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## I

If you didn't look at her face she was less than thirty, quick-bodied and slim as a girl. Her clothing drew attention to the fact: a tailored sharkskin suit and high heels that tensed her nylon-shadowed calves. But there was a pull of worry around her eyes and drawing at her mouth. The eyes were deep blue, with a sort of double vision. They saw you clearly, took you in completely, and at the same time looked beyond you. They had years to look back on, and more things to see in the years than a girl's eyes had. About thirty-five, I thought, and still in the running.

She stood in the doorway without speaking long enough for me to think those things. Her teeth were nibbling the inside of her upper lip, and both of her hands were clutching her black suede bag at the level of her waist. I let the silence stretch out. She had knocked and I had opened the door. Undecided or not, she couldn't expect me to lift her over the threshold. She was a big girl now, and she had come for a reason. Her stance was awkward with urgency.

'Mr Archer?' she said at last.

'Yes. Will you come in.'

'Thank you. Forgive me for hanging back. It must make you feel like a dentist.'

'Everybody hates detectives and dentists. We hate them back.'

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‘Not really? Actually, I’ve never been to a dentist.’ She smiled as if to illustrate the point, and gave me her hand in a free gesture. It was hard and brown. ‘Or a detective.’

I placed her in the soft chair by the window. She didn’t mind the light. Her hair was its natural brown, without a fleck of gray that I could see. Her face was clear and brown. I wondered if she was clear and brown all over.

‘What tooth is bothering you, Mrs –?’

‘Excuse me. My name is Maude Slocum. I always forget my manners when I’m upset.’

She was much too apologetic for a woman with that figure, in those clothes. ‘Look,’ I said. ‘I am rhinoceros-skinned and iron-hearted. I’ve been doing divorce work in LA for ten years. If you can tell me anything I haven’t heard, I’ll donate a week’s winnings at Santa Anita to any worthy charity.’

‘And can you whip your weight in wildcats, Mr Archer?’

‘Wildcats terrify me, but people are worse.’

‘I know what you mean.’ The fine white teeth were tugging again at the warm mouth. ‘I used to think, when I was younger, that people were willing to live and let live – you know? Now I’m not so sure.’

‘You didn’t come here this morning, though, to discuss morals in the abstract. Did you have a specific example in mind?’

She answered after a pause: ‘Yes. I had a shock yesterday.’ She looked close into my face, and then beyond. Her eyes were as deep as the sea beyond Catalina. ‘Someone is trying to destroy me.’

‘Kill you, you mean?’

‘Destroy the things I care about. My husband, my family, my home.’ The rhythm of her voice faltered and ceased. ‘It’s dreadfully hard to tell you, the thing is so underhanded.’

Here we go again, I said to myself. True confession morning, featuring Archer the unfrocked priest. ‘I should have gone to City College and been a dentist and gone in for something easy

and painless like pulling teeth. If you really need my help, you'll have to tell me what with. Did someone send you here?'

'You were recommended. I know a man who does police work. He said you were honest, and discreet.'

'Unusual thing for a cop to say about me. Would you care to mention his name?'

'No, I wouldn't.' The very suggestion seemed to alarm her. Her fingers tightened on the black suede bag. 'He doesn't know about this.'

'Neither do I. I don't expect I ever will.' I let a smile go with it, and offered her a cigarette. She puffed on it without relish, but it seemed to relax her a little.

'Damn it.' She coughed once over the smoke. 'Here I've been up all night, trying to make up my mind, and I still haven't made it up. No one knows, you see. It's hard to bring myself to tell anyone else. One acquires the habit of silence, after sixteen years.'

'Sixteen years? I thought it happened yesterday.'

She colored. 'Oh, it did. I was simply thinking of how long I'd been married. This has a good deal to do with my marriage.'

'So I gather. I'm good at guessing-games.'

'I'm sorry. I don't mean to offend you or insult you.' Her contriteness was unexpected in a woman of her class. It didn't go with hundred-dollar suits. 'It isn't that I think you'll spread it around, or try to blackmail me—'

'Is somebody else trying to blackmail you?'

The question startled her so that she jumped. She recrossed her legs and leaned forward in the chair. 'I don't know. I haven't any idea.'

'Then we're even.' I took an envelope out of the top drawer of my desk, opened it, and began to read the mimeographed enclosure. It informed me that the chances were one in three that I'd enter a hospital within the year, that I couldn't afford to

be unprotected by health insurance, and that he who hesitates is lost. 'He who hesitates is lost,' I said aloud.

'You're making fun of me, Mr Archer. But just what is the arrangement? If you take the case, you'll naturally be governed by my interests. But if you don't, and I've told you about this thing, can I trust you to forget it?'

I let my irritation show in my voice, and this time I didn't smile, or even grimace. 'Let's both forget it. You're wasting my time, Mrs Slocum.'

'I know I am.' There was self-disgust in her tone, more than there should have been. 'This thing has been a physical blow to me, a blow from behind.' Then she spoke with sudden decision, and opened her bag with taut white fingers: 'I suppose I must let you see it. I can't just go home now and sit and wait for another one.'

I looked at the letter she handed me. It was short and to the point, without heading or signature:

*Dear Mr Slocum:*

*Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds. Can you possibly enjoy playing the role of a complaisant cuckold? Or are you strangely unaware of your wife's amorous activities?*

The message was typed on a sheet of cheap white typing paper that had been folded to the size of a small envelope. 'Is there an envelope to go with this?'

'Yes.' She rummaged in her purse, and handed me a crumpled white envelope, which was addressed to James Slocum, Esq., Trail Road, Nopal Valley, California. The postmark was clear: Quinto, Calif., July 18.

'This is Wednesday,' I said. 'It was mailed Monday. Do you know people in Quinto?'

‘Everybody.’ She managed a strained smile. ‘It’s only a few miles from Nopal Valley, where we live. But I haven’t the faintest notion who could have sent it.’

‘Or why?’

‘I have enemies, I suppose. Most people have.’

‘I take it your husband hasn’t seen it. James Slocum is your husband?’

‘Yes. He hasn’t seen it. He was busy in Quinto when it came. I usually bicycle down to the mailbox, anyway.’

‘Is he in business in Quinto?’

‘Not in business. He’s very active in the Quinto Players – it’s a semi-professional theatrical group. They’re rehearsing every afternoon this week—’

I cut her short: ‘Do you usually read your husband’s mail?’

‘Yes, I do. We read each other’s – I hardly expected to be cross-questioned, Mr Archer.’

‘One more question. Is the allegation true?’

The blood coursed under the clear skin of her face, and her eyes brightened. ‘I can’t be expected to answer that.’

‘All right. You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t true.’

‘On the contrary,’ she said.

‘And you want me to find out who sent the letter, and prosecute him or her?’

‘Oh, no.’ She wasn’t clever. ‘I simply want it stopped. I can’t stand guard over the mailbox to intercept his mail, and I can’t stand the strain of waiting and wondering—’

‘Besides, the next note might be handed to him personally. Would it matter so much if he read it?’

‘It would matter terribly.’

‘Why? Is he violently jealous?’

‘Not at all, he’s a very quiet man.’

‘And you’re in love with him?’

‘I married him,’ she said. ‘I haven’t regretted it.’

'If your marriage is a good one, you don't have to worry about a poison-pen or two.' I tossed the letter on the desk-top between us, and looked into her face.

Her mouth and eyes were tormented. 'It would be the last straw. I have a daughter who is still in school. I simply won't permit this thing to happen.'

'What thing?'

'A break-up and divorce,' she answered harshly.

'Is that what it means if your husband gets one of those?' I pointed my cigarette at the scrap of white paper.

'I'm afraid it does, Mr Archer. I could cope with James, perhaps, but he'd take it to his mother, and *she'd* hire detectives.'

'Could they find grounds for divorce? Is there evidence against you?'

'There must be,' she said bitterly. 'Someone knows.' Her entire body moved slightly, twitched like a worm on a hook. For the moment she loathed her sex. 'This is very painful for me.'

'I know,' I said. 'My wife divorced me last year. Extreme mental cruelty.'

'I think you might be capable of it.' There was gentle malice in her voice; then her mood changed again: 'Please don't imagine I take divorce lightly. It's the last thing I want.'

'On account of your daughter, you say?'

She considered that. 'Ultimately, yes. I was the child of a divorced couple myself, and I suffered for it. There are other reasons, too. My mother-in-law would like it much too well.'

'What sort of a woman is she? Could she have sent the letter?'

The question caught her off guard, and she had to think again. 'No. I'm sure she didn't. She'd act much more directly. She's a very strong-minded woman. As I told you, I haven't the slightest idea who sent it.'

'Anybody in Quinto then. Population about twenty-five

thousand, isn't it? Or anybody who passed through Quinto on Monday. It's a pretty tough set-up.'

'But you will try to help me?' She wasn't too much of a lady to arrange herself appealingly in the chair, and dramatize the plea. There was a chance that she wasn't a lady at all.

'It will take time, and I can't promise any results. Are you fairly well-heeled, Mrs Slocum?'

'Surely you don't reserve your services exclusively for the wealthy.' She looked around at the plain, small, square office.

'I don't spend money on front, but I charge fifty dollars a day, and expenses. It will cost you four or five hundred a week, and with what I've got to go on it may take all summer.'

She swallowed her dismay. 'Frankly, I'm not well off. There's money in the family, but James and I don't have it. All we have is the income from a hundred thousand.'

'Thirty-five hundred.'

'Less. James's mother controls the money. We live with her, you see. I do have a little money that I've saved, though, for Cathy's education. I can pay you five hundred dollars.'

'I can't guarantee anything in a week, or a month for that matter.'

'I have to do something.'

'I have an idea why. The person who wrote that letter probably knows something more definite, and you're afraid of the next letter.'

She didn't answer.

'It would help if you'd let me know what there is to be known.'

Her eyes met mine levelly and coldly. 'I don't see the necessity for me to confess adultery, or for you to assume that there is anything to confess.'

'Oh hell,' I said. 'If I have to work in a vacuum, I'll waste my time.'

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'You'll be paid for it.'

'You'll waste your money, then.'

'I don't care.' She opened her purse again and counted ten twenties onto the desk-top. 'There. I want you to do what you can. Do you know Nopal Valley?'

'I've been through it, and I know Quinto slightly. What does your husband do with the Quinto Players?'

'He's an actor, or thinks he is. You mustn't try to talk to him.'

'You'll have to let me do it my own way, or I might as well sit in my office and read a book. How can I get in touch with you?'

'You can phone me at home. Nopal Valley is in the Quinto book. Under Mrs Olivia Slocum.'

She stood up and I followed her to the door. I noticed for the first time that the back of the handsome suit was sun-faded. There was a faint line around the bottom of the skirt where the hem had been changed. I felt sorry for the woman, and I liked her pretty well.

'I'll drive up this morning,' I said. 'Better watch the mailbox.'

When she had gone, I sat down behind the desk and looked at the unpolished top. The letter and the twenties were side by side upon it. Sex and money: the forked root of evil. Mrs Slocum's neglected cigarette was smouldering in the ash-tray, marked with lipstick like a faint rim of blood. It stank, and I crushed it out. The letter went into my breast pocket, the twenties into my billfold.

In the street when I went down the heat was mounting toward ninety. In the sky the sun was mounting toward noon.

An hour north of Santa Monica a sign informed me: YOU ARE ENTERING QUINTO, JEWEL OF THE SEA. SPEED 25 MILES. I slowed down and began to look for a motor court. The white cottages of the Motel del Mar looked clean and well-shaded, and I turned into the gravel apron in front of the U-shaped enclosure. A thin woman in a linen smock came out of the door marked OFFICE before I could stop the car. She danced toward me smiling a dazed and arty smile.

‘Did you wish accommodation, sir?’

‘I did. I still do.’

She tittered and touched her fading hair, which was drawn tightly back from her sharp face in a bun. ‘You’re traveling alone?’

‘Yes. I may stay for a few days.’

She blinked her eyes roguishly, wagging her head. ‘Don’t stay too long, or the charm of Quinto will capture you. It’s the Jewel of the Sea, you know. You’ll want to stay forever and ever. We’ve a very nice single at seven.’

‘May I look at it?’

‘Of course. I believe that you’ll find it delightful.’

She showed me a knotty pine room with a bed, a table and two chairs. The floor and furniture shone with polishing wax. There was a Rivera reproduction on one wall, its saffrons repeated by a vase of fresh marigolds on the mantel over the fireplace. Below the western window the sea glistened.

She turned to me like a musician from his piano. 'Well?'

'I find it delightful,' I said.

'If you'll just come up and register, I'll have Henry fill the carafe with ice water. We *do* try to make you comfortable, you see.'

I followed her back to the office, feeling a little uncomfortable at her willingness to tie herself in knots, and signed my full name in the register, Lew A. Archer, with my Los Angeles address.

'I see you're from Los Angeles,' she said, taking my money.

'Temporarily. As a matter of fact, I'd like to settle here.'

'Would you really?' she gushed. 'Do you hear that, Henry? The gentleman here would like to settle in Quinto.'

A tired-looking man half-turned from his desk at the back of the room, and grunted.

'Oh, but you'd love it,' she said. 'The sea. The mountains. The clear, cool air. The nights. Henry and I are awfully glad we decided to buy this place. And it's full every night in the summer, no-vacancy sign up long before it's dark. Henry and I make quite a game out of it, don't we, Henry?'

Henry grunted again.

'Are there many ways to make a living here?'

'Why, there are the stores, and real estate, all sorts of things. No industry, of course, the Council won't permit it. After all, look what happened to Nopal Valley when they let the oil wells in.'

'What happened to Nopal Valley?'

'It was ruined, absolutely ruined. Great hordes of low-class people, Mexicans and dirty oil crews, came in from gosh knows where, and simply blighted the town. We can't let it happen here.'

'Absolutely not,' I said with a phoniness she had no ear to catch. 'Quinto must remain a natural beauty spot and cultural center. I've heard quite a lot about the Quinto Players, by the way.'

'Now have you really, Mr Archer?' Her voice sank to a simpering whisper: 'You're not a Hollywood personage, are you?'

'Not exactly.' I left the question open. 'I've done a good deal of work in and about Hollywood.' Peeping on fleabag hotel rooms, untying marital knots, blackmailing blackmailers out of business. Dirty, heavy, hot work on occasion.

She narrowed her eyes and pressed her lips together as if she understood me. 'I sensed you were from Hollywood. Of course you'll be wanting to see the new play this weekend. Mr Marvell wrote it himself – he's a very brilliant man – and he's directing it, too. Rita Treadwith, a very dear friend of mine, is helping with the costumes, and she says it has great possibilities: movies, Broadway, anything.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I've had reports of it. Where's the theater they're rehearsing in?'

'Right off the highway in the center of town. Just turn right at the courthouse, and you'll see the sign: Quinto Theater.'

'Thank you,' I said, and went out. The screen door slammed a second time before I reached my car, and Henry came plodding toward me across the gravel. He was leathery and lean, beaten and parched by long summers. He came up so close to me that I could smell him.

'Listen, friend, you mean it what you said about settling down here?' He looked behind him to make sure that his wife was out of earshot, and spat in the gravel. 'I got an income proposition if you're interested. Ten thousand down and the rest out of earnings. Fifty thousand for the works, that's twelve good cottages and the good will.'

'You want to sell this place? To me?'

'You'll never get a better place at the price.'

'I thought you were mad about Quinto.'

He shot a contemptuous yellow glance at the door of the office. 'That's what *she* thinks. Prinks, hell. She lets the Chamber of

Commerce do her thinking for her. I got a chance for a liquor license in Nopal.'

'Money in Nopal, I hear.'

'You can say it again. The Valley's lousy with money since they struck oil, and there's no spenders like oilmen. Easy come, easy go.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm not interested.'

'That's OK, I just thought I'd raise the question. *She* won't let me put up a sign, or list the goddamn place.' He plodded back to the office.

The men and women in the streets had the rumped, sun-worshipping look of people on holiday. Many of them were very young or very old, and most of the former wore bathing-suits. The white Spanish buildings seemed unreal, a stage-setting painted upon the solid blue sky. To the left at the bottom of the cross-streets the placid sea rose up like a flat blue wall.

I parked in front of a restaurant near the courthouse and went in for a cold lunch. The waitress had a red-checked apron that matched the tablecloth, and a complexion that matched the coffee. I tipped her very lightly, and walked around the block to the Quinto Theater. It was two o'clock by my watch, time for the rehearsal to be under way. If the play was scheduled for the weekend, they'd be running the whole thing through by Wednesday.

The theater stood back from the street in a plot of yellowing grass: a massive windowless box of a building with its stucco scabbing off in patches to show the aged plaster. Two weather-pocked plaster pillars supported the roof of the portico. On each of the pillars a playbill announced the World Premiere of *The Ironist*, a New Play by Francis Marvell. On the wall beside the box office there was a layout of photographs mounted on a large sheet of blue cardboard. Miss Jeanette Dermott as Clara: a young blonde with luminous dreaming eyes. Mrs Leigh

Galloway as *The Wife*: a hard-faced woman smiling professionally, her bright teeth ready to eat an imaginary audience.

The third of the glossy trio interested me. It was a man in his late thirties, with light hair waving over a pale and noble brow. The eyes were large and sorrowful, the mouth small and sensitive. The picture had been taken in three-quarters face to show the profile, which was very fine. Mr James Slocum, the caption said, as 'The Ironist'. If the picture could be believed, Mr James Slocum's pan was a maiden's dream. Not mine.

A prewar Packard sedan drew up to the curb in front of the theater, and a young man got out. His long legs were tightly encased in a pair of faded Levis, his heavy shoulders bulged in a flowered Hawaiian shirt. The Levis and the shirt didn't go with the black chauffeur's cap on his head. He must have been conscious of the cap, because he tossed it on the front seat of the Packard before he came up the walk. The glistening dark hair frothed on his head in tight curls. He looked at me from eyes that were paled by the deep tan of his face. Another maiden's dream. They pastured in herds in the California resorts.

Dream Two opened the heavy door to my left, and it swung shut behind him. I waited a minute and followed him into the lobby. It was small and close and dimly lit by the red glow of the Exit lamps. The young man had disappeared, but there was a murmur of voices beyond a further door. I crossed the lobby and entered the main auditorium. It was blacked out except for the stage, where there were lights and people. I sat down in an aisle seat in the back row, and wondered what the hell I was doing there.

The set had been erected, an English drawing-room with period furniture, but the players were not yet in costume. James Slocum, looking as pretty as his picture, in a yellow turtleneck sweater, shared the stage with the blonde girl, in slacks. They were talking at each other in center stage.

'Roderick,' the girl was saying, 'have you honestly been aware of my love for you, and never breathed a word of it to me?'

'Why should I have?' Slocum shrugged his shoulders in weary amusement. 'You were content to love, and I was content to be loved. Naturally, I did my best to encourage you.'

'You encouraged me?' She overdid the surprise, and her voice screeched slightly. 'But I never knew.'

'I took care that you should not, until you had passed the narrow line that lies between admiration and passion. But I was always ready with a match for your cigarette, a compliment for your gown, a touch of the hand at parting.' He moved his hand in the air, and unconsciously underlined the corn.

'But your wife! What of her? It seems incredible that you should deliberately lead me onto the dark edge of adultery.'

'Dark, my dear? On the contrary, passion is radiant with the radiance of a thousand suns, luminous as the dayspring, shot through with rainbow splendors!' He spoke the words as if he meant them, in a ringing voice which held only a trace of reediness. 'Beside the love that we may have – shall have – the legal mating of the married is the coupling of frightened rabbits in a hutch.'

'Roderick, I hate and fear and adore you,' the girl announced. She cast herself at his feet like a ballerina.

He gave her both his hands and lifted her to her feet. 'I adore to be adored,' he answered lightly. Clinch.

A thin figure had been pacing nervously in the orchestra pit, silhouetted against the reflection of the footlights. Now he vaulted onto the stage in a single antelope bound, and circled the mugging pair like a referee.

'Very fine,' he said. 'Very fine, indeed. You've caught my intention beautifully, both of you. But would it be possible, Miss Dermott, to bring out just a shade more emphatically the contrast between *hate and fear* on the one hand, and *adore* on

the other? After all, that's the very keynote of the first act: the ambivalence of Clara's response to the Ironist, externalizing the ambivalence of his attitude to love and life. Would you take it again from "rabbits in a hutch"?

'Of course, Mr Marvell.'

Which made him the author of the play, as I'd suspected. It was the kind of play that only a mother or an actor could love, the kind of stuff that parodied itself. Phony sophistication with a high gloss, and no insides at all.

I turned my attention to the darkened auditorium, which seemed larger than it was because it was almost empty. A few people were clustered in the first rows, silently watching the actors rehash their tripe. The rest of the plywood seats were unoccupied, except for a couple a few rows ahead of me. As my eyes became used to the dim light, I could make out a boy and a girl, their heads leaning close together. At least the boy was leaning toward her; the girl sat straight in the seat. When he raised his arm and placed it along the back, she moved to the next seat.

I saw his face as he leaned sideways to speak to her: Dream Two. 'God damn you,' he said. 'You treat me as if I was dirt. I think I'm getting someplace with you, and then you crawl into your little igloo and slam the door in my face.'

'Igloos don't have doors, you crawl in through a tunnel.' Her voice was soft and prim.

'That's another thing.' He was trying to whisper, but anger jerked at his vocal cords and made the words uneven. 'You think you're so damn superior, the big brain. I could tell you things you never even heard of.'

'I don't care to hear of them. I'm very interested in the play, Mr Reavis, and I wish you'd leave me alone.'

'Mr Reavis! What makes you so bloody formal all of a sudden? You were hot enough last night when I took you home, but now it's "Mr Reavis".'

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