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STAMP OF DOOM

BY
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That set of stamps the murdered man had been mounting in his book when someone knifed him was worth dough. Anyone could have turned it over for a small fortune. Yet, the only pasteboard missing from the set was the cheapest single stamp in the lot!

CONE AND I both saw it at once. We had slowed down to about thirty miles an hour; Cone is a cautious driver. The road was curving here, with a rocky rise on one side, and the brink of an abyss on the other, marked by a white-painted railing. It was a soft night with a nearly full moon riding high. Suddenly ahead of us we saw that a section of the white railing was splintered.

"Good Lord," Cone murmured. "Looks like a car went through there."

Cone pulled up and we climbed out, onto the lonely road. There was a rocky gorge here, about thirty feet deep. Down at the bottom, a big limousine was lying on the rocks. It was on its side. Miraculously one of its smashed headlights was still illumined, with its beam wavering across the rocks.

"Wonder when it happened," I said.

The rocks were dark in the hollows, drenched with silver on their tops. So far as we could see, nobody, living or dead, was down there.

"Let's go down," Cone suggested. "Might be someone pinned inside it."

We climbed down the ragged, precipitous side of the gorge, calling out as we descended; no one answered us. I had visions of corpses lying inside the big car; but when we reached it, climbed up on it, we saw that it was empty.

"Maybe under it," I said.

It was lying on its left side, on broken, rocky ground. Cone had brought a flashlight from our car. I crawled down, under the wrecked limousine; but nothing was there.

"Well," I said, "whoever was in it certainly had a lucky escape. I suppose a wrecking car will be coming from Plainsburg."

Plainsburg was about ten miles north. We had just come from there, from Police Headquarters where Cone had been on a routine case.

"Let's get going," I added, "if you want to get home by midnight. Nothing we can do here."

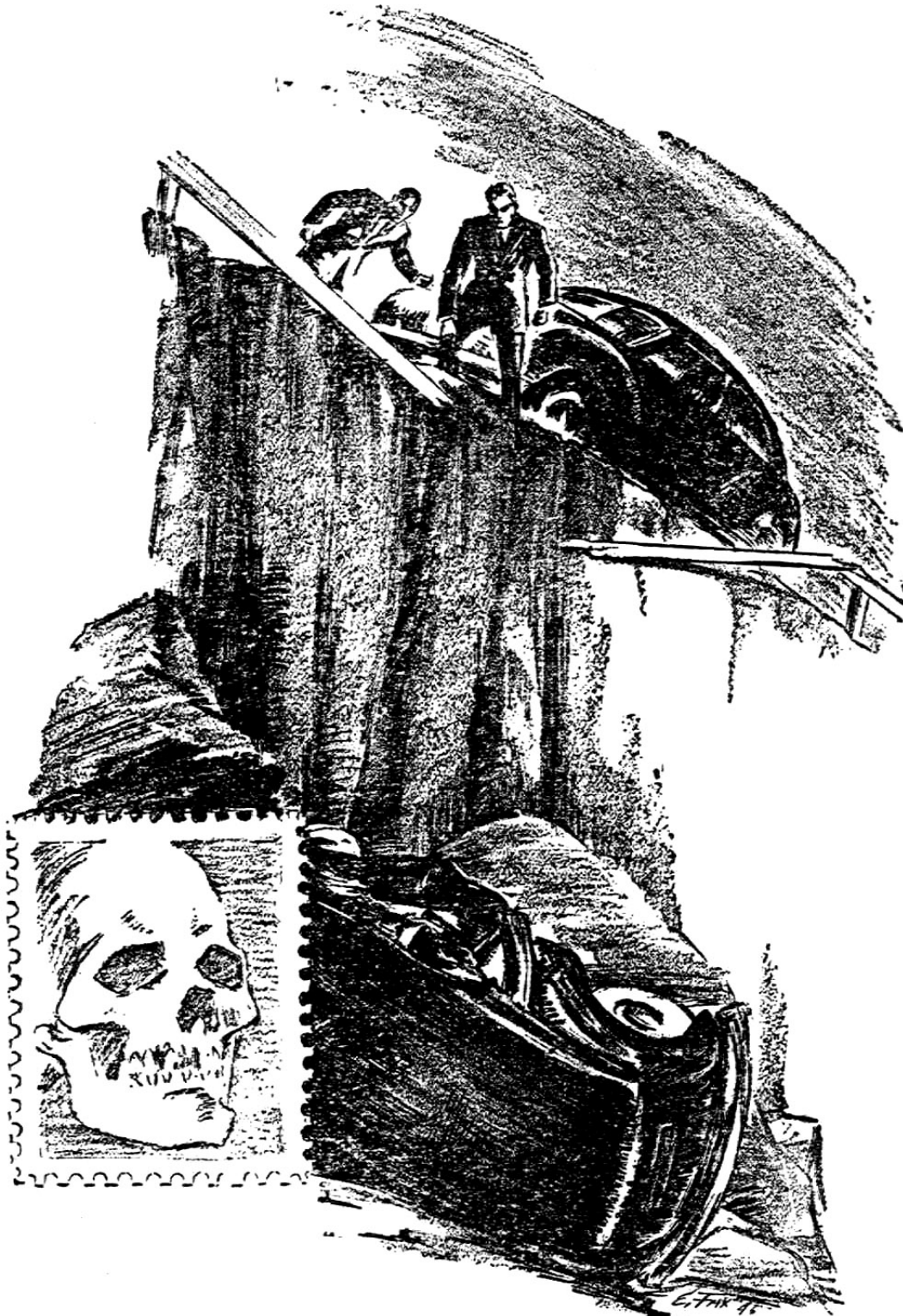
But Cone just stood in the moonlight beside the wrecked car. He looked puzzled. "Seems sort of queer, Bob," he said.

"Queer?"

I'm used to Cone. Maybe you've heard of him, Melvin Cone. He's about thirty-five, tall, lean, with a thinnish, smooth-shaven face, a thin-lipped mouth that can look pretty nasty when he's aroused, and a nose that's rather high-bridge. He sort of looks like the popular idea of Sherlock Holmes and nothing infuriates him worse than to have you say so. He was with the F. B. I. some ten years ago; and since then has been on his own. He's a queer, laconic fellow, always sparse with words. Except with me. He's hauled me around with him so much, just for the companionship I imagine, that I guess he figures it's like talking out loud to himself. Helps him to think.

"SOMETHING wrong about this wreck," Cone said. "The engine is still pretty hot, Bob. It had been running fast, very probably, since it left Plainsburg. Or at least, it came from that direction."

The road connected Plainsburg with Valley Stream, a distance of fourteen miles, so that we were now four miles from Valley Stream. The car apparently had been heading toward Valley Stream, coming from the direction of Plainsburg. You could see that by the way the rail up at the roadside was splintered and the way the car was lying.



The limousine was a twisted mass of steel.

"I'd think the wreck was pretty recent, with an engine still as hot as that," Cone added. "Half, three-quarters of an hour ago maybe."

"So what?" I said. "The victim or victims managed to get out, and—"

"But how did they get out, Bob?"

When he showed me what he meant, it certainly was puzzling. Whoever else had been in the car, at least it must have had a driver. He would have been sitting behind the wheel, at the left. That left front door, and the left one of the tonneau behind it, were both pinned solidly

against the rocks underneath the car as it now lay on its side. The driver, if sufficiently uninjured, might have climbed up and out one of the right hand doors. But he couldn't have done that because the front and back ones were both locked now on the inside!

"You see?" Cone said. "After he'd gotten out, he couldn't possibly have locked these right hand doors from outside...Well, that's that."

We had climbed back out of the gorge when abruptly the night silence was broken by the sound of a siren. It floated to us faintly from quite a distance.

"Police car?" Cone said.

Evidently it was. Then we saw several distant headlights; cars that were wending their way up the hill of a side road. They were about a quarter of a mile from us, back in the direction of Plainsburg. It looked and sounded like a little police cavalcade. We could see that it was heading to where, at the top of the hill, a big house showed in the moonlight. Cone turned our car. "Seems like something else has happened around here," he observed. "Let's go see."

AS WE HEADED back along the highway, a couple of police motorcycles came from the Plainsburg direction. They turned into the side road and swept up the hill. There was quite a commotion up there now. Lights were winking on in the big house.

We mounted the hill. Two radio cars and several motorcycles were in front of the place. It was an ornate, rambling, bungalow-style country home, with a garage to one side.

"Wonder if this has something to do with that car in the gorge," I observed.

"Could be," Cone said. "Oh, hello, Conners. Here we are again. What's going on here?"

It was the big, red-faced Police Sergeant whom we had left not so long ago in Plainsburg. We had only been gone a few minutes when he had had a call from here. This was the summer home of one Jonathan Kent. A bachelor. An eccentric old codger but thought to be very wealthy.

"So?" I said. "Well, what's wrong with him, Sergeant?"

"Nothin' much," Conners said dryly. "Except that he was found murdered half an hour ago. Man who found him's right here. C'mon in, Mr. Cone."

We went into the big lower foyer. "This is Peter Westley," Conners said. "Tell 'em about it, Westley."

The man stood up from the couch where he had been sitting and shook hands with Cone and me nervously. He was a medium-sized, somewhat heavy man with a bald spot and a fringe of scraggly dark hair under it. He had a bulging leather brief case beside him on the couch. He looked about forty years old.

"Sort of peculiar things about this," Conners commented. "Seems old man Kent was a nut on stamp collectin'." The big Police Sergeant gestured toward an open doorway near at hand. "The body's in there, Mr. Cone; the library. He was workin' on his stamp collection when somebody stuck a knife into him."

"You found him?" Cone said to Westley. "Tell us."

This fellow Westley was a New York stamp dealer. For several years now he had been selling old man Kent some pretty valuable old stamps. There was an important stamp that Kent needed for his collection and several months ago he had commissioned Westley to try and locate it for him.

"I found out where I think I can get it," Westley was saying. "So I phoned Mr. Kent about it this afternoon. If I'm gonna get it on approval for Mr. Kent to inspect, I might have to put up an advance, to show good faith. See? So I told Mr. Kent I couldn't finance that—"

"A rarity?" Cone said.

"Yes sir. Catalogues forty-five hundred, an' it's worth all of that. Anyways, I told Mr. Kent he'd better negotiate the deal direct—or he could advance me a thousand if he liked."

"Get to the point," Sergeant Conners said impatiently. "What you told me, you arrived out here—"

"I have a little stamp collection of my own," Cone said. "Go ahead, Mr. Westley."

THE STAMP dealer mopped his red brow with a big colored handkerchief.

"Don't be nervous," Cone said. "Tell us just what happened."

"It was—quite a shock," Westley said. "Finding him—well, anyways, Mr. Kent told me to come out tonight. We'd talk it over. I said I couldn't get here before eleven—I keep my shop

open 'till nine evenings. He said okay, I could stay all night."

So Westley had taken the nine-thirty train which arrived at Valley Stream at 10.02. Westley had walked over, had gotten here about eleven o'clock.

"Nice night, an' I like walking," he said. "See, I'm getting a little hefty around the middle. A four mile walk—"

"Good idea," Cone said. "Then what?"

The house had been locked, and nobody answered his ring. But the library windows were lighted. The shades were drawn down, but one window was open and the shade up. There was low ground under it; Westley couldn't reach the window. He called, got no answer. Then from a rock a little way out from the house, he had been able to see into the library.

Westley mopped his forehead again and looked more frightened than ever. "I saw—I saw him in there," he stammered. "I just looked—him dead in there with a knife in his chest—I just looked an' I ran—"

Sergeant Conners said, "What he saw, you'll see in there now, Mr. Cone. We ain't touched anything yet."

"Good," Cone said.

Westley had run in a panic. There was a small house down the road, Kent's nearest neighbors, a farmer and his family. They had a phone. Westley had called Police Headquarters, and Conners and his men had come at once. They had stopped for Westley; had brought him back up here with them.

"What's in your brief case?" Cone said. "Stamps?"

Westley opened it with a lugubrious smile. It contained his pajamas, razor and toothbrush. "Staying for just one night," he said. "Didn't want to bother with a suitcase."

From the farmer, Sergeant Conners had learned that old man Kent's household consisted only of himself, a sort of butler-valet-chef named Jason; and Jason's young son Lenny.

"And where are they?" Cone demanded.

The Police Sergeant shrugged. "Search me. No sign of 'em."

Westley himself had no idea. He had been here but once before, knew nothing of Kent's domestic affairs.

"He's been in to my shop quite a few times," Westley remarked.

"My men are lookin' around Plainsburg, an' I phoned Valley Stream," Conners said. "We'll pick 'em up—I hope."

"I wonder if they collect stamps," Cone said.

The Sergeant stared at him, then smiled. "You're thinkin' of robbery as a motive for this?"

"Well," Cone said. "An important stamp collection can be valuable."

"His damn sure is," Westley agreed. "I haven't seen all of it myself, but what he says, he's put a good many hundred thousand dollars into it already. An' he's bought some twenty-six thousand dollars worth of rarities from me alone in the past two years."

Conners whistled. "Holy cats. Well, I don't see how it could be robbery—he's got a big safe in the library. But it's locked, an' no sign of anybody tryin' to get into it."

"Come on," Cone said. "Let's take a look."

WE WERE starting for the library when there was the sound of another car arriving outside, and then a commotion at the hall entrance. It was three uniformed men from Valley Stream, arriving with a middle-aged man who was dressed in a dark suit. He was frightened, protesting volubly.

"The butler!" Sergeant Conners exclaimed. "They picked him up in Valley Stream."

"Good," Cone said. "You talk to him, Conners. Come on, Bob."

Cone and I went into the big library. It was a mute, tragic scene. Slumped in a chair at a big mahogany desk was the body of Jonathan Kent—a frail old man with sparse grey hair. Wrapped in a summery dressing gown of incongruously vivid plaid, he had been sitting with his stamp paraphernalia in front of him. He was limply dangling now, sidewise over one of the big chair arms. In his chest the lacquered handle of a big knife stood up out of a gruesome red stain.

A fingerprint man from Plainsburg was there, puttering around. He knew Cone.

"Hullo, Mr. Cone," he greeted. "You sure got here quick."

"By accident," Cone said. "That knife handle. Anything on it?"

The fingerprint man shook his head. "Wiped clean. Killer took that much time anyway, before he lit out."

"By that window. That the idea?" Cone said, with a gesture toward the room's single window which was open.

"Maybe so," the fingerprint man agreed. "Or by the front door, just walked calmly out. The Sarge says all the other windows were found locked on the inside. The back kitchen door too. The front door was locked, but it has a spring lock."

"I see," Cone said. "No footprints on the ground under this window?"

"Rocks down there," the fingerprint man said. "This knife in him—sort of trophy knife. Looks like it was hangin' there on the wall behind the corpse. See? An' the killer grabbed it."

Cone was looking around the ornately decorated room. "Old man Kent must have been to New Zealand," Cone said. "Or at least, a Maori enthusiast. These Maori trophies—quite a nice collection."

Arrows, spears, knives, Indian blankets and such were hanging on the walls of the room. There was a wall fairly close behind the chair where the corpse was lying. A big plaque was there, with a line of knives of various shapes and sizes fastened to it. One space was empty.

"His safe's over here," the fingerprint man said. "I understand he's got a stamp collection in it. Hasn't been tampered with, an' no prints on it, except what are his own. Well, you won't be needin' me, Mr. Cone? I'll go tell the Sarge what I've found, which ain't nothin' but negative."

"Go ahead," Cone said.

THE FINGERPRINT man left us. Cone stood looking down at the big desk where Kent had been working when death so suddenly struck him. No albums of his stamp collection were here; but there were a few empty album pages. One was inscribed *British Guiana, Issue of 1862, Type-set, Rouletted*. Near them were a few old stamps, lying on a white sheet of paper. And there was a yellow bound book, with its title in black:

*Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue
The Americas
and the
British Commonwealth of Nations
The Encyclopedia of Philately*

"That's the Scott Catalogue," Cone said. He was bending down, absorbed now, poking at the

little group of stamps, lining them up on the white sheet of paper. "Mighty interesting, Bob."

"Is it?" I said. "It's Greek to me."

Cone opened the stamp catalogue, riffled its pages. "Here we are, Bob. These stamps are the British Guiana issue of 1862. Scott numbers 35, 36 and so on."

There were eight stamps here, which Cone had lined up on the sheet of paper. "Mint stamps," he said. "Unused. Original gum on the back. See?" He turned one over to show me that the back was gummed.

"So what?" I said.

"Nothing at all, Bob. Except that this little set, in mint condition, and initialed by the Postmaster, which was a custom in those days, happens to be worth \$1875.00. That's what the catalogue valuation is. See it here?"

"And the murderer didn't steal them?" I said.

"Evidently not; here they are." He peered at them a moment more; then went across the room to where on a book shelf some filing boxes were ranged. He opened one marked *Invoices*, riffled through it, seemed to find what he wanted.

I was still thinking of that wrecked car we had found in the gorge. I mentioned it, wondering if it was in any way connected with this murder.

"Could be," Cone said. "Don't let's theorize; facts are better." He had raised the shade of one of the closed windows. I joined him. On this side the house, there was a steep drop down a declivity to where the waters of Ramapo lake glistened in the moonlight. A path led down the rocks, with a small rustic boathouse at the bottom.

"Nice night," Cone commented. We were aware of voices out in the hall. "Conners seems to be grilling that butler," Cone added. "Let's go listen."

The frightened butler was crouched in the corner of a couch in the hall with Conners and a couple of his men standing over him.

"Well that's what I did," the butler was insisting.

"Took a ride in your flivver because it's a nice moonlight night an' you enjoyed it?" the big Police Sergeant rasped ironically. "Sure, why not?"

"Yes, sir," the butler said.

HE WAS A big, powerful-looking man. Cone and I joined the group, staring down at the huddled Jason. Obviously he was thoroughly

frightened; he looked it. But somehow he didn't exactly sound it. His retorts were forceful, and with the queer dignity mingled with respect which is the trademark of a well-trained servant.

"An' we're supposed to believe that?" Conners demanded.

"Yes sir."

"An' then when you get tired of drivin' around the country alone, you stop at Valley Stream for an ice cream soda, an' the police pick you up an' bring you back here."

"Yes sir. That is quite what happened, sir."

"What time did you leave here?" Cone said.

"About nine o'clock," the butler responded. "Mr. Kent told me I could take the evening off. I expected to be back by midnight. He told me that this afternoon—" Westley, the stamp dealer had approached, and the butler suddenly added, "You are Mr. Westley, sir? I recall you were here about a year ago."

"Yes," Westley agreed.

"You phoned him this afternoon," Jason said. "He had just told me then I could take the evening off. I didn't sneak away tonight, Sergeant Conners. This man will tell you that. Mr. Kent said I could have the evening off."

"That's true," Westley agreed. "I heard him tell Jason that, while he was talking to me on the phone."

"You see?" Jason said.

"He told me if I arrived hungry," Westley insisted, "that his butler would be back by midnight, and we'd have some supper."

"He usually eats before he retires," the butler explained.

"You're not a stamp collector, are you?" Cone said suddenly.

"No sir. It's been a great trial to Mr. Kent," the butler said, "but I can't help it. I can't see any sense to pasting stamps in a book."

"But you know some of them are very valuable?" Cone said.

"Yes sir. Of course."

One of Conners' uniformed men interrupted us. "Take a look at this, Sarge."

It was a small, cheap-looking stamp album. Conners took it, opened it. Stamps were pasted on its pages with the little stamp hinges. Some had come loose, and some of the stamps were awry. It looked on the whole, even to my unpracticed eye, sort of messy.

"Where'd you get it?" Conners demanded.

The policeman had been searching Jason's room, and the room of his son Lenny, which was beside it. Both of them were back of the kitchen.

"Came from Lenny's room," the policeman said.

"So you don't collect stamps, but your son does?" Conners said.

A new terror seemed to strike at the butler. "Yes sir," he admitted. "That's true. Lenny seems to like stamps. He putters with them sometimes. That belongs to him, but it isn't—"

Westley was gazing at the drab little album. "Anything of value in it?" Cone murmured.

Westley took it, riffled its pages. He seemed to shudder. "Just junk," he said. "Low values—the French colonies, and Spain, Liberia, that sort of stuff. Take a look—the German inflation stamps—just flashy kid stuff. Most beginners start that way."

"This album's full," Cone said. "The whole thing, ten dollars worth maybe?"

"If that," Westley said.

CONE HANDED the album back to Sergeant Conners. "By the way," he said to the butler, "where is your son Lenny?"

The butler stared, wide-eyed. "Why—why—"

"He wasn't given the evening off, or was he?" Cone demanded.

"Why—no sir. That is, I mean to say—he doesn't work for Mr. Kent exactly," the butler stammered. "He lives here, because he's my son. His expenses come out of my salary."

"So naturally he can go and come as he likes," Cone agreed.

"An' so this night, with so much goin' on here," the Sergeant observed caustically, "Lenny chooses to be among the missin'. Smart boy. Or maybe you heard over the phone Mr. Kent tellin' him not to be around tonight?" he added to Westley.

Westley shook his head. "Mr. Kent didn't mention him to me," Westley said. "Matter of fact, I never heard of him before—didn't know there was such a person."

"Well, he's missing, so far, anyway," Cone said. "Evidently isn't around Valley Stream or Plainsburg, or the police would have located him by now. By the way, how old is Lenny?"

"He's seventeen, sir," the butler said. "Eighteen in a couple of months. He's a good boy. He—"

"Of course," Cone said.

Conners plunged back into questioning the butler as Cone turned away. I followed Cone. He was pondering. He went to one of the hall windows, stared out at the moonlit lake. I had an ideal Lenny could have taken old Jonathan Kent's car from the garage here and started off for Valley Stream with it. I was thinking of that wrecked limousine in the gorge. I said so to Cone.

"I doubt it," Cone said. "Ask one of Conners' men if they've looked into the garage. And find out from the butler what cars Mr. Kent has, and if one is gone. But don't mention that wreck we saw; I'll bring that up later."

I didn't question Cone. It was obvious he had figured out more of this than I had. I made the inquiries; came back to Cone in a moment.

"No go," I said. "Kent has no limousine. Just a little coupe, and it's in the garage. The butler owns a personal little flivver. He took that, as he said. And it's back. The Valley Stream police brought him back in it when they picked him up. They stopped and looked at the wreck. They mentioned it to me. They sent word to Valley Stream about it."

"And you said nothing?" Cone demanded.

"Right," I agreed.

Again Cone fell into a silence. He was staring moodily out the window. Then he murmured, "Pathetic, that boy's little album of cheap stamps, and that rich old man with such valuable ones—"

Cone was still staring out of the window. Suddenly he said, "Take a look, Bob."

A TINY blob showed, out in the moonlight of the lake. It looked like someone in a canoe.

"Seems to be heading for the boathouse here," Cone said. "Let's go down."

It was nearly up to the little boathouse when we got down there. The moonlight showed plainly that it was a young man, paddling skillfully with a single short paddle, in the stern of a long, green canvas canoe. We stood silent as he came neatly up to the boathouse, hauled his frail craft up its little landing incline.

"Hello" Cone said. "I take it you could be Lenny Jason?"

He was a handsome, stalwart youth in grey flannel trousers and sport shirt. He was as tall as I am, and fully as husky. He looked older than his

seventeen years. His curly blond hair was ruffled by the night wind.

"Yes," he said. "And who are you?" He didn't look unconcerned. Far from it. He looked queerly apprehensive, but he smiled. "There seems to be something going on up at the house," he said. "I heard police car sirens a while ago—you can hear quite a distance over that quiet water. Any—any trouble up there?"

"Quite a bit," Cone said. He stared as Cone told him. "The old man—murdered?" he gasped. "Why—why who did it?"

"That," Cone said, "is what everybody's trying to find out."

"My—my father," Lenny murmured. "He's there?"

"Yes, he's there," Cone said. "Where have you been, Lenny?"

He had decided to paddle across the lake, to Johnsonville, and take his girl out in the canoe.

"Pretty late to take a girl out in a canoe, isn't it?" Cone commented.

"She's an usherette in a movie," Lenny said promptly. "Doesn't get out till nearly midnight."

"I see. So you were starting to get her, you heard the police sirens, and came right back?"

"Yes," the boy agreed. "But I left here several hours ago."

"And what have you been doing since?"

He had been loafing around in the canoe, along the shore not more than a mile from here, trying to catch some fish. Then he heard the sirens.

"But you didn't catch any fish?" Cone said mildly. "Or did you?"

"No, I didn't," the boy said. "They weren't biting. But I often have caught them on bright nights. If you use—"

"Okay," Cone said.

We were on our way back to the house. I could see the boy eyeing Cone, trying to dope him out. And suddenly Lenny said:

"Look here, you don't say much, do you? My father—are the police after him? Questioning him? I always got along with old man Kent all right. If you've made my father say different, you—"

"Fair enough," Cone said. "Personally I don't give a damn whether you fought with your father's employer or not."

Cone was taking a shot in the dark, but it hit the target!

"That's a lie!" Lenny burst out. "I never argued with the old codger. Why would I care what he says?"

"You wouldn't," Cone agreed.

"So I just kept away from him," Lenny said. "I'm my own boss, independent. I don't have to answer to anybody."

"That's what your father said," Cone agreed.

"Then my father has been talkin'?" Lenny said.

"Some, of course. So you've been quarreling with old man Kent?"

"That's a lie! I never did. He—he had it out with dad."

"Had what out?"

CONE dragged it from Lenny finally. Jonathan Kent disapproved of Lenny; he didn't like Jason supporting the boy as if he were a wealthy man's son on a perpetual holiday.

"Well, I can see his viewpoint," Cone commented. "You look as though you always enjoyed yourself, Lenny."

"So what? That's my business and my father's. If old man Kent wouldn't let me live here—"

"Did he say he wouldn't?"

"That was the general idea yesterday," Lenny admitted. "So what? I told dad I'd just as soon live in Johnsonville."

"Where the little midnight usherette is," Cone observed. "Well, I can see your viewpoint too."

Lenny flushed. "Say, you're a wise guy, aren't you? You—"

We had arrived at the house. "Take it easy," Cone murmured. "There's a nasty sort of Police Sergeant here. Don't let's go in fighting."

Sergeant Conners was delighted to have Lenny. He backed the boy into a corner of the hall and began flinging questions at him. I could see the butler dart a terrified glance at his son as we came in. Lenny's gaze was tightened, too, though he was trying to hide it under an air of defiance now as Conners launched into him.

"Come on," Cone murmured to me. "I want to take a look into the library again. I'm beginning to get some ideas on this thing."

I was, also. Theories were crowding me. Neither the butler nor the boy had an alibi for the time of the murder, which Cone thought was about ten-thirty. The butler had been cruising

around in his car, and the boy in his canoe. Perfectly possible, of course, but it didn't sound very good. Then I was thinking of that dog-eared little stamp album, and old man Kent's expensive rarities. And the fact that Kent was about to demand that Lenny leave here and live somewhere else.

As though to fit my roaming thoughts, Sergeant Conners' loud voice floated to us.

"So the old man's will has a legacy for you—ten thousand dollars?"

"Yes sir. That's what I said, sir," the butler agreed.

"And what the hell of it?" Lenny's angry voice demanded.

We went on into the library. Cone at once was poking over those little British Guiana stamps again. Eight of them, lying on the square of white paper. I stood silent, watching him. A magnifying glass lay on the desk. Cone examined the stamps under it, moving the big desk lamp so that its light fell full on them.

"Yes," he murmured. "I believe that's it."

"What's it?" I demanded.

"But I've got to have proof, there's the rub." He looked at me, his eyes flashing, his thin lips pressed together.

"Tell those people out there they can come in here," he told me crisply. "I want to explain something about these stamps to them."

I WENT back into the hall. They came back with me, crowding into the library—Conners, a couple of his men; and Westley, Jason and Lenny. The butler and his son stood by the door, wide-eyed. Conners said:

"What's the idea, Mr. Cone?"

"These British Guiana stamps," Cone said. "There are eight of them here. The set, according to the catalogue, should be nine. Number 43—that's its catalogue number—is a four cent blue. Apparently Mr. Kent owned them all. But number 43 isn't here."

"A missing stamp!" Conners exclaimed. "A robbery motive—"

"But queerly," Cone cut in. "The missing one is the cheapest of them all. They run in valuation from \$400 down to \$125. And only the \$125 one is missing."

Westley said, "I know he had them all—"

"Because you sold them to him, didn't you?" Cone said.

"Yes, I did," Westley agreed. "How did you know?"

"I was looking through his invoices." Cone drew the invoice from his pocket. "Sold them to him two weeks ago. All nine of them."

"I sure did," Westley said.

"One could still be in the safe," Cone said, "but I doubt it. He had evidently brought them out tonight—and the album page on which he expected to mount them. See it here? He has it inscribed, *British Guiana, issue of 1862*. That's these stamps."

The telephone rang. Sergeant Conners answered it. "Sure, this is Sergeant Conners ... You checked on it? Okay." He listened a moment, then hung up.

"That was Valley Stream police," he said to Cone. "The train from New York that went through here at 10.02—it got to the end of its run, an' the police out there found the Conductor at his home. He remembers talkin' to this Mr. Westley—remembers he got off at Valley Stream. He described you pretty well, seems like," Conners added to Westley.

The stamp dealer looked startled, "You checked on me? Why sure I came on that train."

"Okay, you did." Conners grinned. "But if it happened you came on an earlier one—you'd of then had plenty of time to walk here from Valley Stream an' kill the old man, an' then phone for us, claimin' you just got here."

Westley's jaw dropped. He flushed, then went pale. His glance went to the corpse which still slumped there in the chair. The County Medical Examiner had been sent for, but hadn't arrived yet so that Conners had left the body undisturbed. Westley gazed at it, then smiled lugubriously at the Sergeant.

"I—I didn't realize I was under suspicion," he said.

"Everybody is," Conners retorted. "These other two—" Jason the butler seemed to quail under the Sergeant's gaze. But Lenny returned it with equal belligerency.

"What I was saying," Cone resumed, "these British Guiana stamps—unused—and signed with the postmaster's initials—are worth a total of \$1875." Cone was talking to the room in general. He was smiling faintly. "If you care to take a look, you'll see the inscription 'R. M. Ac. R. G.'" That means, as the Scott Catalogue explains, "*Robert Mather, Acting Receiver General*." Black ink was

used on the rose-colored stamps; red ink on yellow ones; and an alkali was used on the blue stamps, which, destroying the color of the paper, caused the initials to appear to be written in white. It's all described in the catalogue."

"Sounds pretty technical," Conners commented. "Is this important, Mr. Cone?"

"I think it is."

AGAIN the telephone rang. Cone was nearest to it. He answered it. "Valley Stream Police?" he said. "Okay, I'll tell the Sergeant."

Cone listened impassively; then hung up. "A big limousine was wrecked this evening, in the gorge near here," he said to the Sergeant.

"Sure." Conners agreed. "The men bringin' Jason here noticed it an' reported it."

"They didn't go down to see if anybody was in it?" Cone said.

"No, I guess they should of," Conners admitted apologetically. "Were in a hurry—my Gawd, don't tell me there's any dead people in it!"

"No," Cone said. "It's okay, Sergeant. There's nobody in it—you haven't been neglectful. As a matter of fact, Bob and I saw it—we climbed down into the gorge. Whoever was in it escaped apparently uninjured."

"And this call from Valley Stream?" Conners asked.

"Just to tell you that a stolen car has been reported by a man in Valley Stream. Matter of fact, it is the wrecked car in the gorge. I took the license number of that one—and it's the number Valley Stream just gave me."

"But how could it have been coming from Valley Stream?" I exclaimed. "You remember, we doped out by the way it went through the railing, and is lying, that it was heading *toward* Valley Stream!"

"Whoever was in it, turned it around before he headed it through the rail, just to confuse us," Cone said blandly. "But what he forgot was to unlock its doors so that we wouldn't realize he wasn't in it when it fell."

Cone was talking swiftly now. Conners tried to interrupt him, but Cone's gesture checked him. "As I said," Cone resumed. "These initialed stamps are valued at \$1875. But if you'll look at the catalogue you'll see that they also exist without initials. And those are only worth \$457. Quite a difference."

He paused just an instant, but no one spoke. The room was tense with silence. I could see Cone's eyes darting about from one to the other of the men. And then he said suddenly, "I have two stamps of this set in my own collection. *These* are forgeries cleverly done, but forgeries nevertheless."

"Forgeries!" Westley gasped. "And I sold them to him! Good Heavens, you must be wrong, Mr. Cone."

"I don't think so," Cone retorted. Westley was standing in front of him, quite close, and I could see Cone's gaze roving the stamp dealer's stocky figure.

"I can picture this murderer coming here," Cone was saying softly. "He knows that his forgeries have been discovered. He is threatened with exposure, jail. He hopes that he can buy old Mr. Kent's silence—maybe pay him back. He may have sold Kent many forgeries in the past, which Kent now is in the process of discovering. Perhaps this stamp forger hopes he won't have to kill the old man—but he's prepared to do it. So he arranges what he believes will be an alibi. He makes himself known to a train conductor, then claims he walked the four miles here, which would take an hour. In reality, he steals a car, drives the four miles in a few minutes, and—"

"You're crazy!" Westley gasped. "You can't prove any of that! I didn't steal a car, and if any stamps of his are forgeries, I don't know anything about it. Forgeries exist, of course; anybody can be fooled."

"Quite true," Cone said.

"You haven't got a shred of evidence. Why don't you go after this butler? Or his son. They—"

"You didn't want to make it look like robbery by taking the stamps," Cone said. "That would have pointed toward you, a man who knows stamp values so well. And I imagine there are many others of your fakes in his collection,

locked up in his safe where you couldn't get at them. But you figured they'd never be discovered as forgeries and now one of these stamps is missing. If I could—"

Cone's voice had dropped as though he were talking only to himself. "I could imagine the victim had that missing stamp in his hand. Holding it, showing it as he denounced its authenticity. The killer had seized the knife, and come around to face his victim. And as he jumped, and plunged the knife—"

Cone's questing gaze turned into triumph. "Well!" he murmured. "Well, I'll be damned, there it is! The victim's fingers, fumbling at your throat as you stabbed him—"

He leaped at Westley. I crowded forward. The missing stamp was under Westley's big sagging collar, neatly pasted by sweat against his neck! His fingers fumbled and found it.

"Why—why—" he gasped. "I didn't know—I never realized—"

Then suddenly he had bolted past us, toward the door into the hall. The room went into a turmoil. Conners was reaching for his gun. I had made a jump, but Westley eluded me. I went after him into the big hall. Behind me, I heard Cone's voice:

"Easy, Sergeant! Don't shoot at him—Bob'll get him!"

I caught him near the end of the hall; I finished with a flying tackle that brought us both to the floor. There wasn't any fight in him when I scrambled on top of him.

"You've got me—" he mumbled.

Which was fair enough. And that was the end of it, so far as Cone and I were concerned. In half an hour more we were back in Cone's car, heading home.

"I must show you my stamp collection some time," Cone said. "Interesting things, stamps."

(THE END)