standing with his hands spread on the bar and his big square head lowered, gazing out through the open doorway into the street with a far-off look in his eye, as if he were remembering a long-lost love or a fight one time that he won. He didn't say much. He was either dumb or very wise, I could never decide which. Either way, I liked him.

I asked him if he knew Peterson. I didn't think Barney's would be Peterson's kind of place, but I thought it was worth a try anyway. "Lives over on Napier," I said. "Or did, until recently."

Travis slowly came back from whatever section of memory lane he had been wandering down. "Nico Peterson?" he said. "Sure, I know him. Used to come in in the afternoon sometimes, drink a beer and eat an egg, just like you."

This was the second time I had been linked with Peterson—Clare Cavendish had said he was tall like me—and however weak the link was, I didn't welcome it. "What sort of guy is he?" I asked.

Travis flexed his muscleman's shoulders in a shrug. He was wearing a tight black sweatshirt, out of which his thick short neck stuck up like a fireplug. "Playboy type," he said. "Or that's how he presents himself. Ladies' man, with that mustache and the oiled hair combed in a nice wave. Funny, too—he can always make them laugh."

“He brought his girls here?”

Travis heard the skepticism in my voice; Barney’s was hardly the place to romance stylish ladies in. “Now and then,” he said, with a wry half-smile.

“One of them tallish, blond hair, black eyes, a particularly memorable mouth?”

Travis gave me his cautious smile again. “That could be any of them.”

“Has an air, this one. Nicely spoken and very elegant—too elegant for Peterson, probably.”

“Sorry. If they’re as good-looking as you make her sound, I don’t look too close. It’s distracting.”

He was a real professional, Travis. But it occurred to me that maybe there was a reason he didn’t notice women, and that he too didn’t much like the sign behind the bar, for his own, private reasons.

“When was he last in?” I asked.

“Haven’t seen him in a while.”

“A while being . . . ?”

“Couple of months. Why? Is he missing?”

“He seems to have gone off somewhere.”

Travis’s eye took on a faintly merry light. “That a crime nowadays?”

I studied my beer glass, rotating it on its base. “Somebody is looking for him,” I said.

“The lady with the memorable mouth?”

I nodded. As I said, I liked Travis. Despite his size, there was something clean and neat about him, something trim and shipshape; maybe he had been a sailor, after all. I’d never felt I could ask. “I was over at his house,” I said. “Nothing there.”

A customer was signaling from the far end of the bar, and Travis went off to serve him. I sat and thought about this and that. For instance, why was the first sip of beer always so much better

than the second? This was the kind of philosophical speculation I was prone to, hence my reputation as the thinking man's detective. I thought a bit about Clare Cavendish, too, but, like Travis said, I found her distracting and instead went back to the beer question. Maybe temperature was the answer. It wasn't that the second sip was going to be all that much warmer than the first, but that the mouth, having had that first cool rinse, knew what to expect the second time around and adjusted accordingly, so the element of surprise was absent, with a consequent falling off in the pleasure principle. Hmm. It seemed a reasonable explanation, but was it sufficiently comprehensive to satisfy a stickler like me? Then Travis came back and I was able to take off my thinking cap.

"I just realized," he said, "you're not the first to ask after our friend Peterson."

"Oh?"

"A week or two ago, a couple of Mexicans were in here wanting to know if I knew him."

That same two again, no doubt, in their car with the holes in the roof. "What sort of Mexicans?" I asked.

Travis gave me a sort of wistful smile. "Just Mexicans," he said. "Businessmen, they looked like."

Businessmen. Right. Like my man from New York with the pinkie ring. "They say why they were looking for him?"

"Nope. Just asked if he was a customer here, when he'd last been in, and so on. I couldn't tell them any more than I've told you. It didn't improve their mood."

"A gloomy pair, were they?"

"You know Mexicans."

"Yes—not the most scrutable people in the world. They stay around long?"

He gestured at my glass. "One of them drank a beer, the other had a glass of water. I had the impression they were men on a mission."

“Oh? What sort of mission?”

Travis considered the ceiling for a moment. “Can’t say. But they had that serious look that made their eyes shine—you know what I mean?”

I didn’t, but nodded anyway. “You think this mission they were on might have had serious consequences for our Mr. Peterson?”

“Yeah,” Travis said. “One of them kept on toying with a pearl-handled six-shooter while the other picked his teeth with his knife.”

I wouldn’t have taken Travis for the ironic type. “Funny, though,” I said. “Peterson doesn’t seem the kind of guy to be involved with Mexican businessmen, somehow.”

“Lot of opportunities, south of the border.”

“You’re right, there are.”

Travis picked up my empty glass. “You want another?”

“No thanks,” I said. “I wouldn’t want to go wild.”

I paid the man and climbed down from the stool and went out into the evening. It was a little cooler now, but the air tasted of car exhaust, and the day’s grit had laid down a grainy deposit between my teeth. I had passed Travis my card and asked him to give me a call if he happened to hear any news of Peterson. I wouldn’t be waiting by the phone, but at least now Travis knew my name.

I drove home. The lights in the houses up in the hills were coming on, making it seem later than it was. A sickle moon hung low on the horizon, embroiled in a bank of mud-blue murk.

I still had the house in Laurel Canyon. The woman who owned it had gone on an extended visit to her widowed daughter in Idaho and decided to stay there—for the potatoes, maybe. She had written to say I could have the house for as long as I liked. It left me feeling pretty settled on Yucca Avenue, in my hillside roost with the eucalyptus trees across the street. I didn’t know how I felt about that. Did I really want to spend the rest of my days in a

rented house where about the only things I could call my own were my trusty coffeepot and a chess set of faded ivory? There was a woman who wanted to marry me and take me away from all this, a beautiful woman, like Clare Cavendish, and rich like her, too. But I was bent on staying footloose and fancy-free, even if it didn't feel quite like that. Yucca Avenue is not exactly Paris, which is where the poor little rich girl was nursing her bruised heart, last time I'd heard from her.

The house was about the right size for me, but on certain evenings, such as this one, it felt like the White Rabbit's place. I brewed a strong pot of coffee and drank a cup of it and prowled around the living room for a while, trying not to carom off the walls. Then I drank another cup and smoked another cigarette, ignoring the dark blue night gathering in the window. I thought of laying out one of Alekhine's less terrifying openings and seeing where I could go with it, but I didn't have the heart. I'm not a chess fiend, but I like the game, the concentrated coolness of it, the elegance of thought it calls for.

The Peterson business was weighing on my mind, or at least the part of the business that involved Clare Cavendish. I was still convinced there was something fishy in her approach to me. I couldn't say why, but I had the distinct sense that I was being set up. A beautiful woman doesn't walk in off the street and ask you to find her missing boyfriend; it doesn't happen that way. But what way does it happen? For all I knew, there might be offices like mine all over the country that beautiful women walked into every other day and asked poor saps like me to do exactly that. I didn't believe it, though. For a start, the country surely couldn't boast many women the likes of Clare Cavendish. In fact, I doubted there was even one more like her. And if she was really on the level, how come she was involved with a lowlife like Peterson? And if she was involved with him, why wasn't she the slightest bit embarrassed about throwing herself on the mercies—I was going

to say “into the arms” but stopped myself in time—of a private detective and imploring him to find the flown bird? All right, she didn’t implore.

I decided that in the morning I would do some digging around in the history of Mrs. Clare Cavendish née Langrishe. For now I had to content myself with placing a call to Sergeant Joe Green at Central Homicide. Joe had once briefly entertained the notion of charging me as an accessory to first-degree murder; that’s the kind of thing that will create a bond between two people. I wouldn’t say Joe was a friend, though—more a wary acquaintance.

When Joe answered, I said I was impressed that he was working so late, but he only breathed hard into the receiver and asked what I wanted. I gave him Nico Peterson’s name and number and address. None of it was familiar to him. “Who is he?” he asked sourly. “Some playboy involved in one of your divorce cases?”

“You know I don’t do divorce work, Sarge,” I said, keeping my tone light and easy. Joe had an unpredictable temper. “He’s just a guy I’m trying to trace.”

“You got his address, don’t you? Why don’t you go knock on his door?”

“I did that. No one home. And no one has been home for some time.”

Joe did some more breathing. I considered telling him he shouldn’t smoke so much but thought better of it. “What’s he to you?” he asked.

“A lady friend of his would like to know where he’s taken himself off to.”

He made a noise that was halfway between a snort and a chuckle. “Sounds like divorce business to me.”

You’ve got a one-track mind, Joe Green, I said, but only to myself. To him I repeated that I didn’t handle divorces and that this had nothing to do with one. “She just wants to know where he is,” I said. “Call her sentimental.”

“Who is she, this dame?”

“You know I’m not going to tell you that, Joe. There’s no crime involved. It’s a private matter.”

I could hear him striking a match and drawing in smoke and blowing it out again. “I’ll have a look in the records,” he said at last. He was getting bored. Even the tale of a woman and her missing beau couldn’t hold his jaded interest for long. He was a good cop, Joe, but he’d been in the business a long time and his attention span was not broad. He said he would call me, and I thanked him and hung up.

He telephoned at eight the next morning, while I was frying up some nice slices of Canadian bacon to have with my toast and eggs. I was about to tell him again that I was impressed by the hours he kept, but he interrupted me. While he spoke I stood by the stove with the wall phone’s receiver in my hand, watching a little brown bird flitting about in the branches of the tecoma bush outside the window above the sink. There are moments like that when everything seems to go still, as if someone had just taken a photograph.

“The guy you were asking about,” Joe said, “I hope his lady friend looks good in black.” He cleared his throat noisily. “He’s dead. Died on”—I heard him riffing through papers—“April nineteenth, over in the Palisades near that club they got there, what’s it called. Hit-and-run. He’s in Woodlawn. I’ve even got the plot number, if she’d like to go visit him.”