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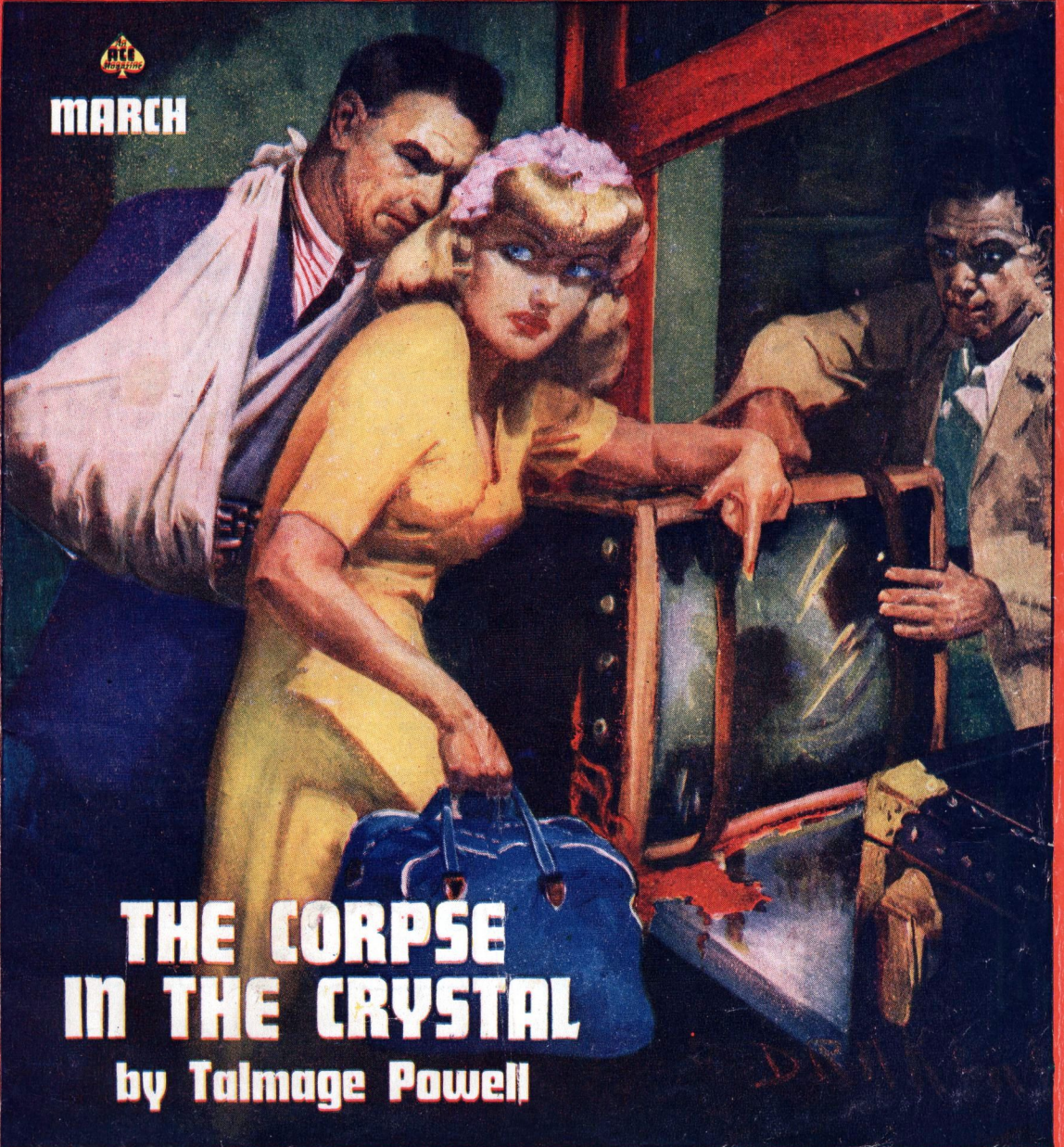
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MARCH



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by Talmage Powell

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March, 1946

Vol. LII, No. 2

☆ 10 New, Different Stories — No Serials ☆

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Cover by Albert Drake

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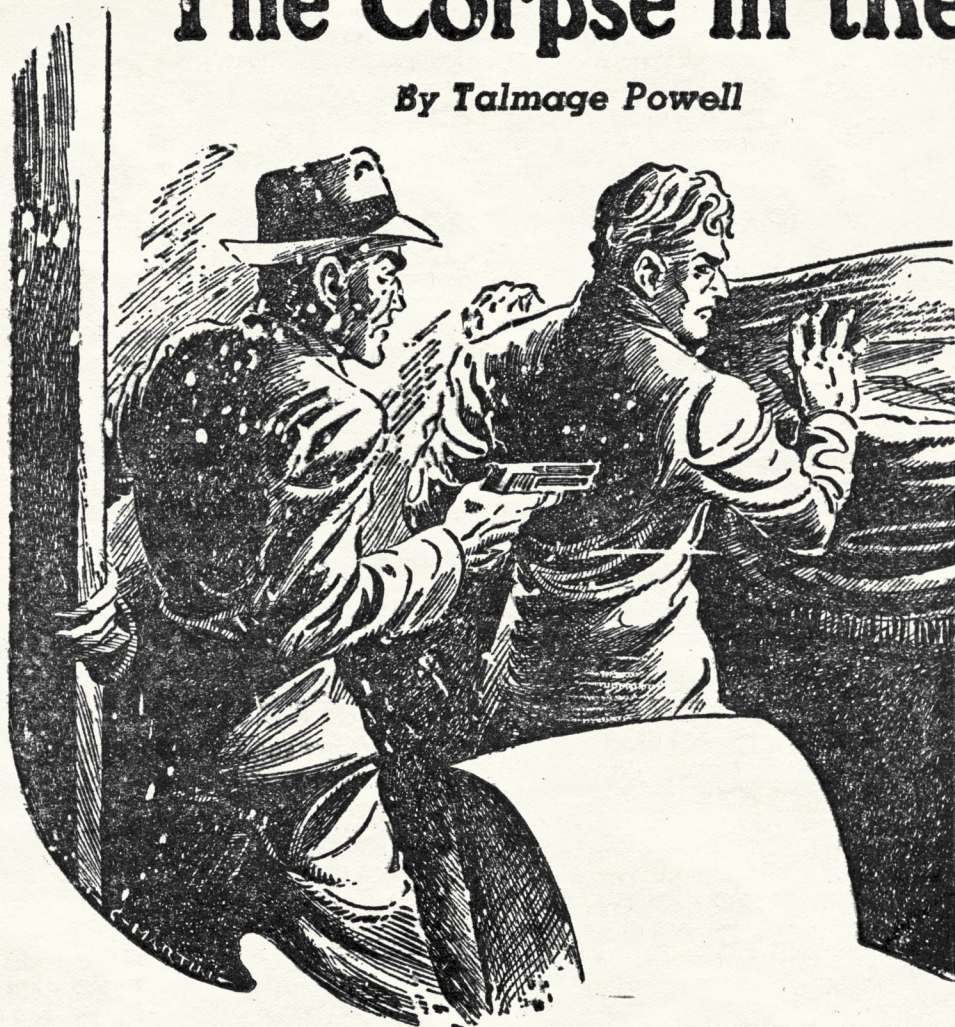
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The Corpse in the

By Talmage Powell



★ ★ ★

Abner Murder was due to freeze to death in August! That's what that weird crystal-gazer foretold—who'd already accurately predicted three equally impossible dooms. So before the stars could put the freeze on the little detective, Abner had to jump to scorch the trigger-fingers of Fate's criminal hustlers.

★ ★ ★

Crystal

"Abner Murder"
Mystery Novelet



CHAPTER I

BY THE time Abner Murder and I got on the death wagon, the kill fest was going strong and showing no sign of stopping. Every one of the deaths indicated that the grim reaper had gone on a whimsical spree—except that death is never whimsical.

Murder and I had no idea we would become involved in the affair. Subsequent investigation showed those initial deaths happened something like this:

We'll take Frank Snow first, though no one is sure even now which victim received the first note. Snow was in the

same business as the chief and I; he was a private detective.

We weren't proud of that fact and didn't regard him as an ethical member of the profession. Snow was the sort of slim, sleek man who didn't care particular'y how he made his dimes. A little blackmail in the course of regular business he regarded as a natural by-product of the operation of a private detective agency.

His secretary was at the courthouse that morning, looking up a trial in the court records that Snow was interested in. He was alone in his fifteenth floor office as he began opening his morning mail. He was tranquil, with a deep sense of well-being at the moment he opened the thin white envelope. He read the contents, and a slow frown furrowed his brow. He crushed out his cigarette abruptly, read the note again:

Mr. Snow,

I am the owner of the only truly authentic crystal, blessed by the lamas of Tibet, on the face of the earth. Though I am an utter stranger to you, I feel it my duty to warn you that I have seen your death in the crystal. You will die of drowning, Mr. Snow, before noon today. Nothing can stop it; no power can save you. The crystal never lies!

Nostra, Possessor of the Crystal

Frank Snow muttered, "The damndest crackpot note I've ever seen! Die by drowning before noon today!"

His laugh was hard, sure. He'd never heard of anything more ridiculous. He was alone, fifteen sheer stories above the street. The only water near him was in the decanter in the outer office. With an abrupt movement, his face mirroring a sense of high comedy, Frank Snow rose from his desk, crossed the office, and locked the door. No one, he was positive, could come through that door. He was quite alone, and he did not intend to leave this office until lunchtime, at one-thirty.

He laughed, crushed the note from the crackpot, Nostra, in his hands and threw it in the trash basket.

His blonde secretary finished her errand and returned to the office at eleven forty-five. Without removing her hat and coat, she hurried across the outer office to deliver the transcription of the court record to Frank Snow. She found his private office locked. She called his name. There was no answer. She waited, called his name again. She deliberated a few minutes, then called the superintendent of the building. The old janitor came up five minutes later.

"Mr. Snow is in his private office, locked in," she told him. "He doesn't answer. I want you to use your passkey on the door."

"But, Miss, he might be—"

"I'll accept responsibility if he blesses us out," she said. She added emphatically, "He wanted this court record. A man is either sick or drunk when he wants something and doesn't answer to his name!"

So the janitor unlocked the door. Frank Snow was neither sick nor drunk. He was lying in the middle of his office, dead. An hour later the medical examiner hesitantly rendered his astounding verdict. Death by drowning—with the victim sealed in the fifteenth floor office of a

modern building with not a drop of water near him. . .

LOREN "THE LION" COLE strode his swank office on the twentieth floor of the same building in which Frank Snow ran a detective agency. However, Loren Cole knew nothing of Frank Snow. Had never heard of him, in fact. Had he been told of Snow's existence, he would have considered the imparting of the knowledge as so much wasted breath by the teller. It mattered not in the least that Frank Snow was dying five floors beneath him at that very moment. The Lion was upset. Some fool had written him a note, signing it, Nostra, Possessor of the Crystal.

The Lion stared at the paper again as he paced the inner sanctum that was his private office, from which grew a thousand tentacles of power belonging to an oil king worth eleven million dollars. The Lion roared a curse, read the note again:

Mr. Cole:

The only true crystal on the face of the earth tells me that you will die from an accident with an automobile, resulting in a broken neck, before noon today. Though you and I were total strangers until the crystal revealed your name, I know it is my duty to tell you that the crystal never lies!

"A pack of rats," three of Cole's battery of secretaries in the huge outer office reported him as roaring. "A pack of rats, sending a note like this, trying to get a man so upset they can best him in business!"

That's the way he translated the note. A prank from a business rival who was dabbling in the application of a queer, negative psychology.

The Lion jerked open the teakwood door he'd imported when he first set up this suite of offices ten years ago. "I'm seeing no one," he roared. Two secretaries swallowed their gum quite involuntarily.

The whole office force of a dozen people later swore that no one had entered that sanctified office. All twelve couldn't have been lying. The Lion was alone in that twentieth floor office until one of the secretaries tapped timidly on the teakwood door, a sheaf of letters in her hand that just had to be signed.

The usual roar did not greet her. Frowning, she took her courage in hand and eased the door open a crack. Her

scream silenced every clattering typewriter. Twelve people were suddenly jammed in the door, staring at Loren "The Lion" Cole.

He was sprawled in the middle of his office, his neck twisted at a gruesome, grotesque angle. Clearly it was broken, and the Lion had died without a roar. The hands of the clock on his desk moved to twelve o'clock, noon. On the floor near the Lion's foot was a little, red plastic toy automobile. It belonged to his son, who ~~must~~ have left it after a visit with his mother, forgotten. Such a ridiculous little thing for a man to trip on and break his neck . . .

ACROSS the city Gregory Sloan gazed at the top of his desk. It was a magnificent desk, oval in shape, made of the finest walnut. But Gregory Sloan was not interested in magnificence at the moment. He was short, heavy, bald, with a greasy look about him, and a nose that looked as if it had been pushed up into his face from its base, making the nostrils prominent. He knew he resembled a fat pig more than any other creature, but even that did not bother him at present. The devil's own share of worries was on his shoulders.

He had sunk every dime he owned in this place, his Forty Nine Club. Everything had been set for Gregory Sloan; then the fool voters of the city had changed things at the last election. Gregory Sloan's man had been voted out. All his carefully laid plans had gone to the well-known pot.

The gambling rooms on the floor below were closed. Gregory Sloan had, in fact, narrowly missed having the Forty Nine Club dice in the office of the D. A. at this very moment. Then that fool girl who'd got drunk and committed suicide. Bad publicity, cops hounding him.

Every dime he owned tied up in the spacious, luxurious club that, in its entirety, occupied the two floors below him. A club that would not pay its own way without the gambling rooms and the sucker traps. He was going broke. There was nothing he could do to stop it. The city knew he was going broke, watching him and laughing. It was hell to come up the ladder from small-time punk and gunman to the crest, then lose it all.

With a grunting, heavy sigh, he turned his mind from his money problems to the

maddening, crank note before him; the note that had arrived in his morning mail three hours ago.

Gregory Sloan had neither Frank Snow's cold brutality nor Loren Cole's blustering courage. Gregory Sloan found that the implications of that note had been growing in his mind since he'd first read it and tried to shrug it off. He found the note crowding everything else from his mind.

Mr. Sloan:

Though I have never had the pleasure of meeting you, I feel that I should warn you that my crystal, blessed by the lamas of Tibet, has foretold your death. You will die of poisoning before two o'clock this afternoon. Whether or not you eat or drink, it will make no difference. The crystal never lies!

Nostra, Possessor of the Crystal.

Gregory Sloan grunted a curse. Poison—before another thirty minutes had passed, for it was now one-thirty. The devil take this fool Nostra! It was impossible, for Gregory Sloan had not been out of his office since he'd received that note. He did not intend to go out of it. Furthermore neither did he intend to touch anything that might conceivably contain poison. Death was one way out of his financial dilemma, but Gregory Sloan did not welcome that avenue of escape.

He crushed the note in his thick fingers. Few people, those few only the most trusted, even knew of the exact location of this office. Gregory Sloan was well hidden, quite alone, and he'd touched nothing that might poison him.

Yet even as the thought was going through his mind, he felt his stomach begin to burn. Eyes staring, he clutched the edge of his desk, hauled himself erect. It was exactly one-thirty. Even a slow-acting poison might do its work in the space of half an hour.

Gregory Sloan tried to cry out against the impossibility of it. It couldn't happen—yet he fell to the floor, his body twisting, jerking in the sort of convulsion that came from the administration of strychnine . . .

SO THAT'S the way things stood before Abner Murder and I got our feet in the mess. We read the scare headlines, of course. As far as we could see the case

would never concern us. Until the little packet arrived from Frank Snow in the afternoon mail.

I was going through some old records while the chief sat at his battered desk, his baby-pink, Santa Claus face lighted while he devoured cream puffs and read a magazine.

The lanky mailman came in, screwed up his eyes at Murder. The mailman had never quite reconciled himself to the fact that the dimpled, dumpy, mild, blue-eyed, little guy at the battered desk had a monicker like Murder. The mailman deposited a bundle of mail on my desk. The first thing I noticed was the manila envelope with Frank Snow's return address. The mailman closed the door behind him, and I picked up the envelope.

I was on the point of opening it, when the door opened again and two men came in. I knew them both by sight and police record. It only took one glance for me to reach around where my shoulder rig and thirty-eight were hanging on the back of my chair. They were that kind of lads. The short one was Rick Duvarti. The tall yegg was a bloody hophead named Burt Krile.

I didn't get my gun. Krile had a flat automatic in his own fist. He slammed it across the back of my hand. Duvarti stood in the middle of the office, covering his pal with a wicked looking thirty-eight on a forty-five frame.

I sat very easy-like and the chief laid aside his magazine. "What is this, boys?"

"Just a sociable little call," Duvarti said. "We been watching the mailman. He just came out of this office. We want something left here."

Burt Krile's eyes lighted as his gaze swept my desk. He snatched the envelope with Frank Snow's return address. "I got it, Duvarti," Krile said with a nasty laugh that came from the bottom of his beanpole frame. Krile crammed the envelope in his coat pocket.

I knew Abner Murder would suddenly trade his eye teeth for a look at the contents of that envelope. He said, "That's a Federal offense, Krile."

Duvarti, short, squat, chuckled. "You wouldn't go yelling for the Feds, would you, Murder? Later on, it might go hard with you and this Luke Jordan ape."

I don't like being called an ape. But there was nothing I could do about it. With another short laugh, Krile struck

with his automatic like a viper. I tried to duck, but he was fast. Duvarti, I saw out of the corner of my eye, looked awful unsteady on the trigger.

My head exploded against the flat of Krile's gun. I felt myself falling, saw in a haze the chief trying to get to the gun in his desk drawer. Duvarti said something in a nasty tone. Krile moved fast. His automatic lashed again, right on the crown of Murder's sandy head. Then I quietly went to sleep.

I blinked my eyes open with the chief slapping my cheeks. I sat up; the chief said, "As the strongarm half of this detective agency, Jordan, you're a bust."

"Nuts," I said. "I didn't notice you thinking your way out." I got to my feet, nursed my head with my hand. "What did our playmates take?"

"Nothing," Murder said, "but the letter. They conked us to give them plenty of time to make a getaway, not to have time to search the office. Finish the mail, Luke, something tells me this climate is unhealthy for two boys named Duvarti and Krile."

He checked his gun while I ripped through a few letters. Then I handed him a square sheet of paper. I watched his face while he read:

Mr. Murder,

I have seen death in the crystal. Your death. Though it is the middle of August and the thermometer at the moment stands at ninety-nine degrees, the crystal states that you will freeze to death before noon tomorrow! The crystal never lies!

Nostra, Possessor of the Crystal

Murder folded the paper very neatly in his pudgy fingers. "It looks," he said, "like we're into something!"

CHAPTER II

TIM BROGARDUS was a headquarters dick with more brawn and vociferous lung power than brains. He motioned us to chairs when Murder and I entered his office. Tim had a harried expression on his face, a pile of filing folders on his desk, along with an afternoon paper. He was speaking into the interoffice phone with obvious control.

"Sure, Chief. Of course I'm doing everything I can! You've had a call from the mayor, and scared citizens are flooding the switchboard? Yes, sir! Of course

—just give me a little time!” He slammed the phone down and passed his hand over his brow.

“I see,” Murder said, “that the crystal-gazing Nostra has upset our fair city.”

“That ain’t the word for it,” Brogardus said. “The whole damn town is afraid to go to sleep or sit down in an empty room. Those reporters—” He gritted his teeth audibly, looking at the headlines on the desk before him.

Tim’s jaw dropped as Murder shoved the little square of paper he’d received from Nostra on Tim’s desk. Tim read the note three times. “So you’re going to freeze to death in the middle of August!”

“That’s what the man says,” Murder said. “So if you’ve learned anything about this Nostra, or located him—”

“Located him!” Brogardus howled. “Listen. The guy is back in a cell right now! He walked up to a cop last night and said he wanted to be arrested. The cop laughed it off, told the guy to be on his way. Then this Nostra hauls off and slugs the cop and we tow him in.”

“So he’s been in jail since last night?”

“That’s right,” Tim nodded. “You know what I think? I think he’s trying to alibi himself.”

I expected a cutting bit of sarcasm from Murder at this obvious revelation to which Tim had struggled. But the chief had left his humor back in the office. He said, “Can I see this Nostra?”

Tim looked at the note Murder had received. He shoved back his chair. “Come on.”

They’d taken Nostra out of his cell to a little windowless room downstairs. The room was full of smoke when we entered, dark in the corners, with a dozen shadowy men moving like phantoms through the ocean of smoke. They were grouped about the man who sat beneath the glaring, green-shaded light in the middle of the room.

He didn’t look like I’d thought he would. He wasn’t greasy or sinister. Nostra was elderly, grey tinting his hair, with a thin face and a thinner smile. Brogardus, the chief, and I slipped inside the room, listened for a moment to the questions the dozen headquarters men were hammering at the crystal-gazer.

“Who told you to send those notes?”

“No one. I saw it in the crystal.”

“Don’t give us that. This crystal business is a phony, a fake.”

Nostra shrugged the remark off.

“How long have you known Loren Cole, Frank Snow, and Gregory Sloan?”

“I’ve told you dozens of times, gentlemen, that I don’t know any of them. Can I have a drink of water?” He half rose; a strong hand pushed him back.

“Listen, you crystal-gazing rat, this is murder! You think we’re going to let you go around killing people and get away with it?”

Nostra’s smile was thin. “How could I kill anyone? I was in jail. How could anyone kill those men? From what you have told me, they were all in sealed rooms. It was impossible for them to die.”

“But you said they were going to die!”

Nostra made a weary gesture with his hand. “Precisely. I knew, gentlemen, that I would be branded a fake. I knew I would be under suspicion. I foretold the deaths, and from the generosity of my heart warned the victims. A lesser man, to protect his own skin, would have remained silent. But I knew the risk I was running from the hands of the police when death was an established fact. I accepted it.”

“Bah!” That was Tim. He strode forward, Murder’s note in his hand.

“Did you write this?” Tim bellowed.

Nostra looked at the note. “I wrote it and dropped it in a corner mailbox late last night before I—er—punched the policeman.”

Murder stepped forward. “And you think I’m going to freeze to death in the middle of August?”

YOU could have heard a pin drop. Very slowly, Nostra looked from the chief’s face down to his feet. Then he raised his eyes once more; his gaze locked with Murder’s. Nostra looked cool and distant even under that hot light, but you could smell sweat in the tight room.

“You’re Abner Murder?”

“I am.”

“Then you will die. Exactly as the note said.”

Somebody shifted his feet. Everybody here, except Nostra, knew the chief, had seen him in action. Murder forced a ghost of a smile. “But suppose I don’t care to die. Suppose I have them lock me in jail until after the time limit tomorrow?”

“You would die anyway,” whispered Nostra. There was a note of finality hanging in his words. There was nothing more to be said.

Back in Brogardus's office, Tim said, "Murder, we've fought and scratched, you and me, and we've even worked together on a few cases. Don't let this get you down. I'll break Nostra if it's the last thing I do."

"I'm afraid you won't," Murder said. "He's got a simple story and he's the sort of man to stick to it. He was in jail. That's his alibi and you're stuck with it. I think you've got as much out of him as you'll get, Tim."

Brogardus sat down with the air of a man who couldn't think of anything else to do. He chewed his nails. The chief said, "You might as well give me the low-down, Tim. If I'm going to freeze to death by noon tomorrow . . ." His smile was wry as he left the sentence unfinished.

"All right," Tim said, "here it is. Like the paper said, Frank Snow was discovered in his office, drowned. The door was locked, and no water was near him. Ergo, an impossible death."

Brogardus made a steeple of his fingers. "It may be that somebody had it in for Snow. You know yourself, Ab, how he was putting his nose in blackmail corners. But if anyone hated him enough to kill him, or feared him that much, it would have been impossible to kill him in the manner that he was."

"And Loren Cole?"

"About the same," Brogardus shrugged. "From all appearances, he tripped on a toy automobile on the floor of his office and broke his neck. We've talked to his wife and a few business associates. Cole has shown intense worry in the last few days, but his wife states that he often had those moods. Several people he had bested in business one way or another hated him. But again, no one was in that office except Cole."

"That leaves Gregory Sloan, the nightclub owner," I said. "The paper didn't have much to say about him."

"We didn't give out much," Tim countered. "Gregory Sloan was a little luckier than the others. His secretary went in his office, found him in a convulsion. She saw the note from Nostra on his desk, mentioning poison."

"She was a quick-thinking gal. She grabbed a glass of lukewarm water and some baking soda from Sloan's desk, poured it down him. She got an ambulance in a hurry, and they went to work with a stomach pump. Sloan's in City Hospital

now, but we are keeping it under cover that he's okay. We don't want another crack taken at Sloan."

The chief edged forward in his chair. "Then you've talked to Sloan!"

Tim cocked an eye at him. "Sure, and that's the most impossible part of the whole thing. If either Snow or Cole had lived to talk, they might have told us something. Like you, Ab, I was on pins and needles, thinking that in Sloan's case a slip had been made and we'd get a lead. But he swears that he was absolutely alone from the moment he received the note until his secretary walked in and found him. He touched nothing that might poison him."

"Living, Sloan's made the puzzle of the administration of the poison bigger than ever. He swears there was no way anyone could have poisoned him—unless he was slipped a capsule late yesterday or early this morning. At breakfast, say. But he'd have noticed a capsule, so that's out."

Tim flung up his arms in the attitude of a man much beset. Murder and I got to our feet. The chief asked Tim for the address of Nostra, got it, and we left the office. The old black ball we were behind looked bigger than ever.

NIGHT was pitch black, not a star showing nor a breath of air stirring. As I walked down the grimy sidewalk in a seedy section of town beside the chief, I had the feeling the whole earth was gathered in a hush, watching us, waiting for the next impossible death to happen.

The unpainted cottage that was Nostra's was directly ahead. We'd come down and scouted the place. Then we had dinner, Murder acting unhurriedly for a man slated to freeze to death sometime during this hot, hushed night. We'd waited for darkness, for the chief wanted to give that place a thorough going over.

We paused a hundred feet up the sidewalk. Except for the bar down on the corner with the lonely sounding, tinny jukebox, the street was deserted. We went on toward the cottage, clinging to shadows. We were at the edge of the yard, when Murder laid his hand on my arm. We dropped behind an unkempt shrub.

A moment later footsteps, quick, nervous, came across the sagging porch, down the walk. The shadowy figure reached the sidewalk, paused a moment. Yellow

tongues from the street light touched a face, a neat figure. She was blonde and trim. Dim as it was, the street light told us she was young and lovely. She'd been inside Nostra's shack, without any lights burning. Prowling, hunting maybe.

She turned left on the sidewalk. When she was fifty feet away, the chief touched my arm. We fell in behind her. She was hurrying along without a backward glance. It wouldn't be too hard to keep her in sight.

The blonde got a cab at the first hackstand. She wasn't half a block away when we'd grabbed a taxi and surged into traffic behind her. She went across town, to Cedarwood Forest, the swankiest development in town, a section of wide boulevards lined with stately cedars. We watched the tail light of her cab. It slowed, turned in the white driveway of a hedge-bordered estate.

Murder gave our driver orders to drive on past. Half a block away, the chief paid the cab, and we got out and walked back. As we cut into the edge of the wide, terraced lawn, Murder said:

"This, Luke, is one of the Wendel Hobbs' houses. His summer place, I believe. Think it over."

As we moved like deeper shadows against the night across the lawn, I thought it over. Before, this case had been impossible. Now it was also gigantic.

Wendel Hobbs was the controlling hand behind half a dozen huge companies, a chain of paper factories, a chemical works, a major stockholder in a steel mill. He was retired from active business, eighty years old, becoming a bit doddering in his senile years, according to a couple of newspaper columnists who'd spotted him at one or two racy night spots. He had so many millions that he and his heirs couldn't count his money in their lifetimes.

The chief found a French door at the side of the house that opened quite easily. He hissed to me, and I inched my way through the dense shrub. I moved up beside him. We were in the Hobbs mansion.

We stood a moment, getting our bearings. This was evidently the library. Faint light filtered in from the hallway. Books, hundreds of them bound in the finest morocco, lined the walls. Here and there was a rather silly bit of bric-a-brac. Hobbs had probably paid a fortune for

just for amusement in his waning years.

From somewhere we could hear the subdued murmur of voices. The lawnlike carpet deadened our footsteps. We heard a woman's voice rise and say, "I tell you, Wendel, I did the best I could!"

I was willing to bet it was the blonde talking. It was her kind of voice. Velvet, even with the strained note in it.

Near the library door, Murder drew his flashlight, shaded it, played it over a scroll-legged desk. He whistled softly between his teeth. I looked over his shoulder. He had raised the blotter on the desk. Beneath it was a packet of carbon copies. He thumbed through them. There was a carbon copy of every warning Nostra had sent out. Frank Snow. Loren Cole. Gregory Sloan. Abner Murder.

Quietly, the chief let the blotter fall back on the desk. "Hobbs," he said. "I suddenly want to talk to old Wendel Hobbs very much."

The hall was lighted by a brilliant chandelier. Murder inched his head out the library door, scouted the hallway with his gaze. He tugged my sleeve, and we ventured out into the glaring light.

The sound of voices was coming from a room up the hall to our left. We started toward it. At that moment footsteps sounded in the back of the hall. It was probably a servant, but we didn't want to find out at the expense of being caught in the middle of the hallway.

We lunged silently toward a door at our right, grabbed a knob, eased inside before we were spotted. Murder's insatiable curiosity caused him to turn on his light to see the sort of room we had ducked into.

It was a den of sorts, a big lounge, some leather easy chairs. A rack on the wall held a few loving cups and guns. There was a huge fireplace. Before the fireplace lay two men clad in the garments of workers. It didn't take a second stab of Murder's wan, yellow light to show that both men were dead.

I STOOD back while Murder bent over the two dead men. I didn't like their staring eyes or the neat bullet holes in their temples. The chief straightened, snapped his light off. I felt his presence move over near me.

I said, "Who are they?"

"How should I know?" he sounded irked. "Their pockets are as empty as the

Jordan brain. However, one little slip was made."

"Which is?"

"On the inside of the bib of their overalls. A little cloth label. No one would think of looking for it there, except a laundry. The overalls belong to the Apex Window Washing Service."

"Does that make sense?" I asked, after thinking it over.

"Not yet," he said. "But it will—if I freeze in the attempt." I sensed the strain in his voice. I had a hunch he was thinking of his blonde wife, Jo-Ann, and the Murder children. His family was never far from his thoughts when he was working on a case, especially a case as coldly and deliberately executed as this one was. The chief could never quite forget that somebody, someday, might take a grudge out on his family.

We listened for long, thick minutes. The footsteps in the hallway had died. There was no movement, no sound, until we opened the door and again heard the murmur of voices up the hall.

This time we made it to the door which concealed the owners of the voices. Murder palmed the knob. A woman talking; the cracked tones of an old man. The chief opened the door.

There was an enormous fireplace in this room too. Before it, his hands clasped behind him, stood an aged, thin man, slightly stooped, his hair a white mane. I'd seen his picture in the papers, Wendel Hobbs.

A woman sat in a high-backed deep chair near him. At the sound of our entry she jumped to her feet. It was the blonde we'd seen coming from Nostra's house, all right. Getting a good look at her, I saw that my first assumption had been right. She was a blood-pressure raiser, definitely. A Miami beauty contest would have been a snap for her blonde, green-eyed perfection. But now her face was like chalk.

Wendel Hobbs said, "What's the meaning of this? I'll have you—"

"We just want palaver," the chief said. "Don't get apoplexy."

The blonde said, "Who are you?"

"A civil question," the chief said laconically, "demands a civil answer. We are private detectives. I'm Abner Murder, this is Luke Jordan."

WENDEL HOBBS made a sound that sounded almost like a groan. He drooped loosely in a chair, his faded blue eyes seeming to sink in his head.

The chief said, "I gather from your reaction, Mr. Hobbs, that you don't exactly welcome a detective on the premises."

Hobbs gripped the arms of his chair to still the trembling of his hands. He forced harshness into his voice. "I don't welcome you. Either leave, or I'll call the police." His eyes drank in the hard, knowing smile on the chief's lips, the light in the chief's eyes, which were still blue but no longer baby-looking.

"It depends entirely on you, Mr. Hobbs," Murder said. "If you want to call the police, there's a very expensive ivory telephone on that table." Hobbs slumped in his chair.

The blonde was still standing. "Introductions haven't been completed," Murder said.

"I—I'm Linda."

"Linda?"

"Yes—just—just Linda."

"I see," Murder mused. "Your last name is your own. Keep it quiet if you want to. But I'd like to ask you what you were doing in the house of a crystal-gazer named Nostra tonight."

She tried to laugh. "I? In what house? I don't believe—"

"We saw you come out of the place," Murder said coldly. "We know you were there."

She took a turn about the chair, her long, red-nailed fingers gripping the back of it. "It's none of your business, Mr. Murder."

The chief regarded her for a long moment. The fire crackled; the only sound save the rising murmur of the wind outside. "All right," Murder said, "we'll play it that way."

He turned to Hobbs. "Maybe you'll be more communicative, Mr. Hobbs, and tell us who the two dead men are in the room across the hall."

The blonde Linda almost fainted, reeled against the chair. Hobbs rose, doddering, slumped. He looked from Murder to me, back to the chief, a very old man. He shuffled to a high secretary beside a huge window, seemed to be gazing out at the night. Then he turned from the secretary, and there was a gun in his hand. He wasn't trembling now, either. He was

cool with a coolness born of desperation. He would use that gun, I knew.

"I don't know anything about those men, Mr. Murder. I came home tonight and there they were. I was waiting for a chance to get them out of the house. I'm sorry you came along."

"What do you intend doing now?" I asked.

"Whatever I can do," he said huskily. "Whatever I have to do. The last few days have been extremely trying ones, gentlemen. May I plead with you not to push me further." He motioned with the gun, took a step toward us. The chief and I moved under the gun's bidding.

"Through that door," Hobbs said. We backed out into the hall, down the hallway to another door, and Hobbs added, "In there."

I fumbled the door open. It was a large linen closet. "Keep moving, please," Hobbs requested. Murder and I backed into the closet. The old man slammed the door, shutting us in darkness. There was the faint sound of Hobbs' footsteps retreating down the hall.

I lunged against the door. Murder caught my arm, pulled me back. "Just take it easy, Luke. Give the old boy a few minutes to get away. We won't force him to start shooting at us, and get him in any more hot water than he is already."

"So he's innocent, huh?" I said sourly. "With two dead men in his den, he's innocent?"

I felt the chief's shrug. "He's making too many mistakes to be guilty, Luke. He's so scared he isn't thinking straight, all in a muddle. He intends now to get rid of the pair of dead men, thinking vaguely he'll tie the police up with the lack of a *corpus delicti*. But he didn't take our guns, did he? He's in such a dither he can't see the loopholes, such as us getting out of here and going straight to the police."

"So we wait, huh?"

"Might as well. Anyway, a frightened innocent man is a dangerous thing. You poke your head out of that door, you'll get a noggin full of lead—which would at least put something in the empty space."

I was framing a retort to that one when the faint sound of a car motor, racing, somewhere outside drifted to us.

"Hobbs is on his way," Murder said. "Let's get a move on."

We pounded on the door for perhaps thirty seconds; then a key grated, the door swung wide. A goggle-eyed servant took one look at us strangers in his linen closet and let out a yell. Murder shoved him to one side and we got out of that hallway, slamming the massive front door behind us, like convicts with hungry bloodhounds on our heels.

CHAPTER III

THE hospital corridor was white, bright with light, clean with the odor of anesthetic and germicides. The door to Gregory Sloan's private room was just ahead of us, down the corridor. He was evidently much improved. His door was standing open.

As we neared, we heard his voice, "I appreciate your coming to visit me, Miss Smith. You are a good secretary, but when I tell you to come in my office at one thirty, you shouldn't come at one thirty-five, just as you shouldn't have brought the flowers tonight. They're lovely, but my hay fever, you know."

A girl stammered something. As we moved into the doorway she bade her boss, Gregory Sloan, good-by and speedy recovery, saying she would take care of the office while he was in the hospital. He assured her that he was going home in an hour or so, breaking off as he saw us.

His pale brows lifted. The chief said, "I'm Abner Murder, Mr. Sloan. This is Luke Jordan, my assistant. We're—"

"I know. Detectives of the private variety. I've heard of you, Mr. Murder. Sit down."

The chief took the chair at the side of the bed. I stood at the foot of the white iron bed.

Murder started to say something, but quick footsteps sounded in the corridor, turned in the room. She saw the chief and me too late to turn back. It was a blonde goddess named Lind. Her face became as lifeless as the color of cotton batting when she saw Murder and me. She stood just inside the doorway, frozen.

Gregory Sloan missed her reaction. "Gentlemen," he said, "my wife."

Murder had risen. He made a mocking, faint bow to the girl. "We're happy to know you, Mrs. Sloan. I would almost swear that I've met you some place before."

I watched the pulse pound in her throat.

Gregory Sloan laughed. "I doubt that you've met Linda, Mr. Murder. She's a very quiet, homey little woman."

"Oh, I'm sure of it," the chief said. "Very quiet, homey." His eyes were drilling into her. Her own lovely green orbs were stricken, begging him to keep silent about trailing her from Nostra's shack and finding her in the house of a rich man who had two very real corpses in his den.

"I—I really don't get around much, Mr. Murder," she stammered. "Another girl, perhaps? Someone who looked like me?"

Murder let her hang for an agonizing moment. Then he said, "Naturally. Another girl."

She almost slumped with relief. She fumbled in her bag, found a cigarette and lighted it. She stood over by the window as Murder took the chair by the bed again, and explained to Gregory Sloan that we were interested in the deaths foretold by Nostra and would appreciate a few answers. Sloan told him to fire away. He and the chief talked.

As far as I could see, Murder got exactly nowhere. We learned nothing we hadn't known before. Gregory Sloan had received the note from Nostra, had been alone, had touched nothing that might poison him. He was unable to explain the impossible, he said. Neither could he advance a theory as to how Frank Snow had drowned with no water present, or how a man might be killed in an accident with a toy plastic automobile.

So for my money the visit was a flat zero, but when we left the hospital, there was a smile on Murder's chubby face. "I know how the whole thing was done, Luke," he said in the darkness outside. "I can explain the things that happened to Frank Snow, Loren Cole and Gregory Sloan. I can also explain the two dead men in Wendel Hobbs' den. I think I can even lay my finger on the killer!"

"But how—"

"You can't see it?" he said in mock surprise. "Gracious, Luke, you've seen every angle of the case that I've seen. Every fact known to me is right under your nose."

"Okay, crow awhile," I said sarcastically. "But in the meantime, why don't we nab this killer?"

"Because," he said slowly, "the most important element is still missing. We've got to find a motive."

"So what do we do?"

"We go to the key to the puzzle—Wendel Hobbs. We wait. We hope that we don't have to wait too long. That we don't have to wait until I freeze to death here in the middle of August!"

NIGHT had deepened. Despite the sweat gathered in the small of my back, the ground was cold, especially if you were lying full length on it. Dew had risen, seeping into my coat, and the night wind had grown.

I was hunkered behind one of the shrubs dotting Wendel Hobbs' spacious, terraced lawn. Murder was on the other side of the flagstone walk, hunkered behind a shrub that was a twin to this one. We had a full view of the front and either side of the house.

I kept watching the light burning in the corner of the house, the shadow pacing back and forth across the face of the light, a silhouette against the window. Murder had assured me that the pacing shadow was old Wendel Hobbs, that eventually he would stop his pacing, turn out the light and go somewhere. Personally, I guessed the old geezer would go to bed. That's where I wanted to be.

I knew the chief would bawl me out if I dared strike a light to smoke. So I crouched there in misery, cursing the day I'd hired myself out to the dumpy little man with the dimples and baby-blue eyes.

Then my thoughts broke off. The light had gone out, just as Murder had said it would. A door slammed. A long minute of silence, during which even the wind paused. Then the sound of footsteps coming down the path, the steps of an old man made sprightly by nervous reserve energy.

The shadow passed down the walk. As the chief had assured, it was Hobbs and he was going somewhere. A light topcoat with the collar turned up and a hat brim pulled low almost obscured his face. He didn't want anyone to know where he was going, not even his chauffeur.

He turned right at the sidewalk. Murder and I gave him a moment, then cut across the lawn and fell in behind him.

It wasn't an easy job, this task of shadowing. Hobbs was leery, cautious. His head kept jerking around, the movement freezing Murder and me in shadows.

Hobbs walked a block, turned. He ap-

proached a small park, stopped, looked around. He stood at the edge of the sidewalk for what seemed to be five dragging minutes. The chief and I inched closer to him until we could have whispered to him from the shelter of twin willow trees just off the sidewalk behind him.

Then up the street twin lights flashed. Automobile headlights. The car was parked a block away at an intersection. Even I didn't miss that carefully planned detail. The car could have gone in any of four directions should anything go wrong.

Those headlights snapped on and off again, then on once more and stayed lighted. Old Wendel Hobbs reached beneath his coat, pulled out a long, flat package and tossed it on the edge of the street. The car's motor was roaring and the headlights raced closer. Hobbs turned quickly and started walking back in the direction he had come.

MURDER bawled some kind of order to me. Things happened so fast that, even though I didn't catch his command, I fell in step behind him as he came hurtling from the shelter of the willow tree. His body was bent, his feet pounding. He was headed directly toward the street.

It was a hop and jump; it was nip and tuck. Murder reached it without breaking stride and scooped up the package Wendel Hobbs had tossed in the street. Those headlights were glaring, right on top of us it seemed. My heart was trying to tear its way out of my throat.

I heard Hobbs yell. The roar of the car's motor as the quick-thinking driver gave it the gun.

He twisted the wheel, slashed across the street toward us. If we had paused to turn and take the short way out of the street, he would have got us. Instead, we just kept right on going like the devil was lashing our heels, into the broad, vacant lot directly across the street.

The looming headlights missed us by inches. I heard Hobbs yell again as the chief and I plunged into undergrowth. Murder clutched that long, flat package in his hand. I hoped it was worth all this.

Tires shrilled behind us as brakes were slammed. Car doors opened and shut. The quiet, widely separated estates of elegant Cedarwood Forest had never seen the like of this.

Half a dozen rough voices rose in the night. Footsteps charged into the undergrowth behind us. Somebody back there ran into a tangle of brambles and cursed.

Somebody else was too much on edge. He fired three quick shots. The man in the brambles cursed some more. "Cut it, you fool! Wait'll we get our hands on them, then we'll slit their eyes out!"

The chief and I reached a clearing. He drew up short. We'd be spotted in the dim moonlight in the cleared space. And we couldn't turn back. Personally I valued my eyes too much.

I stood panting during a second that seemed like an eternity. Then Murder shoved me, grabbed a low branch on a tree, swung himself up. I followed suit, easting up on the limb beside him. We pressed against the trunk of the tree, trying to make ourselves a part of it, and waited.

The half dozen men back there would have been tops in their trade in a dark alley with knives in their hands, but they weren't woodsmen. They made too much noise as they beat the underbrush, coming steadily toward the clearing. Then they were silent. I knew they had drawn up, ringing that side of the clearing not a dozen feet from our tree.

They were more cautious now. Seconds ticked away and the chief and I saw dim blobs moving out into the clearing. One shadow passed beneath our tree. I could have spit in his eye if he had looked up.

But he didn't. They worked their way to the other side of the clearing. Somebody said, "There's another street over here. They musta got away that way."

"Nice going, nice going, ain't the boss gonna like this?" somebody else said bitterly.

A third voice added, "We better scram outta here. They got away. Some of the dudes living around here might have heard Duvarti shooting and called the bulls."

So Duvarti was in that group of men. That meant Krile probably would be, too.

THE dim shadows below turned and came back across the clearing. Moments later the motor of the car started. We listened to the sound die away. Our playmates were gone.

Murder and I dropped out of the trees. "Scooped their prize right from under their noses, eh, Luke? I guess old man

Hobbs is back home by this time, quivering in his slippers."

"And what did we scoop?" I asked.

In answer, Murder shielded his light, flicked it on. He handed me the package. I ripped open the end. It was more money than I'd ever dreamed I would see in one time in my whole life. It was a package of thousand dollar bills. There must have been at least a hundred of them.

We didn't get to enjoy it. A voice in the darkness behind us said, "One move, gentlemen, and I can promise you that you'll never move again!"

The light of a flashlight spread over us. We turned slowly. "Drop the package." Murder dropped it.

I'd heard the voice before. It was the voice of Nostra, the guy who owned the crystal.

He chuckled over the gun in his hand. "Did you really think we would give up so easily, Mr. Murder? I guessed you would be hiding somewhere close around. You really didn't have time to make a getaway. So I stayed behind with a couple of the boys. Two friends of yours. Rick Duvart and Burt Krile."

Duvarti and Krile moved up out of the darkness to stand beside Nostra.

"I thought you were in jail," the chief said.

"It was easy enough to get out," Nostra said. "I'd committed no real crime. I paid my bond and will have to appear in police court next Tuesday because I slapped the cop. You know as well as I that they had nothing to hold me on."

Duvarti gave his short, nasty chuckle, came forward and warily picked up the package of money at Murder's feet.

"You have some admirable traits, Mr. Murder," Nostra said. "Few men would have thought of trailing Wendel Hobbs and snatching the package from under our noses. Few men will be so honored in their manner of dying. We will retire to the street. I'll signal with my light. The car, which is now parked down the street, will turn, come back, and pick us up. If you want to die suddenly, make a break. If you want a few hours more of life, remember that the crystal never lies."

"You mean—" I gulped.

"I mean," Nostra explained coldly, "that I have a friend who owns a slaughter house. You are aware of the refrigerating systems in slaughter houses, of

course? Refrigerators that can hold a ton of pork or beef and freeze it solid. We will strip you, gentlemen, and do our best to keep you from being cozy inside the refrigerator. When you have finally expired, about dawn, we'll smuggle you to a hotel room. A post mortem will prove definitely that you froze to death in August in a hotel room you apparently spent the night in. Quite cunning, don't you think?"

He laughed, and I was feeling that refrigerator already.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS crowded in that heavy seven-passenger sedan. But there was no chance to make a break. These lads had been recruited, because they were fast on the trigger, knew their business, and would shoot their own brothers for a grand note.

I sat beside Murder, listening to his jerky breathing. The sedan wound its way through back streets, where the one short yell we might be able to give would do no good. Streamers of fog began to slither across the headlight beams. The particular smell of grimy water lapping piers bit my nostrils. We were down in the waterfront section of warehouses, docks, slums—and slaughter houses.

The sedan drew to a stop before a huge, weather-browned building. One of the men got out of the car, opened a broad, creaking door. The sedan moved forward, tipped down, went down a wooden incline.

Nostra said, "Last stop. You will keep your hands over your heads, gentlemen."

The chief and I got out. In the beams of the headlights we saw that we were in a huge, boxlike room. A row of hand trucks stood to one side. Empty boxes were stacked along one wall. Overhead ran a series of steel rails, huge, gleaming meat hooks hanging from pulleys here and there, on which huge slabs of meat were shunted toward the refrigerators at the far end. The slaughtering pens were not here, but were in the rear section of the building; yet the odor of the pens hung over everything.

Krile carried a flashlight, walking directly behind us as the chief and I moved forward with our hands above our heads. I knew Nostra had been lying about one thing. Whoever owned this packing house



was not a friend of his. It was a legitimate place. The owner would never suspect it had been broken into and two men cooled in its refrigerators.

The lights of the car snapped off. We moved forward in single file, footsteps echoing, Krile's light a dim, lost finger in the vastness of the place.

It was a mistake all the way through on the part of Nostra. He shouldn't have told us to keep our hands up. We shouldn't have been walking single file with only one flashlight behind us. Nostra shouldn't have been leading the procession with Murder directly behind him.

If Nostra had done none of those things, Abner Murder never would have grabbed the next meat hook we passed.

Murder's arm snapped like a small load of dynamite behind the hook. The pulley

wheels supporting the heavy, three-pronged hook on the gleaming rail zinged an angry cry as the hook left Murder's hand.

Krile yelled and Nostra turned. The crystal-gazer jerked up his arm, his face contorted. He was only five feet away. He never had a chance. The sharp tip of the hook was on a neat level with his chin . . .

Then I was piling into Krile. I couldn't wring the light from his hand, but I smashed it to the floor by throwing him. The light winked out. Krile thrashed, yelled. Everything was happening between heartbeats. Men were cursing and milling about in the Stygian darkness.

Murder's hands found Krile's face. Still Krile hung on to me. So the chief

drew back his toe and kicked. His aim was good. I heard Krile lose teeth, and he relaxed in unconsciousness.

Somebody tripped over me. I cursed in a reasonable facsimile of Krile's voice. I got his gun, located the chief by feeling around for him. I fired the gun three times. I wasn't aiming at anything, simply away from Murder and myself.

We dropped flat on our faces before the last shot had died. Everybody started shooting, which is the spark I'd wanted to set off. They were still banging away in the dark, insane with panic, when the chief and I inched out of one of the packing house windows.

Four blocks away we found a drug store. Murder dropped a nickel in the phone and dialed headquarters. He got Tim Brogardus on the wire and told Tim about the little party in the packing house. "But never mind that, Tim," he said, "send some of your minions to pick up the pieces. If any of them are still alive, we'll want them for questioning. We especially want Duvarti and Krile to spill their brains. Krile at least will be alive, I think. You'll find him on the floor unconscious."

Murder paused. At the other end, Brogardus evidently had picked up another phone and was yelling orders to be dispatched to squad cars.

Then Murder said, "Here's what I want you to do, Tim. Pick up Wendel Hobbs, Linda Sloan, and her piggish husband. Take them to my office. If you get there before we do, use one of your passkeys and wait. By the way, Tim," he added, "you might have told your squad car lads that Nostra will be hanging around when they get to the packing house."

TIM worked fast. The chief and I had to hoof several blocks to find a cab. We trudged up to the office and saw that the light was on. We opened the door, and they were there. Tim. Gregory Sloan. Linda Sloan. Wendel Hobbs.

Murder surveyed them, closed the door, took a turn around the room like a lecturer preparing to start his talk. The chief really lived at moments like these.

He addressed Wendel Hobbs, "I asked you here, Mr. Hobbs, in order that you might enjoy knowing the identity of the person who was wringing money from you." Murder fastened his gaze on the lovely Linda Sloan.

She half rose from her chair. "No!"

"Yes!" the chief mimicked sardonically. "You want details? Here they are. The whole business was a combine to extort money from wealthy men. Scare them half to death, stage a lot of spectacular stuff, and demand money as the price of their staying alive. That's the motive. Simple enough?"

"Except for Frank Snow. He was killed because he was getting wise to the setup and trying to muscle in. Just as Luke and I were slated to be killed because you weren't sure Snow hadn't talked to us. You knew he'd sent us a packet containing evidence with an envelope inside the manila envelope sealed and inscribed with something like 'Not to be opened except in case of my death.' He was doing that to hold you in line.

"But you found out he'd sent the packet to me. You had Krile and Duvarti ready to lift it, but you didn't know whether or not I was wised up to a certain extent already. So I was supposed to be removed in the usual spectacular way. For every one of the deaths served two purposes—they created confusion, thereby covering the identity of the murderer; and they created fear in men like Wendel Hobbs who were going to pay off in millions.

"Loren Cole was one such man. But he didn't pay, so he was made an example to others who might get ideas of balking."

"But *how*, Ab?" Tim Brogardus demanded.

"Frank Snow and Loren Cole were murdered by window washers," the chief said. "Nostra was just a puppet in the game, contacted and hired to write these notes, all of which built the bizarre in the minds of future extortion victims.

"It was a simple matter to remove two workers from the Apex Window Washing Service this morning with bullets in their temples. Then a couple of huskies don the uniforms, drop the lines and platforms and start washing windows—until they get to the office of Loren Cole and Frank Snow. They take those offices one at a time, working as a pair. They open the window—or if it's locked they tap on it—and tell Cole and Snow to please excuse them, that they want to wash the inside of the windows.

"So Cole and Snow, possibly even experiencing a momentary first instant of

fright, think nothing more of it. Cole turns his back and they break his neck, place his body on the floor along with a toy automobile they've stolen from his home or bought in a dime-store toy department.

"Snow turns his back, and the two of them cram his head in a pail of their water. They dry his head and face, and he's apparently drowned with no water near. Just who the two 'window washers' were is a minor detail that we'll find out when your boys really get rolling to tie up the loose ends, Tim."

"No!" Linda Sloan sobbed. "I wasn't behind it! I didn't do it!"

"But you will talk!" Murder said. "Not on the stand of course, for a woman can't testify against her husband. But you'll tell us enough off the record to make a confession come easy and lighten the grief you're going to carry. You were an accomplice, working from inside, putting pressure on the rich guys and building the idea of Nostra and death! Not to mention the way you worked on Hobbs with the bodies planted in his den!"

GREGORY SLOAN bounded to his feet. "I won't take your insinuations, Murder! I'm a sick man. I've just been out of the hospital a few hours. I was in bed when I graciously consented to come here when Brogardus phoned me."

"Sit down," Murder said coldly. "You're a killer and you're going to take all the insinuations I can hand out. You were the man behind it all. It's no secret around town that the last election upset your apple cart. So you picked this way of getting rich quick.

"Sure, you were poisoned. You included yourself right in your list of victims. You even sent the carbon of the note you'd supposedly received from Nostra along with the other carbons that went to Wendel Hobbs. Carbons that were one more tiny example of the dozens of ways your pressure mounted on your victims. You knew that if you were among the victims, there was a good chance you might get caught. One of your hoods might have talked a little too much. There might have been a slip somewhere.

"I suspected you of giving yourself a slight dose of poison—not too much of course—this morning when Tim told me your secretary had rushed in your office and given you luke warm water and bak-

ing soda, a good emetic. The water and soda were both on your desk where you'd put them in advance!

"I was positive it was you, Sloan, when I came up to your hospital room and heard you blessing out your secretary for coming into your office at one thirty-five when you had told her in advance to come in at one thirty sharp. That five minutes could have been fatal had the poison been stronger.

"We've got Krile. He'll talk. Linda here is in a jam. She'll talk. How long do you think you'll last, Sloan?"

Gregory Sloan whimpered, bolted for the door. I hit him, and he staggered back across my desk, his hand to his cut lips. He slouched there and held out his other hand to Wendel Hobbs.

"Help me! You've got money. You can hire lawyers! I'm sorry I did what I did to you. Your money is in my safe at home. Help me."

Wendel Hobbs looked at Sloan, and Sloan's words died. His piggish gaze dropped before that of the old man. I looked at Sloan, his pleading words to the man he had victimized echoing in my ears. I knew that not even Abner Murder would ever fully understand the criminal mind. Tim mumbled a thanks, pulled his gun, and herded Linda and her broken, sobbing husband out. The door closed behind them. The chief turned to Hobbs and cleared his throat.

"Mr. Hobbs, I feel I should tell you that my price for recovering lost or stolen property is a mere ten per cent. Now since your money is now known to be neatly tucked away in Gregory Sloan's safe."

Old man Hobbs laughed, pulled a check-book from his pocket. Without hesitation he wrote a nifty. Ten grand, with the notation in the corner of the check, *For services rendered—in more ways than one.*

"I'll watch the company I keep, Mr. Murder. I met Linda Sloan at a rather wild party one night. She was the first contact."

He shook the chief's hand and walked out. Murder sat down, blowing tenderly on the check. "Luke, call my wife and tell her to put on the coffee and break out the cream puffs. We're doing to have a celebration!"

Celebration? With ten grand who—besides Abner Murder—would care anything about cream puffs!

Kern's little murder scheme was all complete, even to leaving a . . .

Picture of Homicide

By Theodore Pine



“LES! After all these years! When did you get in town?” Dan Gavin chuckled into the telephone. “You’ve no idea how glad — what? Okay, so you’re a sergeant now, and demand some respect from your old uncle!” He clicked his heels. “There! Now, getting your Army discharge soon, sergeant?”

Jeffrey Kern was listening at the library doorway. He was supposed to have gone home. His thin usually expressionless face wore a contemptuous grin. He had been Gavin’s secretary for three months, and hated him. Also his fingers itched for the money and diamonds he knew his boss kept tucked away in the wall safe behind the big tapestry.

He glanced at his watch. Nine o’clock. The servants were all out, but would be back in an hour. Kern waited and listened.

“Bygones are bygones, eh, Les?” the millionaire was saying. “Fine. Glad you feel that way. As a matter of fact I’ve changed my will back in your favor. We didn’t hit it off so well in the old days, but Pinky started the trouble. Your splendid work in the Army has made up for everthing.”

Silence, then Gavin sighed. “Pinky? Yes, I heard. Too bad. So you’re all I’ve got left, Les.”

Kern sneaked a look in, watched his boss pacing back and fourth in front of the massive fire, dragging the telephone cord behind him.

“Would I like to see you! What a question! Fine. Come along, eh? I’ll be waiting in the library. Let yourself in at the side door. Good-by till then.”

Gavin hung up, his face shining with anticipation. Kern sneered, watching the fat man take down a gold-framed picture from the mantel. It was the

picture of two well-dressed kids. Kern knew it well, but had never thought much about it before. The boy tall for his age, wore a snappy military academy uniform. The girl was a freckle-faced little thing with red hair.

So Les had quarreled with his uncle, but now that the Army had made a man of him, he was back in Gavin’s good graces. Pinky—from her red hair, perhaps—had died.

Kern’s slippery mind moved swiftly over all these ideas. When Dan Gavin moved to the wall safe, opened it and removed a box with a flawless unset diamond in it, his mind snapped shut on a sudden resolution. This was it. Dan Gavin would die, and he would get the money and the diamonds. The smug brat in the picture would take a rap for his rich uncle’s killing!

But it would have to be timed just right. Then he’d figure out a good alibi. Nothing elaborate and suspicious. His old landlady could be rung in on it. She wasn’t bright. If he told her she had seen him come in at eight o’clock, she’d believe it.

He moved on cat’s feet into the hall, and out through the kitchen door. He stepped quickly along the shrubbed driveway to his little coupé. There was a service revolver in the glove-compartment that he had bought once from a tramp. Now it would come in very handy.

Back in the little office, he found that ten minutes had filtered away. Better not time it too close.

He had put on gloves in the car. Now he wiped the gun clean.

Gavin was sipping a drink and smiling down at that glittering chunk of ice. He heard the faint sound behind him, half-turned. His eyes widened. His fat face wobbled when he saw Kern standing there pointing a gun at his stomach.

“Kern!” he yelled. “What—”

Kern’s gun cut him off neatly. The



bullet hit the millionaire at the edge of his puffed-out shirt front. The dying man groped blindly at air, then stumbled heavily over an ottoman. He made an untidy large heap on the carpet.

Kern was too smart to gloat long. The nephew might be early. It was almost time. Kern had important things to do. There must be strong evidence pointed at the nephew. The picture! Kern took it off the mantel, smashed the glass against the stool and set it down by Gavin's hand. They'd think Gavin had brushed his hand out and knocked it off as he fell, as a clue to his killer.

Kern made a swift haul from the safe. He didn't bother to count, just stuffed the greenbacks into a brief case along with the diamonds, then shut the safe and replaced the tapestry.

As he moved down the hall he heard running footsteps on the walk that led to the unlocked side door. The nephew was early! Kern leaped for the kitchen door, barely made it. He held his breath while clicking footsteps moved into the library, silent as their owner crossed rugs. He heard the library door open, then a faint cry.

Grinning, Kern slipped out the kitchen door, crawled behind the wheel of his coupé, and drove home to arrange an

airtight alibi with his dim-witted landlady.

DETEKTIVE LUKE PATTON, Homicide, flipped a cigarette to his lips and lit it. All the time his heavy-lidded eyes stared down at the shattered picture on his desk. It was early morning, the day after Gavin's murder. Patton had been up all night on it. Somehow he felt that this picture was the answer.

Sergeant Gavin's story was simple but hard to believe. It looked like a clear-cut case, and yet. . .

"Send in the secretary," he told his assistant. Kern wore his meekest look as he was ushered in. He fumbled with his hat with just the right amount of innocent discomfort. Patton studied him keenly.

"You worked for Gavin three months."

"Yes."

"Any trouble?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Umm. Once you did three years on a misappropriation of funds charge," Patton said. Kern bit his lip. He muttered something about every honest man slipping once in his life.

Patton crushed his smoke thoughtfully, leaned back in his chair. "What

do you know about Sergeant Gavin, Kern?"

"Nothing. That is—"

He wavered. Should he add another link to the chain of evidence against the nephew or let well enough alone?

Patton noticed his hesitation. "Go ahead. If you know something, spill it. I'm far from sure this case is solved. I invited you up here to help me."

Kern flicked his tongue across his lips. "Well. Only that just before I left the house I heard Mr. Gavin talking on the telephone. I heard him mention 'Sergeant,' so I knew he was talking to his nephew in the Army—the one he quarreled with some years ago."

Patton's eyes gleamed. "Go on."

Kern sneered inwardly. This was easy. His words would sit Les Gavin right on the hot seat. "I knew about the nephew, but I'd never seen him. I heard Gavin tell him that he was leaving him all his money."

Patton nodded. A smile quirked his lips, then vanished. "Is that all, Kern?"

"Not quite. Just as I was leaving in my car I saw a soldier hurrying up the sidewalk to the side door."

"What about this soldier?"

"Well, he was tall, had dark hair, and seemed in a big hurry. I only caught one good look at him as he moved into the porchlight, but I'm sure it was Gavin's nephew."

Patton tapped the broken picture. "You knew him from this?"

"Ye-es, partly," Kern lied glibly. "And I had heard about him and the niece from the servants. When I saw he wore sergeant's stripes, I knew it was him."

PATTON beckoned his assistant over and whispered something to him. The assistant nodded and stepped out. Kern sat in the hard chair Patton pointed at, waiting to be dismissed. But Patton apparently forgot all about him, busying himself with enigmatic phone calls.

Kern started getting nervous. His nervousness increased as the moments went by. Finally the assistant came back. He whispered something to Patton. Kern mopped his wet forehead.

"Can I—go now?" he piped up.

Patton whirled on him suddenly. "You paint a very realistic picture. Kern!"

he blazed. "You had me thinking for a moment that maybe Gavin's nephew did kill him. But the trouble with your mind is that it's absorbed with details. It neglects big facts! From embezzlement to murder is too big a step for a mind like yours, Kern!"

Kern bolted up, whimpering protests. "B-B-But the nephew must've done it! They found him standing over the body with the gun in his hand! He inherits everything. He disliked his uncle. And—that picture!"

Patton's heavy laugh sent chills down his back. "The picture was the clue, all right, but not the way you planned it! The nephew would come in. He would be so dazed that he'd pick up the gun before he knew what he was doing. Even if he didn't—the picture, plus his motive and opportunity, would look very bad. That's how you saw it, Kern.

"Trouble with that picture is that Gavin's nephew was no place near the scene of the crime. He couldn't have done it. He was a bad one, arrested for looting in Europe six months ago. When my assistant inquired just now, he found out young Gavin has been in an Army prison ever since!"

"But I heard his footsteps when he came in," Kern screamed.

Patton smiled icily. "Hearing that telephone conversation was what set you off, eh? And the money from that cleaned-out safe, plus the missing diamonds, is what you were after. We'll search your apartment. Won't take long to find them. As for your alibi—won't hold water."

He spoke with cold, impersonal contempt. Kern's brain whirled dizzily. Something had gone wrong and he still didn't know what!

"Tell me what went wrong," he sobbed.

Patton beckoned his assistant, said a few words to him, and the assistant stepped out again. Kern hung his head and sobbed until he came back. Then his eyes moved up. He stared incredulously.

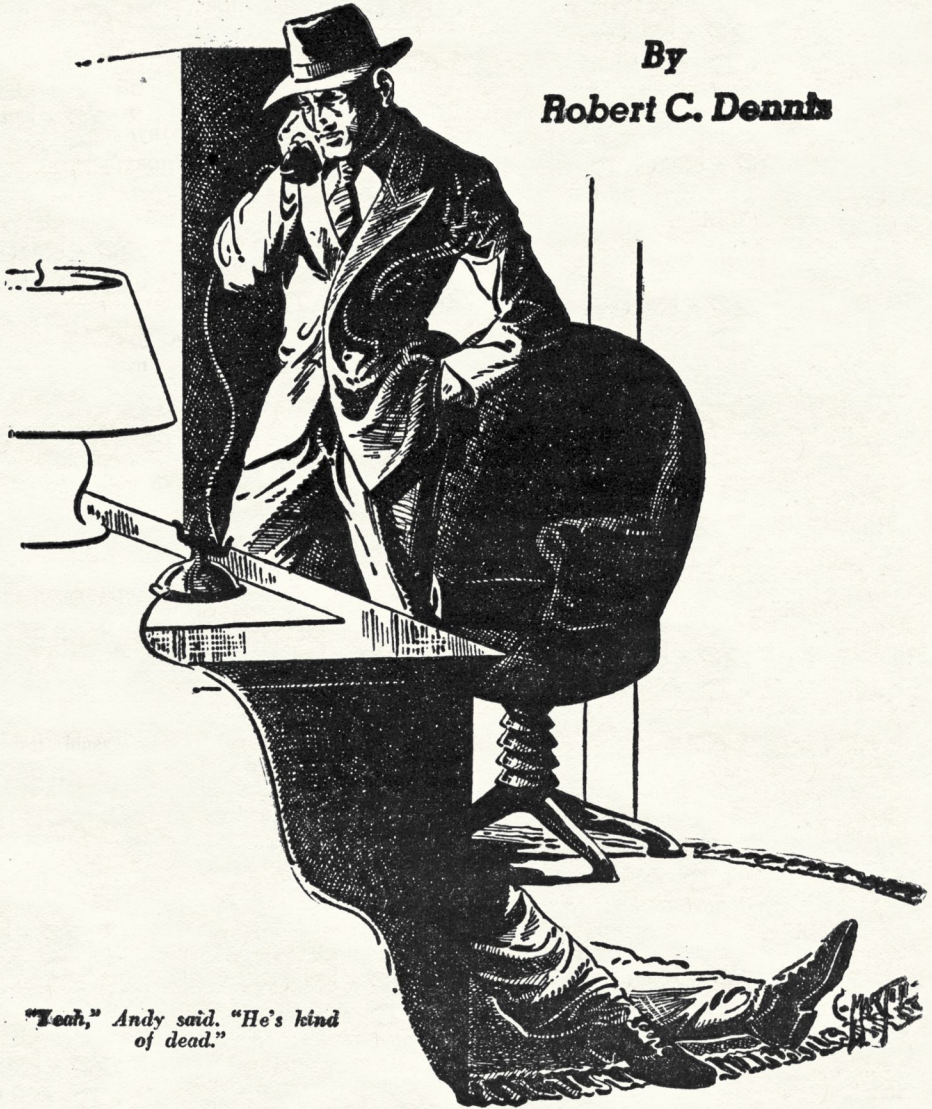
"No! It can't be!" he cried.

A pretty redhaired girl's wide eyes stared back at him bewilderedly.

"Sergeant," Patton introduced with ironic formality, "I want you to meet your uncle's killer. Kern, allow me to present Miss Leslie Gavin of the W. A. C."

The Slay Must Go On

By
Robert C. Dennis



"Yeah," Andy said. "He's kind of dead."

Instead of a play, Dramatic Critic Andy Macklin found himself reviewing a slay. And though the crime's leading lady might get orchids from a jury, Macklin himself seemed slated only for mortuary lilies.

ANDY MACKLIN was batting out a review of a play which had been so bad he'd forgotten the name, when the city editor steered a visitor into the cubbyhole quaintly known as Andy's office.

"This is Mr. Ballinger. He needs a little information." The Old Man gave the high sign behind Ballinger's back to indicate a gentle hand—meaning a stock-

holder or maybe a big advertiser. "I'll leave him in your hands, Andy."

Andy played it cautious. "Sit down and spill it, Mr. Ballinger."

Ballinger sat down, but he didn't exactly spill. Coming from his thin, almost prissy lips, the words had a cold, elderly sound, with a curious undercurrent of embarrassment.

"When you learn my object in calling on you," he said, "you will be inclined to think the matter a police job. It is not. A private detective, perhaps, but I doubt such people are as private as I wish. As a leading stockholder in this newspaper I have reason to believe you will treat the matter confidentially."

Or else! thought Andy bristling a little. He didn't like people who threw their weight around and seriously considered risking his job by taking Ballinger by the back of his stiff, old-fashioned collar and tossing him right out into the hall.

"I am interested in obtaining all facts pertaining to a young woman—an actress—named Vallie Hudson. Do you have any data at your fingertips?"

The name didn't call anything to mind for Andy. He told Ballinger so. "Just what did you want to know about her?"

Ballinger gestured with a lean, bloodless hand. "Everything. Her present whereabouts. Her career in the—ah—theatrical profession. In short, a complete dossier."

Andy mentally shook his head in mild amazement. Some people just never got too old to carry a torch for a good-looking show girl it seemed. Ballinger was a frigid sixty at least, with more reserve than the First National Bank. It must be quite a dame who could get someone like that in a tizzy, Andy thought. His curiosity was getting the best of his resentment. He asked:

"What does she look like?"

"She's a—blonde, I believe. That's all I can tell you." He rose stiffly. "Do a satisfactory job for me, Mr. Macklin, and I'll not be ungenerous when the time comes to repay you."

"I'll get in touch with you," Andy assured him.

He finished reviewing the play, pulverizing everyone connected with the disgraceful affair, and then got on the telephone. A call to the booking agents ought to give him the information he needed. After that he could forget it for

two days, then take a voluminous report into old Ballinger, and pry him loose from a wad of currency. That would teach him to threaten a hard-working newspaperman!

It wasn't quite as simple as that. All of the top agents disclaimed any knowledge of Vallie Hudson, and the talking left Andy so dry he had to go out for a beer. Once out in the warm, spring afternoon he decided to check the second-rate agencies in person and strolled the four blocks to the Avon Building, which housed the offices of Weldon and Baker. Andy didn't know much about this outfit, except it seemed to prosper without any big names on its contact list.

THE elevator took him to the sixth floor, where he hunted down the correct office. The outer room was deserted except for a blond receptionist. She was a slight girl with very pretty, unclassical features behind streamlined red harlequin glasses. Andy admired her somewhat too elaborate hair-do. Elaborate, that was, for an office. In a night club with dim lights reflecting on the gold—

"I'd like to see Mr. Weldon," Andy said, taking them in order.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Weldon isn't in." She didn't look particularly sorry. He has been in Boston for a week attending the try-out of a new play."

"Mr. Baker will do," Andy said agreeably.

Mr. Baker is in conference. I doubt that he'll see anyone else today."

"I'll wait. He's got to come out sometime." Andy took up a position where he could concentrate on her profile, and lit up a cigarette. This maneuver seemed to demoralize her. She fumbled around as if trying to remember what she'd been doing before he came in, finally settling on some typing. She typed poorly. Andy didn't hold that against her, seeing as she was so cute and not his secretary anyhow.

"I'll tell Mr. Baker you're here," she relented suddenly. "What is the name, please?"

"Andy Macklin—of the News.

She pushed a button on the base of the phone, put the receiver to an incredibly lovely ear. "Mr. Macklin to see you, Mr. Baker," she murmured. After a moment's pause, she said, "Very well, Mr. Baker. You may go in now, Mr.—"

"Macklin," Andy assured her. He left the blonde reluctantly and went into the inner office.

Baker was a small man and after the manner of small men, had an enormous desk. He was very dapper, very well tailored, so that the neat bald spot in this black hair seemed almost an essential accessory to his well-groomed appearance. There was only one jarring note. Someone had clubbed Mr. Baker squarely on the bald spot. With an Indian club. With tremendous force. He was the deadest actor's agent Andy Macklin had ever seen.

The Indian club lay on the rich blue rug, half under the desk. The mate to it sat lonesomely on top of a file cabinet from which the middle drawer protruded like the tongue of a prehistoric monster.

There was only one other door in the office, opening into a two-by-four windowless washroom.

Wheeling, Andy charged back into the outer office. The blond receptionist and her red harlequin glasses had vanished. Andy peered out into the hall. It was dim with the late afternoon light, and quite deserted. Thoughtfully, Andy went back into Baker's office.

This time he took notice of a second desk, presumably belonging to Mr. Weldon. It was more conventional in size. Andy bet himself an imaginary million dollars that Weldon was also larger than his dead partner.

The open drawer of the file cabinet held Andy's attention. He went over and examined the square white card on the face of the drawer. It read, H to N. Andy bet himself another million there would be nothing under H for Hudson, Vallie. He won. There was a green tabbed folder bearing her name, but it was eloquently vacant. He shoved the drawer back in.

The click of the outside door caught his attention. Suddenly alert, he glided over to the door connecting the outer office and peered out. A graying, watery-eyed little man in striped overalls was dragging in a vacuum cleaner. The janitor. Andy relaxed.

Then he shrugged in resignation. He had planned to fade gracefully out of the picture before the body was discovered. Now that was impossible.

AT the sound of Andy's footsteps the janitor looked up from where he was plugging in the vacuum cord. "Is Mr. Baker still busy?" he whispered.

"No," Andy assured him. "He's all through being busy for awhile. I'm going to use the phone."

While waiting for the police to arrive, Andy questioned the janitor. "Do you know the receptionist in this office?"

"Mean the secretary? Mrs. Armbruster. Yeah. She's in Boston with Mr. Weldon. I carried the portable typewriter downstairs for her."

"Mrs. Armbruster?" Andy repeated. "What does she look like?"

The janitor shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Kind of heavy. Kind of short, too."

"A blonde?"

"Nope. Kind of dark."

"Then who would a blonde with red glasses and pretty ears be?"

The janitor looked blank. "I dunno. Is there something wrong with Mr. Baker?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "He's kind of dead."

Which gave Ballinger's quest for Vallie Hudson a very much more sinister aspect. There was something besides a May and December romance here. For some reason Vallie Hudson wanted very badly not to be investigated.

For some remote reason Andy was very reticent when questioned by the police. He didn't tell his real purpose in visiting Weldon and Baker, and he didn't mention the blonde. He tried to give the impression of a totally disinterested bystander.

Even so, he was held there so long he didn't get in for the opening of a new play until the second act. Ironically, it was a smash hit, and Andy was decidedly grumpy the rest of the evening. That was partly due to the fact that he couldn't figure out whether he'd held back information from the police because of the fee Ballinger had promised him, or because the blond girl had pretty ears.

BALLINGER lived in a house approximately the same size as the News Building. Andy was admitted very early the following morning by a young woman who certainly was not doubling for a butler. She had rather undistinguished brown hair and wore clothes that were so simple as to be almost severe. It didn't

do much good. The lines of her gorgeous figure gave an undreamed of smartness to the clothes, and the brown hair was, strangely, extremely becoming. In other words, Andy decided, she had an air, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

He stated the purpose of his call. The woman said in a low, throaty voice, "Would you mind waiting in the parlor? I'll tell Mr. Ballinger you're here."

She led the way, with Andy admiring her graceful walk and lovely legs. He discovered the parlor was just what he should have expected in Ballinger's house. It was—a parlor. Chilly, ultra-conservative, with staid family photographs scattered judiciously about on top of museum pieces of furniture.

Andy whiled away the minutes examining the photos. The first one was a handsome square-shouldered young man with a reckless tilt to his smile and a light in his eyes. He was in a naval officer's uniform. He could be the old man's son. Andy concluded, though there was not much resemblance.

Andy passed on to the grand piano and the next photograph. And did a quick double-take. It was the blonde from Baker's office. No harlequin glasses. No elaborate hair-do. But the blonde nevertheless. Andy would have known that lovely left ear anywhere!

Picking up the picture he slumped into a chair and studied it. There was something about her that got Andy. She wasn't the terrific species of female like the lady who'd just let him in, but she had an appeal. The gal-next-door type, maybe.

J. D. Ballinger came pussyfooting in then, wearing the same somber clothes and high stiff collar. He glanced at the picture and said briefly, "My daughter, Virginia."

Virginia, Andy thought, *call me Vallie for short!*

"Pretty girl," he said.

Ballinger refused to unbend. "Have you some progress to report?"

"Yes," Andy said cautiously, "and no. I've come to the conclusion that there are angles to this deal I hadn't expected. Will you give me a better understanding of what it's all about?"

"No," said Ballinger.

"Suppose," Andy persisted, "the investigation brought to light certain facts

that would be very unpleasant to all concerned? Including you. What then?"

"I expect you to continue," the old man said grimly.

"No matter how close to home it hits?"

Ballinger winced ever so slightly. "I expect you to continue," he repeated in a barely audible voice.

"That's all I want to know." Andy carefully replaced the photograph of Virginia Ballinger on the grand piano and walked out.

He was beginning to get a slant on Ballinger's reasoning. The old man suspected his daughter of having indulged in some theatrical fling under the name of Vallie Hudson with Weldon and Baker as her agents. To keep from letting her know until he was certain, he was investigating from Vallie Hudson, backwards.

Andy didn't like the implications. Ballinger's strait-laced displeasure was probably great enough to disinherit his daughter for her indiscretion. To prevent that, all trace of Vallie Hudson must disappear—even if it involved murder!

Remembering the cool way Virginia had maneuvered her way out of the office, Andy had to admit she might have tunked Baker on the bald spot. At least Andy wasn't betting a million against it!

THE woman who had admitted him came to open the door for him. She followed him outside, closing the door carefully behind her. "I'd like to have a few words with you, Mr. Macklin."

Andy nodded politely. "I'm afraid you have the advantage of me—"

"I'm Margaret Ballinger—Mrs. Michael Ballinger."

"That's Mike's picture in the parlor," Andy surmised.

She nodded. "J.D.'s son. He's in the Navy."

"He looks like a good Joe. That makes Virginia his sister then." Andy got the relationships straightened around in his mind and motioned for Margaret Ballinger to go on.

"It's about Virginia, of course."

"Why of course?" Andy demanded.

Margaret gestured impatiently. "Let's not spar. Your name was mentioned in the papers in connection with the murder of Ace Baker, the agent. You asked the janitor something about a blond girl wearing harlequin glasses. You *didn't* say

anything about her to the police. The janitor repeated your conversation to them."

Andy swore under his breath. He hadn't known that. The cops would be on his back for sure. They were probably waiting at the office for him right now. "So what about the blonde?"

"Stop sparring with me, Mr. Macklin," she said angrily. "We both know who that blond girl was. I saw you studying Virginia's picture in the parlor."

"Okay," Andy agreed. "What now?"

"I want your assistance in protecting Virginia," she said flatly.

"Without evidence?"

Her beautiful features were impassive. "If necessary."

"Which would make us accessories before the fact. Or after. Maybe both. In any case we're begging for grief. I'm afraid not, Mrs. Ballinger!"

"You withheld information yesterday by not telling the police Virginia had been in Baker's office. Why did you do that?"

Andy wasn't exactly sure yet. "I was working for J. D. Ballinger on something, and I didn't know just how this concerned him. I suppose I was protecting his interests until I could have a talk with him."

Margaret Ballinger said tensely, "What did he say?"

"I've got the green light," Andy said, "come what may. So either I'll blow the whole business up or I'll drop it completely. I don't know which."

It would depend, he knew, on whether Ballinger's fee were more important to him than Virginia Ballinger. Andy Macklin always needed money but he had to sleep nights, too. He wanted to know if and why Virginia had slugged Ace Baker before he told the police what he knew about it. He said to Margaret Ballinger, "I'll do what I can."

ANDY didn't go right down to the office, because he had a good idea a cop would be there waiting for him. Still, he couldn't outwait them forever. Finally, well fortified with a couple of beers, he went in and faced it.

The cop's name was Lopez. He was big and swarthy, with a face that was probably grim at all times and particularly unpleasant now. He wore a dark suit that made him look slightly sinister. He said

briefly, "Who is the blonde? Say it fast, or I'll take you downtown for withholding evidence."

Andy knew he wasn't joking. He knew that withholding Virginia's identity would only delay matters, not help them. They'd sweat it out of him or let him rot in a cell till he talked. He said:

"Her name is Virginia Ballinger."

"Got her address?"

Andy gave it to him.

Lopez helped himself to Andy's phone and snapped some brief instructions into the mouthpiece. "Bring her to the News Building," he finished. "Macklin will identify her."

"Damn it all!" Andy exploded. "That's pretty raw!"

Lopez gave him a dirty, dark-eyed look. "And maybe we'll go into that withholding evidence business, too!"

An hour later, a plainclothes man ushered Virginia Ballinger into Andy's office. She no longer wore the harlequin glasses, and the elaborate, upswept hairdo was gone. Now blond hair was pulled back by a green ribbon, making her look a little like a junior college girl. A frightened one. But not panicked.

"Oh," she said, looking at Andy. "You!"

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Ballinger," Andy said, and meant it. "If there is anything I can do—"

"You've done pretty good so far," she said, a little catch in her voice. "Just stay out of it, Mr. Macklin. Leave it alone."

Lopez broke in, "This the girl, Macklin?"

"Yes," Andy said unhappily. He hated himself; he was sure the girl hated him too, and that was very bad.

"All right," Lopez jerked his head at the plainclothes man.

At the door Virginia looked back. "Stop hunting for Vallie Hudson," she said quietly. "You'd be very sorry if you found her." She went out, her head high.

Immediately Lopez pounced. "Vallie Hudson—who's that?"

Andy looked as innocent as he could. All Lopez needed now was the motive and knowing about Vallie Hudson would give it to him.

"I don't know anybody by that name," he said. "Do you?"

Lopez's dark eyes smoldered. "Keep at it, Macklin, and you'll get it good! You might want to know you were next on the

blonde's list. We found the janitor in the basement with his skull bent in. Maybe that will give you an idea."

He slammed the door behind him.

Andy sat in his chair like a sack of old bones. He was the only witness to Virginia's presence in the office of Weldon and Baker yesterday. If she killed the janitor because of his second-hand evidence, the next on the list was definitely Andy Macklin. He didn't like the queasy feeling in his stomach, particularly when it was inspired by a gal he could have gone for.

If she didn't go for him first. With a blunt object!

TWO hours later Andy was still brooding about it. He decided a beer might help. He was partly out of his chair when he heard crisp, feminine footsteps coming down the hall. Virginia couldn't be out on bail so quickly he told himself. Besides they didn't give you bail on a murder count. Or did they? Still gripping the arms of the chair he waited for them to go on by. They didn't. A feminine form, vaguely familiar, silhouetted in the frosted glass.

Margaret Ballinger walked in. She looked as if she would like to do Andy some bodily harm. She was clothed in the same severe outfit as yesterday and she was, just as perversely, terrific. In a low-cut formal she'd be a one-woman morale destroyer.

"I suppose you know Virginia was arrested a short while ago," she said grimly. "Or did you know?"

Andy nodded, trying not to commit himself. "How did the old man take it?"

"He doesn't know it yet. It'll break his Puritan little heart. Family pride—" she broke off and demanded. "How did they find out about her?"

"I told them," Andy admitted. "They seemed to be hot on her trail. I didn't think going to jail myself would help in any way. Besides the cops think she was about to tap me on the head next. I didn't care for the idea."

"That's ridiculous," Margaret Ballinger snapped. "Virginia wouldn't harm a fly."

Andy shrugged. "Somebody harmed Mr. Baker, severely. Somebody harmed the janitor, also severely. He's kind of dead, too—"

"The janitor!" Margaret Ballinger was stunned. "Somebody killed the janitor?"

"His body was found in the basement this morning."

Abruptly her head came up and her dark eyes glowed. She was no longer gunning for Andy, but she was still gunning! "The janitor," she said again, savoring it, "Mister, that does it!"

She left Andy flat. Before he came to she was out the door, her heels fading down the hall. Andy had the feeling he'd come in during the last act. He just didn't know what was going on. By the time he reached the street Margaret Ballinger was in a cab and pulling away.

There were no other cabs in sight. Andy gave chase on foot. He was outdistanced in less than a block, but the direction the cab was taking suggested the Avon Building. It was as good a guess as any. Andy covered the last three blocks on the double.

There was no sign of Margaret Ballinger until he reached the outer office of Weldon and Baker. Then he saw her shapely back just before the door of Baker's office closed behind her. At the desk, where Virginia Ballinger had sat yesterday, was a woman best described as kind of heavy, kind of short and kind of dark.

"Mrs. Armbruster," Andy said, "I want to see Mr. Weldon, please."

Mrs. Armbruster took another look at Andy and couldn't seem to place him. She said, "Mr. Weldon is busy right now. Would you care to wait?"

"No," Andy told her, "not today!"

He banged into the inner office with Mrs. Armbruster barking at his heels. Andy pushed the door shut in her face.

WITH Margaret Ballinger was a man, obviously the remaining half of Weldon and Baker. He was the tweeds-and-brown-brogues sort of person. A little shaggy but big—the kind who would exercise every morning with a pair of Indian clubs. A large man with a small desk, Andy observed.

"Who the hell are you?" Weldon demanded.

"The extra guest," Andy said a little bitterly. "The guy who always comes late and gets left over. A day late and a dollar short!" He looked at Margaret Ballinger. "The more I find out about this

business, the less I know. What did the janitor's murder mean to you?"

"Everything," she snapped. "Now I know what happened to Baker after I whacked him with the Indian club."

Andy did a double take. "You whacked?"

"Certainly!" she said impatiently. "You didn't believe a sweet child like Virginia could do it, did you? I thought I hit Baker only hard enough to stun him. When he was reported dead, it seemed I'd hit him harder than I thought."

"Read about it in the paper!" Weldon said impatiently. "Both of you get the hell out of here."

He was roundly ignored. "What about the janitor?" Andy asked.

"Think!" Margaret ordered. "Virginia certainly didn't kill him. She had no reason to. Neither did I. So somebody else must have. If the person who killed the janitor was also the murderer of Baker, the answer is obvious. If I killed Baker, I killed the janitor. But I didn't kill the janitor, so I didn't kill Baker; I only stunned him."

Weldon started filling a brief case with papers, his eyes watchful.

Andy asked the obvious. "Why was the janitor killed?"

"Because he must have known something he shouldn't. Such as knowing Mr. Weldon here wasn't in Boston yesterday afternoon at all."

Andy looked at Weldon. Weldon reached into a drawer for more papers. His hand came out with a gun. "Move away from the door," he ordered.

Andy moved; he got over by the file cabinet and used that to help keep his spine stiff. "You think Weldon killed Baker after you stunned him?" he asked Margaret.

She nodded. "I think he was hiding in the washroom all the time I was here, listening to Ace and me fighting." She looked at Weldon. "Isn't that right?"

Weldon didn't speak. He zipped the brief case shut.

"He slipped down to the basement to hide until it was safe to leave the building," Margaret finished. "The janitor discovered him, so the janitor had to be killed."

Weldon started circling his desk, making threatening gestures with the gun. Andy promptly put his hands up. It wasn't from fear. If the unused Indian

club was still on top of the file cabinet where it had been yesterday—It was!

"I'll leave you two to work it out—maybe!" Weldon snarled. He had to turn his back for a brief second as he rounded the corner of his desk. Andy used that second. He grabbed the Indian club and threw it in one motion. It went end-over-end at Weldon's head.

Weldon was bringing the gun up as he turned. The thick end of the club caught him squarely on the temple.

Andy caught him as he fell forward. He lifted the gun from Weldon's fingers, let him fall the rest of the way to the rich blue rug. Then with a nonchalance he would have criticized as spurious in any play, he said, "You were saying Mrs. Ballinger . . .?"

WHILE they waited for the police, Margaret talked. "I was in show business—burlesque—under the name of Vallie Hudson."

"Oh—you're Vallie Hudson?" And felt that should cost him a million. He ought to have guessed from Margaret's walk and voice, her appearance, even camouflaged with plain clothes and with the blond hair darkened out to a natural brown, that she had once been on the stage.

She nodded. "That's how I met Mike. We knew J. D. would harden his arteries if he found out, so we kept it a secret. Baker learned I'd married into a rich family and tried to blackmail me with some publicity stills. They weren't exactly the kind J. D. would want to set on his piano."

Andy wished faintly that he'd gotten to see those pictures. They were probably terrific.

"I simply tore up Ace's blackmail letter—I knew he didn't have the stomach to follow up on it. But then J. D. seems to have gotten suspicious—found some of the pieces maybe. I was afraid he'd hire a detective to investigate and get those pictures from Baker. So I came down here and took them away from Ace."

It probably happened just the way she said it, Andy decided. She wasn't the kind of person to be pushed around. "How did Virginia get mixed up in it?"

"She acts as secretary to her father, so she probably knew what was going on. She's a swell kid. She hurried down here to try and get the stills from Ace."

"But Weldon had already finished Baker off!" Andy concluded, "before she could do anything I came in. She tried to get rid of me so she could look for the pix. When I wouldn't budge, she had to get away."

The police began arriving then, and Weldon began moaning. With a little persuasion by Lopez, Weldon admitted it all. The theatrical agency was mostly a front for various and sundry shady deals. While they had no big names under contract, they made up the difference by blackmailing the clients they did have for far more than the usual ten per cent commission. It had been a foolproof racket, but Baker had started playing both sides of the street until Weldon got suspicious.

Weldon had an idea that Baker intended selling the stills to Margaret, pocket all the proceeds, and then pretend he hadn't been able to collect. So he came back secretly from Boston and staked himself out in the washroom. There he listened to Baker double-crossing him.

And when Marget ruined the blackmail deal, Weldon saw an opportunity to get rid of a two-timing partner, acquire control of a profitable business, and build a new method of squeezing Margaret by

making her think she'd killed Baker. All in one stroke of an Indian club!

Nobody had known Weldon wasn't still in Boston until the janitor discovered him hiding in the basement.

Finally Lopez said, "I guess we can release Miss Ballinger now."

"I'll go and pick her up," Andy put in quickly. He wanted to get away before Lopez had time to remember all the evidence Andy had withheld. Besides there was good psychological value in being the one who came for Virginia. She might forgive him that much sooner.

Down on the street he remembered that now he had all the dope on Vallie Hudson for Ballinger. He stopped in a drug store and got the old man on the telephone.

"Reporting on Vallie Hudson," he said. "I've learned she is a starlet in one of the movie studios in Hollywood. . . Yes, that's definite. . . We'll talk about my fee later."

Andy hung up feeling very satisfied with himself. He had liked Margaret, though she wasn't his type. She was married to Mike Ballinger, who was probably a good Joe. Besides, there was Mike's sister Virginia. Unconsciously Andy started whistling happily to himself as he headed for the police station.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Ten Detective Aces, published bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass.,
for October 1, 1945

State of New York)
County of New York) ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, have been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of Ten Detective Aces, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 587, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor and business manager are: Publisher, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.; Editor, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None. Business Manager, A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Magazine Publishers, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.; A. A. Wyn, 67 West 44th Street, New York 18, N. Y.; C. A. Publishing Co., Mount Morris, Ill.; E. Campbell, Mount Morris, Ill.; E. L. Angel, Rockville Centre, New York, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1945.

ROSE BLUMENTHAL, Notary Public.
New York Co. Clk's No. 435, Reg. No. 976-B-7
Commission expires March 30, 1947.

Curt figured on a big-money answer when he sent that old man a . . .

Muzzle-Loader Message

By D. A. Hoover

CURT CROSS drove the cream-colored sedan with one hand, his right arm around Mary. Her head was thrown back on his shoulder. Her long red hair spilled like bronze against the collar of his suit. The spring night was warm under the soft glow of a rising moon. Curt could hear the pleasant music of the two wine bottles jingling together with the gentle motion of the car. The doped wine was in the bottle with the longer neck.

Five miles out of Hillsboro he parked under the umbrella of an elm. Skinny had been mighty nice to loan Curt his car; in return Curt had paid for a wash and oil change. But it went beyond a show of gratitude. Curt wanted Skinny, who operated the filling station, to make a record of the speedometer reading.

Curt could hear Mary breathing in the soft dark and smell the faint fragrance of roses which drifted up from her. Nervously he brushed at his black hair and modestly regretted the dirty trick he was about to play on the girl.

She relaxed with a sigh. He didn't have any time for the usual spooning with all that lay ahead for tonight, yet he could not afford to be brusque to a degree she would remember later. She was to be his alibi for murder.

In the dark of the sedan compartment it was not hard to pour Mary a slug of the doped wine. He drank the sparkling claret from the other bottle and watched her out of the corner of his eye. If she thought the taste peculiar, she didn't say anything, as she rattled about the day's events at her counter at the dime store.

After a while she yawned, patted her red mouth delicately, and collapsed on the cushion with a little whimper. Curt put her into the back seat and wrapped her in an Indian blanket. Then he reached in under the dashboard and unscrewed the knurled nut which connected the flexible cable from transmission to speedometer. Now no more miles would be recorded for several hours and a murder later.

The object of his plotting was old Anthony Lowder, his foster father. Old Anthony owned and operated one of the

most profitable strip coal mines in the southern part of Illinois. Curt brought out the old man's last letter and spent the next few minutes calmly going over the circumstances ahead.

A little forethought would insure speed later and guarantee a safe, careful job. As court reporter of the reigning county judge, Curt knew the biggest cases, often involving the lives of

the principals, depend on the little details they thought too trivial to matter. Surely, in the five years he had followed this business, he had learned most of the slips schemers made.

He read:

Dear Curt:

Why don't you come on home, take a job in the mine, and learn it from the ground up? You'll have to know how if you are to manage when I'm gone. You're the only one left to get it.

Curt, you recollect Tom Baxter? The young squirt who married the gal you was crazy over? It's that old gun he sent in and had fixed up that scares me, Curt. He didn't have a one of the six notches cut out which stand



for as many members of your family killed in the feud going back a hundred years.

Curt, I'm afraid. I heard bullets whang into a bush nigh to me as six feet. I think maybe the old feud is on again. Do you reckon Tom had that old muzzle-loader oiled up so he could kill me? Hurry home, son.

Your Old Dad,

ANTHONY LOWDER.

To look at the letter now, it had apparently never been mailed. All of the cancellation marks, except a little smudge, had been on the original stamp which Curt had steamed off. By replacing it with one of the long, special issue stamps he was able to hide even the little smudge. Tonight, when he killed the old man, he would drop this letter in his rural box as if Anthony had just mailed it.

The body would be discovered by the time the carrier drove out and the letter detained as evidence. Handed to Curt after he was told of the sad event, it would put Tom Baxter in a very bad spot indeed. Better, it would suggest that Curt, away from home five years, was hearing of the friction between Tom and Anthony for the first time.

All this would be doubly effective, Curt thought grinning and feeding the car out on the highway, when he and Mary were found a hundred miles away. Knocked out also from the doped wine, sleeping all night, and the speedometer of their car registering but five miles since it was serviced.

AS THE powerful car slipped through the early evening moonlight, Curt's mind returned easily to the past. He remembered that gun with the notches, a heavy cap-and-ball muzzle-loader. The huge bore just admitted a dime, a useful bit of information he had picked up when he and Tom played together as boys. Kids naturally like each other. It's the older folks who start things.

At a nameless antique shop up northwest of Chicago Curt had picked up a muzzle-loading rifle the same caliber as Tom's. It was riding in the trunk now, primed with a heavy charge of black powder and a steel ball, out of a ball bearing, that fit loosely in the bore. That was one projectile the cops wouldn't look over for marks imposed by the barrel it traveled through. It was so hard it would not mushroom and stay in the body. It would sail off into the woods a mile after

killing old Anthony, and never be found to identify the rifle which fired it.

And Isobel. How he hungered for her yet. Blue-eyed, her hair as tawny as the buttercups she ran through in the lush upland pastures with her little twenty-two rifle tucked in the warm curve of her tanned arm. Her young body firm and pliant under blue shirt and jeans.

But tall, easy going Tom had been endowed with something the girl preferred over him. Maybe it was because Tom considered it a blessing to have good health and hard work to do, which Curt did not. Perhaps she was disgusted with Curt because he swore he'd never learn the mining business the overall way, and Old Anthony had said if he refused he'd will it all to charity when he died. Tonight ought to change things a little.

Droway Hollow slashed the red clay hills around old Anthony's diggings like a pointing finger. It got its name from the awful solitude. Vine-choked scrub oaks and cedars made a person want to whisper at noon. At night, under this lean slice of moon, it was as creepy as a graveyard. To Curt its appeal was its position between Anthony's mine and Tom and Isobel's cabin.

Curt pulled on gloves and shouldered his rifle. The back of his neck tickled with anticipation. There was one big question mark. Had Tom's aging dog died and been replaced by a younger and more savage canine? If so, a new strategy would have to be planned.

Half an hour later Curt parted the green shrubby growth along the bank of the dry wash and held his breath to listen. It was intensely quiet here below Tom's house with nothing but the hum of night insects coming to his straining ears. He could feel his heart thudding, his ribs. No dog gave tongue.

Before starting his slow crawl up into Tom's yard Curt had first skirted old Anthony's shack and dropped the letter he carried in the rusty rural box. It was then he noticed the high woven wire fence strung with pots and pans and other noisemakers which ran entirely around the house. No one was going to slip up on the cagy old gent unaware.

Curt reached the center of Tom's tree-lined yard. The angle of the bullet had to be right. He looked to his rifle and cocked the big, crooked hammer. He

picked up a piece of dead tree limb and tossed it across Drowsy Hollow in a long underhand sweep which sent it squarely into the old man's fence loaded with its noisemakers. A set of sleigh bells jangled in the unusual quiet.

A minute later Curt's straining ears picked up the sound of a door closing with a cautious scrape. Then old Anthony came around the corner of the house hugging the shadow. His night shirt flapped around hairy limbs, but he had a scatter gun on his right arm. Curt raised his rifle and pressed the trigger. At this distance there was no risk of missing even in the dim light.

The ancient gun bellowed. As its echoes slapped back from the sleeping hills Curt was sprinting for the gully. His foot sloughed through something queasy, and he stopped his headlong flight to investigate, for he didn't want to leave a clear track anywhere. A pile of dead birds, blackbirds, their eyes glassy in death. He went on running. Isobel must still be good with her twenty-two rifle. Killing birds was her favorite sport. But the look of the stark, twisted bodies of the birds brought a cold shock to Curt now that he was a killer.

He slammed madly back into the car and drove feverishly back to Hillsboro, stopping only long enough to drop the death gun down an abandoned shaft of a local mine. It sank in four hundred feet of dirty water.

Driving back to the tree where he had doped Mary, Curt moved her to the front seat. He reattached the speedometer cable and made sure the gas gauge needle was about where it was before. A couple of five gallon tins of fuel had done that for him.

He poured himself a cup of wine from the drugged bottle and drank deeply. He refilled and gulped another. But there was no jubilation in him as he'd expected. Like a sufferer going under the ether he felt the welcome numbness creep over him. The last thing he heard was the hum of the night insects blending with the tolling of a locomotive bell.

CURT awoke in a white-painted room at the Hillsboro Hospital. From the slant of the sun he knew it must be well after noon. The night's events came

back to him in a rush, but he was pleased that his terror was gone. Before ringing for the nurse he reflected a moment. *I'm a rich man now and Isobel will soon be a widow.* He smiled and rumbled his hair.

The nurse looked like a dish of strawberries, pink and efficient.

"How'd I get here?" Curt demanded. "Where's Mary?"

"Out in the hall. She didn't drink as much as you did. She has a friend of yours with her."

"Send them in." His scalp tightened. The friend was Sheriff Willoughby from down home. Why was he here? Had he picked up something?

"What brings you to see me, Sheriff? How are all the folks down home?"

Mary blurted out then, "Before you two start in on old times, I want to give you hell, Curt Cross. Feeding me doped wine and me spending the night out on the dew. A milk trucker found us about sunup, and my ma's giving me fits."

Curt felt like chortling. Here was the whole story and unsolicited. He apologized to the girl, pointing to his own condition as proof of innocence. She left, her eyes still full of suspicion.

Willoughby cleared his throat. "Your old foster-father is dead. Someone shot him last night."

"No!" Curt said, reaching out a trembling hand to the lawman. "It can't be! How did it happen? Who did it?"

"He was shot with a big bore rifle. The ball went clean through and was lost. Likely never identify the rifle. Are you able to travel? The lawyer was out there this morning, and since I'd looked around and had nothing else to do, he asked me to drive up and get you to sign some papers."

Reasonable enough, Curt thought. He rang for his clothes and dressed quickly. Mary's spiel had been a natural and the letter? Willoughby had not mentioned it and Curt didn't dare. "I'm ready, Sheriff."

Back at the old home county the sheriff drove directly to Tom's house since it was on the main road. They'd have to take the path across the gully. Tom was waiting and came down the cracked porch swinging his long loose body.

"Hello, Curt. Isobel and I are mighty sorry about this."

The sheriff spoke, "Do you remind repeating what you told me, Tom?"

"There was a shot just before midnight, but I couldn't see a thing after I got up. The old man has been accusing me lately of gunning for him so I didn't go over. I didn't want him to mistake me for a stray dog and cut loose on me."

Tom invited them inside and asked them to have rockers. Curt found it easier and more effective just to shake his head and appear stunned. Several people were sitting around inside. Isobel, her tawny mane hanging to her rounded shoulders, was passing out cold milk and hot ginger bread. She did not look at Curt nor offer him any refreshment. Postmaster Yarrow was there, but Curt found no friendliness in his watery blue eyes.

"The killer of our friend and neighbor stood somewhere in Tom's backyard, judging by the bullet angle," the sheriff said. "Tom, let's see your old gun."

Now Tom's going to get his, Curt thought jubilantly.

The sheriff turned the muzzle toward Curt and spoke. "Your dad said in his letter that Tom had his gun done over. Look, they fitted it with a new .22 caliber inner barrel. Parker rifling they call the sleeve they solder in. Tom's been

shooting a mess of blackbirds hereabouts. Anthony was killed by a big bullet."

Curt stared at the small eye of the muzzle, his stomach feeling as if he'd stopped a Joe Louis right. "Is that what he meant?"

Stiff silence greeted his remark. The eyes of all present were on him cold and hard.

The sheriff's hand lay near his gun. "Who meant what?"

They'd trapped him into a bad slip. He wasn't supposed to know about that letter yet. Nobody had brought it up.

"Curt, you killed your foster father."

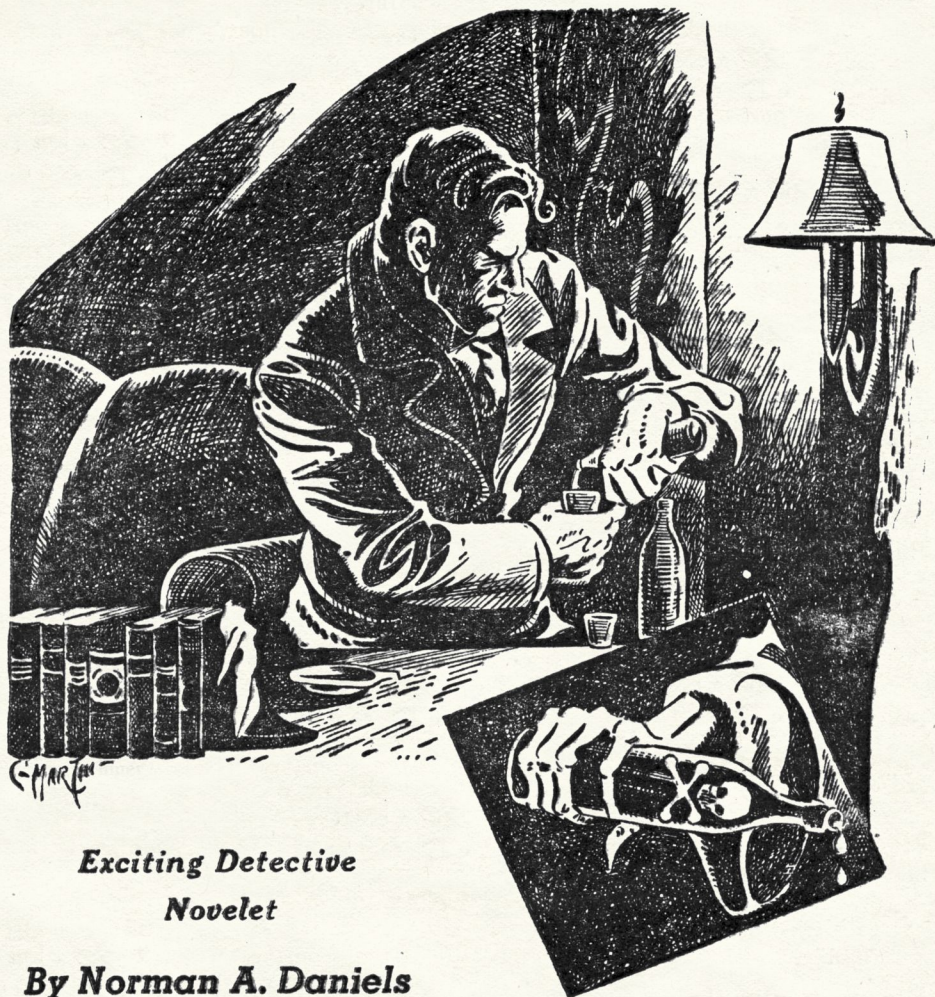
Curt wanted to gag. "I wasn't near here I—"

The sheriff jerked a thumb at Yarrow, the postmaster. "Tell him."

"It was the letter you dropped in the old man's box. We knew you'd had it. The slip you just made proves it. That long stamp you put on was one of a limited issue I never did get down here. The stamp collectors hereabouts nearly skinned me. We found the letter because of the brown rust you spilled out of that old mailbox. We asked ourselves, 'Now why would old Anthony mail a letter here, when he knows perfectly well that there ain't been no rural pickup nor delivery from my postoffice in the last three years?'"



The Killer's Home Companion



*Exciting Detective
Novelet*

By Norman A. Daniels

Fate forced Alan King to become an amateur detective. For though he knew himself to be a murderer, it was his niece the cops were holding. And to win his first case, King would have to build an ironclad case for his own execution.

CHAPTER I

ALAN KING was tall, slim, and from the back it was impossible to know just how old he was. His hair was thick and glossy. His shoulders were broad, his hips slender. When he turned around, one might judge him to be about forty, perhaps forty-five. There was a youthful sparkle to his eyes, no lines on the smoothly shaven, unwrinkled face. But Alan King was shaking hands with sixty.

He felt those years as he climbed the stairs to the third floor apartment of

Hugh Vogan. It wasn't so much the actual physical climbing that bothered him. It was what he had to do when he reached Vogan's apartment.

Under King's coat, supported by one crooked arm, was a bottle of whisky. Not a mellow, smooth whisky from rye or corn. The contents of this particular bottle had largely come from a keg labelled wood alcohol.

King rapped on the door. He heard an irascible muttering. A chair was flung back and finally the door opened. The man who faced him was very nearly in the handsome classification when he was sober. Sleek hair, a round chin, smooth fair complexion. Hugh Vogan knew very well that he was good-looking. At the moment, however, he was very drunk and grossly insulting.

"Well, if it isn't Alan King! All hail to the king! What in hell you want?"

"I thought," King said calmly, "you wanted to see me. About a certain sum of money. . ."

"Come on in." Vogan staggered aside and bowed with a flourish. "I never turn down money. Need some, in fact. Lots of it. I hope you came well-heeled because I'm getting sick of your face, King. Sometimes I think I ought to turn you in on general principles. To relieve my own conscience, you know."

"Men's souls," King said softly, "leave their bodies upon death. You'll be different, Vogan, because you were born without a soul. When you die, there will be nothing left, fortunately. May I sit down?"

"Sure," Vogan grinned. "Why not? Always treat my guests well. How about a drink?"

Vogan picked up the quart bottle of rye, the brand he always used. King nodded, raised his glass, and looked Vogan straight in the face.

"To your health. May it deteriorate rapidly."

He drank some of the whisky, put the glass down and reached into his pocket. The bottle he carried in secret, almost slipped and crashed to the floor. King took out a fat wallet, extracted a sheaf of bills and laid them on the table, with his hand on top of them.

"It has occurred to me, Vogan," he said, "that some time has elapsed since I saw that documentary evidence which you hold over my head. Perhaps you no

longer have it. Before I pay this installment, I'd like to see. . ."

"Sure, sure, sure." Vogan got up unsteadily. "A man has a right to see what he's buying. In this case you don't get anything for your money except my silence. I'll get the papers. Keep 'em handy. But," he cocked his head a little and grinned broadly, "don't go getting any ideas. Maybe I'm a little drunk, but I could bust you in half."

Vogan reeled a bit as he left the room. The instant he was out of sight King drew the partly filled bottle of whisky from under his coat. To make it match the level of the whisky in Vogan's bottle, King tiptoed to the small kitchenette and poured some of the contents down the sink.

He put Vogan's bottle behind the door and put his own in its place. He still had some whisky left in his glass and had a reason to refuse any more.

VOGAN returned, waving some papers.

King merely glanced at them and nodded. Vogan put them into his dressing gown pocket. He poured himself a stiff slug from the substituted bottle, downed the liquor at a gulp and smacked his lips. King mentally heaved a sigh of relief.

King said, "I've been paying you blackmail for almost fifteen years now, Vogan. All because you accidentally discovered I had been involved in a mob fight twenty-five years ago and I had killed a man. I thought, for a long time, that I'd gotten away with it. The thing was really more of an accident than a homicide. Then you came—with those papers. I paid, because in the position I'd reached, I couldn't afford to have you expose me. I committed a crime, and I've paid for it in money and anxiety. How much longer will this go on?"

Vogan laughed and took another drink. "You got me. By what I know you're about sixty years old. Say you live to eighty. Figure on twenty more years, Pop."

King closed his eyes and felt almost eighty at that moment. "Vogan," he said, "you've compelled me to introduce you to my friends. You're a pretty good actor. People like you and even trust you. They don't know about your profession, nor the fact that you go off on

these benders and stay drunk for days on end. They don't know you nearly died two years ago when you ran out of cash and whisky at the same time. I was away. You couldn't get more money, so you started drinking anything that had a kick to it. Wood alcohol had such a wallop you nearly died."

Vogan's eyes narrowed a trifle. "So you know that, eh? Okay, why should I hide it from you? But if you know that much, maybe you're having me tagged."

"Perhaps I am," King admitted slowly. "With sufficient reason. My niece has fallen in love with you. That's true, isn't it?"

Vogan smiled and poured himself more whisky. "Suppose it is? Maybe I'm in love with her, too. And listen, Pop, you tell her one word about my drinking or my touching you for a few thousand and everything I know about you becomes public. Got that?"

"I understand," King said. "Too well. It's been bad enough paying you, but to have my niece marry a sot, a professional blackmailer, a born liar—that's going too far, Vogan. I won't have it."

Vogan slowly roated the glass, now almost empty again. "Maybe, Pop," he mused, "you won't reach the ripe old age of eighty. But listen to this. I'm going to marry Betty. She doesn't know about me, and she doesn't have to. If I get a yen to go on a bat, I'll breeze somewhere out of town so she'll never find out. She's crazy about me. I can marry her tomorrow if I like."

"I suppose you could at that," King acknowledged wryly. "Betty is about average intelligence. She's a chemist working on an important job. Yet she loves you. It's beyond me, this strange force of love. I've never married, as you know. Perhaps that is why I can't possibly imagine why a nice, well-educated girl like Betty would want to marry a man like you. However, she does. But she won't, Vogan."

Vogan smiled maliciously. "How you going to stop her? Try it and I'll show you up. I'll tell the whole world what kind of a guy you were. I'll have them send for you, bring you back to that southern state, and you'll be tried for murder. There is no statute of limitations on murder. You took a man's life."

King shook his head. "I've taken two

men's lives, Vogan." "No kidding," Vogan stared. "I didn't know about the second one. Maybe I ought to tap you for a couple of thousand extra. As a wedding present, perhaps. Who's the other victim?"

"You," King said. "You're as good as dead already."

Vogan got to his feet and stood there, swaying a bit, while stark terror wiped the half grin off his face. He reached for the bottle of whisky, but King was ready.

Before Vogan could put up much resistance, King had taken out some soft, wide, and strong gauze from his pocket. He pulled Vogan's arms behind him and used the gauze to lash them. Then he tripped the man and used more on his ankles.

Finally he carried him into the bedroom and tied the man firmly to the bed. King knew exactly how it could be done. He'd experimented for many hours so there'd be no slip-up. He took the papers from Vogan's dressing gown.

KING stepped back, wiped perspiration from his forehead, and looked down at Vogan.

"I'm not the only one who knows you drank wood alcohol two years ago," he said. "There are police and hospital records. They'll hardly be surprised if you did it again. This time for keeps. I exchanged your bottle of whisky for one loaded with wood alcohol, but highly flavored so you'd never detect it in your present stage of intoxication. I'd have continued to pay you, Vogan, but I could never permit my niece to throw her life away on someone like you."

"You insane fool," Vogan howled. "You'll leave clues. They'll get you. It will mean the chair. You can't get away with it."

"I'm certain I can," King replied. "Before I leave, I'll gag you. Remember how the wood alcohol worked before? You started to go blind. This time, I imagine you will, before you die. I'll leave you for a while. When I return, you will be dead. I'll remove all traces of your bonds. There won't be any marks, no matter how much you struggle. When the police find you, it will simply look as if you wilfully imbibed poisonous alcohol. I shouldn't but I actually do hope it works fast, Vogan. Good-by."

"I should have done it weeks ago," Vogan ranted. "If I ever get out of this. . ."

The gag was slapped across his mouth, shutting off the flow of abusive words. King tested the ropes, walked over and pulled down the window shades. They were of dark, heavy material. When the lights were turned off, the room was extremely dark.

King went around the apartment, methodically unloosening each electric light bulb. If anyone did get into the apartment, they'd believe it was empty. Not being able to turn on the lights, they'd probably go away without further investigation. It was just a hunch, but cost nothing to follow up.

King pulled down every curtain in the house. Finally he came to a stop just outside the bedroom door. Vogan was beginning to moan dismally. King walked out of the apartment, locked the door, and took the key with him.

He walked the streets for two hours and, remarkably enough, found himself hungry. He spent another hour and a half dining leisurely and enjoying his food. He reasoned to himself that killing Hugh Vogan was in the same category as rendering justice to war criminals. The man simply did not rate the privilege of living in the same world with decent people.

It was many hours after his departure that King returned to Vogan's apartment. He let himself in with the key he'd borrowed, took a large handkerchief from his pocket, and proceeded to screw the electric light bulbs tightly into their sockets and, at the same time, remove any fingerprints from the bulbs.

He found Vogan dead all right, but the man had somehow managed to get free. His body, with tattered remnants of the gauze still tied to wrists and ankles, lay on the floor in the living room. King worked faster then. He removed the gauze, wiped everything he could possibly have touched and put Vogan's bottle of good whisky into his coat pocket. The poisoned stuff he wanted them to find.

In the bedroom he carefully arranged the bed so it looked unused. He took off the gauze from the spots where he'd tied it. Then he saw the knife Vogan must have had in his trouser pocket and managed to get out. The knife had

slit the gauze ropes. King closed the knife and dropped it into a bureau drawer.

Satisfied that everything was now in order, he started for the door, and suddenly remembered the glass he'd used. He washed it, dried it with his handkerchief and put it away. He reflected, grimly, that he was quite an amateur at this business.

Shortly before three A. M. he let himself into his own home. He toptoed up the stairs. Betty worked nights lately and never awakened him. She'd honestly believe he'd been in bed. That was an alibi if he needed it. But as he passed her door, he thought he heard her sobbing softly. Perhaps she was. Betty was having a ghastly time of it these days. Wanting to marry Vogan and knowing very well she shouldn't.

King smiled a bit. At least he'd solved that problem for her. He destroyed those papers he'd taken from Vogan, went to bed, and slept soundly.

CHAPTER II

WHEN he awakened about nine the next morning, King shaved and showered. He hummed under the spray, feeling content with himself. He'd feared all along that remorse might get the better of him, but now he knew that there was nothing to be remorseful about. Killing a rattlesnake about to strike never made a man sorry. Vogan had been a serpent in every sense of the word.

As he dressed, King thought he heard a man's voice downstairs, and he speeded up the procedure. On entering the living room, he saw Betty talking to a man who looked like a college senior. Betty was wide-eyed with fear. She saw her uncle, arose, and rushed to him.

"Uncle Alan," she cried, "this man is asking me a lot of questions about Hugh. He's dead. Hugh is dead!"

King looked properly surprised, then adamant. "Who the devil are you?" he demanded of this man.

Then King looked at a gold badge and heard a soft, pleasant voice speak. "Lieutenant Archer, sir, of Homicide. Hugh Vogan was murdered sometime last night. I've come to get information from your niece. Frankly, she isn't at all co-operative."

"But why on earth question her?" King demanded.

Lieutenant Archer said. "Well, you see, certain people saw Vogan and your niece at a cafe early last night. They had an argument there, and she left in a huff. She told him, quite loudly, that she'd rather see him dead. Just why, I wouldn't know."

"Vogan," King said softly, "was a—"

"A heel," Archer agreed. "We suspected him of professional blackmailing. Now I'm going to be perfectly frank. The moment an autopsy on Vogan was finished, we suspected your niece. You see, Vogan was killed by a particularly virulent poison manufactured only in the laboratories where your niece works. It's a peculiar substance and is in the testing stages only. It isn't on the market and cannot be had anywhere in the world except in those labs.

"Doctors know about it and the test it is undergoing. Therefore, it was quite promptly identified. Your niece is the only person connected with the source of that poison who knew Vogan."

King felt a mantle of helplessness closing in about him. "Now look here, Lieutenant, my niece never paid any blackmail. She's never done anything to be blackmailed for."

"I'm not even insinuating that," Archer said patiently. "But as I understand it your niece planned to marry Vogan and called it off suddenly. Perhaps she killed him during a lovers' spat. And if she is innocent, why did she lie already?"

Betty walked over and sat down slowly. She was pretty, youthfully supple and clear-headed enough to maintain her composure very well even under these circumstances. She spoke in a low voice.

"Uncle Alan, the lieutenant asked me where I'd spent last night. I told him I'd attended the Basque Theatre to see Helen Parkins' latest play. I lost my seat stub. Threw it away, rather. I told him that, but it seems—I made a—small error. The play was cancelled last night when Miss Parkins was taken suddenly ill. Doesn't pay to lie, does it?"

"But why did you lie?" King demanded. "Betty, this is very serious. If you were not at the play, where were you?"

Lieutenant Archer broke in. "I asked

her that. She refused point-blank to tell me."

"I wouldn't even tell you, Uncle Alan," Betty said firmly. "I can't tell. I simply cannot even give the slightest hint."

King turned toward the detective. "But surely you're not going to hold her for murder just because the poison happened to come from the lab where she worked, and also had an argument with Vogan and told a lie."

Archer shrugged. "That's plenty to arrest her, Mr. King, but there is even more. We found her fingerprints in Vogan's apartment. Oh, the place had been gone over very well indeed, but she slipped in a couple of places, and her prints were there. We checked them against the fingerprint files of every employee of the lab where she works."

"What are you going to go?" King asked slowly.

Archer said, "I have no alternative. Your niece is under arrest for murder, and I'll have to lock her up. If she'd talk—be perfectly honest—she might claim an alibi if she is innocent. The prints could have been spread around Vogan's place the day before he was killed."

"I can't talk. I won't" Betty said. "May I get my hat and coat, Lieutenant?"

"I'll go with you," Archer said. King put out a helpless hand to stop the detective, but Archer brushed past him. King sat down limply in one of the big chairs. Vogan had died of poisoning identified as something from Betty's lab. But how? There'd been nothing like that in the whisky he'd slipped to Vogan. It was impossible for he'd mixed up that whisky himself.

BETTY and Lieutenant Archer were coming down the stairs side by side. Archer took her elbow gently. They both stopped to face King who intercepted them in the hallway.

King said, "Lieutenant, you can let her go. I killed Vogan. I fed him some wood alcohol. Somehow that poison must have got mixed up in it. Don't ask me how. I hoped Vogan would die of the wood alcohol. He'd imbibed it before, and nobody would have been very surprised. I'll get my things."

"I'm sorry," Archer said. "It won't work, although I understand the generosity behind your motives, Mr. King.

Vogan died of poisoning, not from the effects of wood alcohol. You can see your niece at Headquarters any time after four today. She'll be questioned until then. Send your attorney if you like. Coming, Miss Crane?"

Betty kissed her uncle, patted his cheek, and managed a smile. "You're a nice old duffer," she said. "Don't worry about me. I didn't kill Hugh, and the innocent have nothing to fear. Drop around and see me, Uncle Alan."

Lieutenant Archer sighed. "I hate it when I have to arrest nice people. If you did kill him, Miss Crane, he certainly deserved it. My car is out front."

King watched them drive away. He passed a hand slowly across his forehead and felt ninety-five years old. He poured himself a drink, a very unusual procedure for him. He sipped it as he sat alone in the big house. He'd never known this house could be so utterly empty.

His mind was busy trying to figure things out, but there was no answer. Why wouldn't Betty tell the truth? She hadn't been with Vogan. King was certain of that. Her life, possibly, was at stake, yet she wouldn't even attempt to establish an alibi.

Had Vogan been poisoned before he got there? Had Betty visited him first? The idea stunned King. He felt that he had to do something about it. He went to the phone and called Betty's laboratories. The man in charge was sympathetic.

"The particular poison couldn't possibly have been mixed with any wood alcohol, Mr. King. No one can get the stuff. Not a gram of it. A small portion kills quite fast. Say five or ten minutes at the very most. A paralysis sets in. The victim cannot speak or utter a sound. He may move about for a minute or so. No longer. In proportions we haven't as yet established, it may help the heart. Too much will make the victim seem to die of a heart condition. The stuff can positively be identified. I wish there were something we could do. . ."

King hung up and closed his eyes in silent resignation. He bitterly cursed the urge which had caused him to destroy those incriminating papers he'd taken from Vogan's pocket. They would have served to establish his motive for murder. Without them he couldn't pos-

sibly convince the police that he killed Vogan. They'd assume he was merely sacrificing himself to protect his niece. They'd pat him on the back, call him a swell guy, but they'd say he was lying.

Betty's fingerprints had been found in the apartment. How in the world had they gotten there? He had wiped the surface of everything he might have touched; that included about every surface in the apartment except floors, ceilings, and walls. She must have gone there. When? Why? Why did she hold back the truth? What was behind all this?

King didn't bother with anything to eat. Unlike the evening before, he had no appetite. This wasn't in a class with exterminating a rattlesnake. He got in touch with a law firm, and they promised to dispatch one of their ablest men. They tried to soothe him, but it was no use. King knew very well what would happen to Betty if all this evidence was presented in court. A jury couldn't help but believe the facts. Or what seemed so sincerely to be facts.

AT FOUR o'clock King presented himself at Lieutenant Archer's office. The lieutenant was friendly. "I'm going to let you see Betty privately," he said. "Try your best to make her tell where she was at the time of the murder. I don't travel on hunches. They never pan out, but this time I've a feeling. I can't make myself believe that Betty killed him."

"She didn't" King said wearily. "I did, but no one will believe me."

Archer laughed. "Back that up, Mr King. Tell us how you got the poison, for instance. You were in the lab. Not a grain of that poison was allowed outside the lab."

"I killed him with wood alcohol," King tried to explain. "Your medical men made a mistake in identifying the cause of death as that poison from Betty's laboratory. Oh, I know I sound silly. What's the use in talking? Let me see her, please."

Betty greeted him enthusiastically when she was led into one of the offices on the second floor of Headquarters. King was reasonably certain that there were no dictaphones planted, no hidden ears to overhear their conversation.

Archer just didn't seem to be that type of person.

"Thanks for sending the lawyers," Betty said. "although I upset them terribly. I wouldn't talk. Uncle Alan, am I beginning to sound like a hardened criminal? Shall I start saying lam and swag and hideout?"

"Don't joke," King said. "It's not a joking matter."

Betty's smile died away. She accepted a cigarette and puffed on it with the first sign of nerves she'd so far exhibited.

"I know. It is bad, isn't it? There's nothing new?"

"Nothing," King replied. "Betty, tell me where you were last night. I wasn't at home myself. I don't know when you got in, but I heard you crying. You knew he was dead then, didn't you?"

Betty looked steadily at the tip of her cigarette. "Uncle Alan, you've always had a lot of faith in me. I want to keep it that way. When I say I can't talk about last night, I mean just that. Do you think I killed Hugh?"

"I killed him," King replied, "so how can I believe you did? I killed him, Betty, and that's the truth. I'm not lying to protect you. I'm telling the truth to save you, but you won't believe me either.

"What must I do to prove I'm a murderer? What steps must I take? Murder will out! So they say. That's the baldest lie ever invented. I want to confess. I have confessed, and I'm laughed at. Betty, you couldn't have killed him, so there is no reason why you should hold back your alibi. You must have one."

"I'm not going to talk, Uncle Alan," she said slowly. "Not even to you. No matter how much or how hard you plead. And, of course, I'll never believe that fantastic story that you killed Hugh. You couldn't harm a fly. Everyone knows that."

King nodded glumly. "The very odd part about it is that Vogan wasn't the first man I killed, but I can't even prove that now. They'd just say it was more shenanigans related to my desire to protect you."

Betty said, looking straight into King's eyes, "There is one thing you can do for me and I'll never forget it. In my room, hidden under the cushion of

my vanity bench, you will find a sealed envelope. Bring it to me, like a darling. Unopened. Uncle, I don't like to say this, but if that envelope is tampered with, I shall call in that very kind detective lieutenant and make a full confession of the murder of Hugh."

King shuddered. "Don't! For heaven's sake, don't even talk that way. I'll bring your confounded envelope. Just as soon as I can get back here."

An hour later, King was in the same office with Betty. She locked the two doors and held out her hand. King produced the slim envelope. Betty took it, revolved it between her fingers for a moment, then lit a match. She set fire to the envelope, watched it burn far down, then dropped it on the bare floor. When it was completely consumed, she rubbed the ashes with her foot. Then she carefully cleaned it all up and deposited the ashes in the waste basket.

"That," she breathed a deep sigh, "was my biggest worry. If they ever found it—no, don't ask me what it contained. I'll never forget your kindness though. Never."

King went to Lieutenant Archer's office. "She wouldn't tell me a thing. I'm afraid nothing can make her talk."

Archer nodded. "My impression exactly. We're stuck, Mr. King. I don't know what to do. She'll be indicted within forty-eight hours."

"Tell me," King asked, "just where you found her fingerprints in Vogan's apartment. I really spent considerable time cleaning everything there. Because of my own prints, you know."

"Oh sure," Archer grinned. "Still at it, eh? Well we found some perfect sets against the west wall moulding of the bedroom. The boys had to dust the whole place to locate them, but—there they were."

"Thank you, lieutenant. Oh yes, one more thing. You might ask Betty if Vogan ever visited her at the laboratory. I meant to, but I'm so upset I can't remember a thing. I'll phone later about it."

Archer said, "What are you up to, Mr. King?"

King answered, dryly, "I'm going into the detective business. I shall undertake only one case. Once I have proven myself a killer, I'll be out of business. If that happens, I shall be completely happy. I

shall consider myself a phenomenal success as a detective. Wish me luck, lieutenant."

Archer didn't reply. He turned on his heel and walked across the room to stare out of the window. King walked slowly away.

CHAPTER III

IT WAS well after eight o'clock when King arrived before the door of Vogan's apartment. He swore softly because he hadn't taken the key with him when he locked the door behind that dead man the night before. The key might have helped prove his guilt—and get him inside right now. He wondered how he was going to manage it. Story-book detectives could open any door, burglars were good at it, and police carried pass keys, he'd heard. But personally he was unprepared for anything like this.

He turned the knob and pushed. The door was locked. He rattled it savagely a few times and, amazingly enough, it gave way. He gasped and stepped inside. A look at the lock told the story. The latch was out of line. Rattling the door made it slip a trifle. Just enough so it cleared the metal recess into which it was supposed to be lodged all the way.

King closed the door behind him and turned on the lights. He proceeded straight to the bedroom, estimated the location of the west wall, and went over to it. He didn't have to guess the spot where they'd found Betty's prints. They were still there, made vivid by the fingerprint powder which still clung.

Disregarding the stuff, King gently pressed his own fingertips against the moulding which was about hip high. He tapped the wall with his knuckles, and then bent to examine it better. He brought a small lamp over, plugged it in, and saw the very fine line in the wood.

He went to the kitchen and got some tools. Inadequate things. A big knife and a small one. An emery sharpener and a sturdy can opener. With these he lustily attacked the wall. It took some doing and he broke the big knife, but

he did open that very well hidden compartment. It was about ten inches deep and very, very empty.

He knew what it meant. This was where Vogan had concealed the evidence he had against his victims. It proved King's former suspicions that Vogan was blackmailing other people as well. With sudden horror he wondered if Vogan had anything on Betty. Some crime which now made her seal her lips. King put that idea out of his mind. Betty had lived with him since she was nine.

He went into Vogan's tiny study. The police had been there already, but their examination would have been cursory at the best. They had all the evidence they needed. He pulled all the drawers out of the desk and looked behind them. Sure enough, there was a false part to one recess. By its location he judged the compartment could be entered from the surface of the desk, right below the heavy metal desk lamp. He tried to move it. The lamp appeared to be solidly anchored.

King grasped it with both hands and tugged. It moved slightly. With a grimace, King saw how it worked. The whole lamp merely tilted backward to reveal a fairly wide slot. Reaching down, his fingers encountered papers and he pulled them out.

One was a letter, undated and addressed to Bob. Vogan had a brother named Bob. King knew that much about him; the brother wasn't a much better type. The letter stated that Vogan would be visiting Bob's home shortly. A telegram would state the exact date, but Bob was to let it be known that Vogan was already there. That he needed an alibi and wanted his presence at Bob's home established twenty-four hours before his arrival.

"Vogan was arranging an alibi," King muttered. "I wonder why. He was planning something. A crime, of course, for which he might be suspected."

KING laid the letter to one side and looked over the other papers. There were four. They seemed to be a list of securities and bank balances. Not Vogan's surely, but those listed items

somehow seemed to be familiar.

King let out a short cry of surprise. No wonder they were familiar. This was a listing of all his holdings. The securities and the bank balances tallied perfectly. He recalled that Vogan used to prowl the house often. He could have come across these figures and names.

The dark mantle of Vogan's intentions dropped away completely. He'd been planning to kill him. Vogan had contemplated the murder of the man who had taken his life instead. It was all perfectly clear and logical. If he died, Vogan would have come forward, been very kind and properly sympathetic, Betty was in love with him. She'd have had no one else to turn to. He'd have married her.

"The unspeakable rat," King ground out. "He wasn't content to bleed me for years. He wanted everything I had even if he had to ruin the life of Betty to get it. To say nothing of cutting my own life short. He did give me a hint or two before he died."

King sat there in thought for ten minutes. This didn't solve Betty's dilemma nor his own problems. It soothed his conscience, but that wasn't enough. He arose and went to Vogan's bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet and studied the assortment of vials and bottles. Vogan seemed to have been a typical hypochondriac.

King literally raced through the apartment for the telephone. He called the city hospital and told one of the few lies of his lifetime. He pretended to be Lieutenant Archer of Homicide.

"You had a man named Hugh Vogan brought in suffering from wood alcohol poisoning about two years ago. Will you dig out his record, please? I'll hang on."

King's mind was working rapidly as he waited. The doctor came back on the wire and he had the record before him.

King said, "Tell me if you prescribed anything for him. After he left the hospital, I mean. Perhaps a medicine for his outraged stomach. Something of that nature."

The doctor chuckled. "If you're guessing, it's pretty good, lieutenant. I remember the case. Vogan stated that he might do the same thing again. That when he was on a bender, he forgot rhyme and reason. So he wanted to know

if there was something to take which might save his life in case he drank cleaning fluid, shellac, or wood alcohol. Yes, we gave him an antidote."

"In what type of bottle?" King asked. "Please try to remember. I know it's very difficult."

"But it isn't. That particular antidote was powerful stuff. Too much would have done more damage than the rotgut he might drink. So we gave him only enough for one dose and dispensed it in a small blue vial of a type generally used for poisons."

"Thank you," King said. "Thanks very much."

King leaned back and started to smile. A heavy hand clamped down on his shoulder. It was Lieutenant Archer.

"I thought I'd find you here. In fact, I heard you representing yourself as me. That's a misdemeanor, my boy. An offense against the dignity of the law. And say, you bought that wood alcohol at Barrows' Sons down near the Bowery, didn't you?"

King blinked. "Why, yes. How on earth did you know? I was sure no one could find out because I purposely put on some very old clothing, neglected to shave, and kept my hat pulled rather low."

Archer grinned. "I swiped a photograph of you, had a lot of copies made and sent it the rounds. You see, there was wood alcohol in Vogan's stomach. Not enough to kill him. You happened to buy the wood alcohol in a paint store which sold some a few years ago to several men—Bowery bums—who promptly drank it and died. Since then they dilute the stuff when an unsavory looking character wants to buy it."

"Then I didn't kill Vogan," King jumped up. "Lieutenant, I can explain the whole thing now. I did kill him, in a way, I suppose. I tied him up, left him to die. I thought he'd imbibed enough to kill. So did he. He got loose."

"I'd darkened the whole house by unscrewing every electric light bulb. I thought if anyone came and the place was dark, they'd go away. Even if it was a friend with a key. Naturally, being unable to turn on any lights, he'd leave without investigating the place. I had to come back, you see, and remove evidences of my crime."

Archer whistled softly. "I can guess

the rest. Vogan got loose. That time before he nearly lost his sight from drinking the stuff. This time he turned on the lights. They wouldn't work, but he thought they did, that he was already blind. You go on from there."

"It's perfect," King exclaimed excitedly. "Vogan had been given a remedy in case he ever drank wood alcohol again. He stumbled to the bathroom. He couldn't see what he was doing and must have been frantic by then. He guessed the location of the bottle of remedy, but took a bottle filled with that poison instead. I—no, that wouldn't work, would it? You'd have found the bottle. Seen his fingerprints on it. And how could he have gotten possession of the stuff anyhow?"

"I can answer the last one and guess the other," Archer said. "We did some work around that lab. Inside a glass cabinet in which only vials of this particular poison are kept, we discovered Vogan's fingerprints. He'd swiped one all right. I've been wondering what he intended to do with it."

"He meant to kill me, so he could marry Betty and control the estate I have already willed to her. I tell you he deserved to die."

"So it seems," Archer admitted. "I know something about that poison too. If Vogan also knew the symptoms, he'd have soon been convinced he'd taken the wrong stuff. It works rather slowly for ten minutes, then kills fast. He had a few minutes to dispose of the vial. Why? So you'd be accused of his murder. He knew you'd admit it if you were questioned. Let's look for the bottle of antidote from the hospital."

THEY found it and a significantly vacant space beside it, just big enough to have harbored a vial of about the same size.

King said, "That's what happened. He killed himself, accidentally. You've got to let Betty go."

"She's already free and at home waiting for you," Archer said. "We gave her case plenty of publicity. It brought about the desired results. I reasoned that she was shielding someone, and that's how it turned out. She talked after that. It seems she suspected Vogan was a black-mailer. That was what caused their argument the other night.

"She followed Vogan and saw him meet a woman who shall be nameless. That woman paid blackmail. Betty waited until Vogan had gone away, then asked her point-blank about it. The woman broke down.

"Betty then did a brave thing. She waited until she thought Vogan would be asleep. She went to his apartment and got in. She'd been there before when she believed Vogan was an honest and hard-working man. She knew the door could be forced easily. But she found Vogan dead."

"Good heavens," King gasped. "She must have gone there after I came home. I heard her sobbing. She was planning the whole thing then."

"More than likely," Archer agreed. "She saw there was nothing she could do for him. Some time before, on one of her visits to his apartment, he needed some cash and went into the bedroom. It happens there is a mirror on the living-room wall which reflects just a small part of the bedroom. In the mirror she watched him open that secret compartment he'd created in the wall."

King broke in. "She knew that was where he'd have hidden the evidence he was using against that woman."

"Yes, of course," Archer said. "She found it, too. Along with a few details concerning other people. She took it and left. When I arrested her, those papers were in her room."

"I knew," King said quickly. "The little devil made me bring them to her, intact and unread, on the threat that she'd confess if I peeked. She burned them."

"And I caught merry Hades from the inspector. The smoke smelled up his pretty office. Yes, she told me that too. Well, the woman she befriended came forward and told us the whole story. Confronted with her, Betty broke down. That's when I began work in earnest, fully believing you had killed Vogan.

"I certainly meant to," King confessed.

Archer went on, his enthusiasm growing less and less. "Imagine, he took the stuff he'd stolen to kill you with. They say it makes the heart go blooey—anyone with a heart condition might be killed by it and no one would ever suspect. Have you a heart condition, Mr. King?"

(Continued on page 69)

Dead Man's Code

By Glenn Low

That old moonshiner mountain hideout would serve those bank robbers—but only if they respected the secret of Cowbell Knob.



THE old hillbilly was right. It surely was a nifty hideout practically perfect. The sides of the big mountain were so densely overgrown with stubby mountain laurel that for one to travel through it at night without a light would be an impossibility. If anyone tried coming up in the daytime, Knuck and Big Sam would see them a mile off.

"Use to make moonshine up here," the old hillbilly said. "Lots o' times revenuers tried to catch me. But daytimes I'd see them comin' and scoot off down some other side o' the knob, and nighttimes nobody ever tried to come up. The laurel is so blasted thicky-growthy a feller'd have to have a light, else he'd make so much racket thrashin' through, that a-body here would hear him and have worlds o' time to get away."

"It's a sweet hideout, all right," Big Sam said. He put his right hand in his coat pocket, glancing studiously at the ragged little backwoodsman who had guided them to the top of Cowbell Knob.

"How much do you think we ought to pay you for bringing us up here?"

The old man grinned good-naturedly, his beard flashing black and silver in the strong moonlight. "I hain't a hard man to do a bargain," he said. "Would three dollars be askin' too much?"

Knuck cracked a short laugh, a laugh that sounded like a spoonful of grease spilled on a hot stove.

Big Sam smiled, his hand still deep in his coat pocket. "Old-timer," he said, his voice gentle, "how much cash did you ever see all at once in your life—all in one pile?"

The hillbilly scratched his head thoughtfully, his brow wrinkling. After

a long pause, he said, "Seventy-five dollars and seventy-five cents. That was it, all right. A fellow paid me that for my still when I quit makin' blockade liquor six years ago."

Knuck and Big Sam laughed. Big Sam said, "We're going to pay you what's right, old-timer. We want you to know that there's no small stuff going when it's me and Knuck here on a deal."

"You said it, Sam," said Knuck, his voice a harsh cackle.

"How much you goin' to give me?" asked the old man, his eyes wide with happy expectancy. "You goin' to give me five dollars, maybe?"

"More than that," said Sam. "We're going to give you exactly fifty thousand dollars."

For a long minute the hillbilly stared into Big Sam's face, slowly his eyes narrowed. When they were almost slits, he said, "That can't be. That's too blasted much money. A feller'd have to go over to the bank at the county seat to see any such money as that."

Knuck laughed again, said, "Look, Father Whiskers, that's where we've been. We've been over to the bank at the county seat. Didn't you hear about two guys walking into the bank over there and then walking out with a bagful of money?"

A dazed expression slid over the old man's face, then, a moment later, it lit with anger. "But you tol' me you'd pay me if'n I'd show you a good place to make moonshine whisky. You didn't tell me you were bank robbers. Why—why robbin' a bank is stealin' Stealin' money that b'longs to other folks. It's agin nature, it is."

Knuck laughed again, a sizzling lisp. Big Sam smiled. "Making moonshine whisky is against the law, too, old timer," he said.

"Tain't!" said the hillbilly defensively. "Nature gave us corn, if'n we'd work to plant it and hoe it and shuck it out. And if'n we do that, then it's our'n, and we can do as we please with it. Corn and corn liquor is a gift o' nature, same as taters and turnips is. But robbin' banks—that's a blasted dirty trick. Why I wouldn't tetch any o' your money. I'm goin' right smack dab over to the county seat and tell the sheriff where you're hidin' at. I am, s' help me!"

He whirled and started from the clearing on top of Cowbell Knob, started in a fast trot, his old legs wobbling, his big beard seeming to jerk his head forward.

"Give it to him," whispered Knuck. "We was going to, anyhow."

"Sure, I'll give it to him," said Big Sam. "Only I wanted him to die happy, die rich and happy, with a lot of money in his hands. That way I'd have felt better about bumping him off."

WHEN the gun crashed the little hillbilly stopped, straightened, then raised his hands as if beseeching help from on high, and pitched forward.

He was still alive when they went over to him. "Hell," said Knuck. "You ain't telling the sheriff about us very fast."

The old man groaned. "I was goin' to tell you—all how this here old knob got its name—Cowbell Knob," he said, his voice hoarsening. "But now I'm mighty glad that I didn't do it." He was quiet for a minute, breathing hard.

Knuck picked up a rock and moved over near his head.

His eyes flickered. "Go ahead and bash me," he said. "But you can't bury me up here. Hain't dirt 'nough up here—only a few inches o' dirt up—here. Everythings solid rock. I'll rot and—and the buzzards'll eat—the buzzards'll—" His voice whistled away.

"Don't hit him," Big Sam told Knuck. "He's going out now."

The old man groaned. His body jerked. "I'll—I'll tell the sheriff," he whispered hoarsely. "The—sheriff—the corpses' code. . . code. . ."

He quit gasping, and they knew he was dead.

"What's he mean by that, now?" said Knuck, his face a worried puzzle.

"Delirious. Didn't mean anything," Big Sam said.

"What'll we do with the body?"

"He's right about the soil here. We can't bury it. That's why the knob's covered with laurel. Laurel don't need much root room, grows anywhere."

Big Sam looked off over the moon-shrouded country below. He could see for miles, a great, pale, lemon-tinted land, the lesser hills falling away on all sides like mammoth stairways, stairways decked with giant pennants, flagging the shadows. Below in the brush a lone cowbell clanked flatly. The quiet, except for the cowbell, was a soft, whispering thing. A sensation of fretful loneliness caught him up for a moment.

Knuck voiced the spirit of that loneliness. "I'd feel better with lots of lights, lots of noise. Maybe we'd been better off if we'd made a break to get out of this backwoods right after the stickup."

Big Sam shook his head. "We can stand it for three days. By then they'll let up looking for us around here. Happy'll pick us up at the road crossing Wednesday midnight. Happy won't fail."

Knuck drew a tight breath. "One thing sure," he said, "we don't want Father Whiskers around close while we're waiting. He'll start to smell before three days are up."

"We can take him off in the brush a ways," said Big Sam. "It's likely varmints will 'tend to him, or buzzards."

After they'd carried the body a few hundred feet down the slope, dropped it into a shallow place, and threw a few leaves and sticks over it, they returned to the clearing. It was almost midnight then. They pitched pennies for who'd stand the first watch. Big Sam won the right to sleep.

He stretched out on the soft ground, using the bag that held their loot for a pillow, and was soon breathing heavily. Knuck sat on a big rock, smoking too many cigarettes, listening to the woods noises, noises that were strange and scary to him. Once a bobcat squalled nearby and he leapt off the rock, clawing his gun from his coat.

Big Sam moved restlessly at the animal's shrill cry, but did not awaken. Knuck guessed the origin of the sound and did not awaken him. After that lone squall from the bobcat there were no other disrupting sounds—only the buzz

and chatter of night insects, the occasional cry of a night bird, and the regular mate call of a great owl.

The steady clanking of the cowbell low on the knob was there, but it had become so established that the little hood paid it no attention.

THEY'D brought a thermos jug of coffee and enough food to last them three days. In the moist dawn, while a light fog enshrouded the top of the knob and water dripped like rain from the big laurel, they ate and drank cold coffee. After that Knuck stretched out for his turn at sleep and Big Sam stood guard.

By nine o'clock the fog had cleared and a bright October sun had risen above the rim of a distant mountain. Big Sam was restless. He paced the clearing awhile, watching the open country below, the broad cleared meadows on all sides of the knob. No one could cross those meadows and reach the foot of the mountain without being seen. The security of the hideout was complete.

He smiled as he thought how the sheriff, his deputies, and the West Virginia State Police must be scouring the country roads and the highways for them. His smile became a satisfied thing as he considered their good luck in running into the old hillbilly who had led them to this safe spot. Once he wondered about the story concerning how the knob had earned its name, and why the dying man had been glad he hadn't told it to them.

The cowbell clanked on, far away down the slope. Once a hawk swooped low overhead, whistling its blood hunger.

It was almost noon when the first buzzard appeared, sailing high over the big hills. A great, ominous shadow slid across the floor of the clearing as the big carrion-eater passed overhead.

Big Sam, strangely fascinated, watched the bird, saw another appear on the distant horizon, then another, and—He didn't bother to count them.

He thought their presence might attract attention to the knob, but didn't worry over the possibility. He and Knuck could see anyone coming in plenty of time to make their getaway. It would take thousands of men to surround the foot of the mountain.

The cowbell clanked on monotonously. The buzzards lolled and circled above.

"They'll do that until the corpse is good and ripe," Big Sam told himself. Still he wondered why the buzzards didn't come down to investigate their find, never thinking that his and Knuck's presence was keeping them in the air.

Late in the afternoon Knuck awoke and they ate. After that they played stud poker for small stakes to pass the time. They felt secure in the knowledge that their pal, Happy, would be waiting for them at the road crossing, Wednesday midnight. The road crossing was not far from their hideout. Their arrangements for meeting Happy had been well made.

Night drew on, and there was no change from the night before. The moon was just as pale, the hills just as silent, mysterious in their lemon and mauve shades. The cowbell clanked below on the flats, seeming a little nearer.

Big Sam chuckled once, saying, "If that cow comes up here, Knuck, we'll milk her. Milk has vitamins."

"Probably ain't the milking kind," said Knuck.

They both laughed.

The cow did move closer. They could tell by the bell. Before long she was near enough that they heard her crashing the brush, cracking the sticks and scraping the stones as she moved.

BIG SAM finally stretched out for his night's rest. The moonlight was plenty bright enough to show them the spots on the cards, but they had tired of their penny ante. Knuck squatted on the rock, dealing solitaire.

The clanking of the cowbell told the cow was coming nearer and rearer. Big Sam was still awake when Knuck said, annoyance in his voice, "Maybe I better go out and head her the other way. The dumb critter will follow her nose if I turn her."

"Maybe you had," Big Sam said. "She's making so much noise that we wouldn't hear if anybody decided to walk in on us."

Knuck rose and left the clearing. "I'll head her the other way or beef her," he said.

A few minutes later Big Sam heard him cursing the cow, throwing stones at her. Then there was a gun shot.

A smile wreathed Big Sam's face. "He killed her," he said. Then, "Knuck doesn't mess around much. I like a man like that."

The cowbell clanked no more. Big Sam heard Knuck returning to the clearing.

"When do you expect to skin and quarter your beef, Knuck?" he said.

He closed his eyes, satisfied. The continuous clank of the cowbell had been a worry. He'd probably sleep better tonight. He heard Knuck enter the clearing, move over close to him.

He was smiling when he opened his eyes to speak and saw the yawn of the big automatic. The snout of the gun was only a few inches from his head, its business end focused on a spot between his eyes.

"What's up, Knuck—what's—?"

It wasn't Knuck. For a moment Sam had thought Knuck was double-crossing him.

A tall, lean, blunt-faced stranger leaned over him. Sam saw the cow halter around his neck, saw the fingers of his left hand muffling the cowbell's clapper.

"I had to shoot your chum," said the sheriff. "He thought I was a cow and threw rocks at me. I hope I won't have to shoot you."

Big Sam sat up, slowly lifting his hands. "How—" he began, saw the badge on the sheriff's coat and stopped.

The tall man smiled down at him. "Very simple. I crossed the meadows after dark, just before the moon came up. I found the cow down in the laurel and took her halter and bell. Then I could make all the noise I wanted to

coming up. I figured you fellows had never heard the story of how this old knob got its name—Cowbell Knob."

Sam moved uneasily, his eyes fastened on the gun in the sheriff's hand. There was no chance to make a play for the gun. The hand that held it was professional, dead steady.

"A long time ago," went on the sheriff, "a smart revenue officer worked this cowbell stunt to get through the laurel at night and pull a still some of the boys were running up here. That's how the knob got its name. It's a wonder old Connoll didn't tell you about it. But maybe you killed him before he had a chance."

Big Sam arose, stood quietly while the sheriff clamped the irons on his wrists.

"What I want to know," he said glumly, "is how you knew we were up here."

"Easy," said the sheriff. "The corpses' code—the buzzards. I've been watching them from down on the highway since noon. They kept circling over the knob, but never lit. If they'd lit I'd have thought it was some dead varmint they were after, but when they kept flying and didn't once come down, I knew there were live human beings up here whose presence kept the birds in the air."

"Corpses' code," mumbled Big Sam, remembering the old hillbilly's last words.

The sheriff said, "Sure, it's always the same thing. Something dead or rotten on the ground. In this case it meant both; only old Connoll isn't rotten yet."

Big Sam knew what he meant.



When Abigail Hepplethwaite, Boston's female *subtreasury*, was pinched on a hit-and-run charge, Snooty Piper tried to bail her out. So the moonstruck newshound naturally managed only to get himself . . .

Half Shot at Sunrise

"Dizzy Duo" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

IF I, Scoop Binney, live long enough to see a cut in U. S. taxes, I will never forget the look on Dogface Woolsey's face one morning when me and Snooty Piper report for work at Mr. Guppy's *Evening Star*. Dogface looks numb as if he had swallowed a very large bottle of embalming fluid. He has a cigar rammed into the paste jar and is chewing on the goeey end of the paste brush.

Snooty says, "Why, Dogface, whatever is the trouble with you? I hope it is nothing trivial, and is hardening of the arteries at least."

The city editor's eyes lose some of their *gim*. He seems to recognize us. "Huh?"

Dogface barks. "It is nothing much, boys. Nothing at all. All it was is Abigail Hepplethwaite called up just awhile ago. She says she is charged with manslaughter, as she nudged a pedestrian too hard with a gas buggy while apparently under the influence. She—"

Snooty grabs at a post and holds on. "Look, Dogface, tell me again what it was I thought you just said."

Dogface repeats his amazing statement. Before we can recover, he drops another live grenade in our laps. "It is quite a morning. Last night somebody opened the safe of the Cheerful Credit Jewelry Company on Tremont and took seventy grand

in cash and stones. They bashed a watchman over the noggin so hard he is now being measured for a timber overcoat. That is about all that has happened up to now." Dogface sighs and tries to light the paste brush.

"What to do?" I asks Snooty "We should hurry and see what we can do for Abigail. The jam the old girl seems to be in—"

"I am going to look in on the murder first, Scoop," Snooty says. "Abigail could get out of any sort of jam, even if she was bogged down in a vat of the strawberry flavor. With all her cabbage, who could give her a rap, even the Federal D. A.'s? Let's get down to where the corpse is. What was that address, Dogface?"

The city editor finally tells us, then drops his head in his hands. We hop into the elevator. I says, "You heard Dogface intimidate that Abigail was spiffed when she removed the citizen from circulation, didn't you? I wonder did she hit and run, Snooty?"

"Not her, Scoop. Abigail would throw a left hand with anybody and hold her ground. I wonder if Iron Jaw has already arrested a suspect? I have never been so excited since V-E day. Two rub-outs in a matter of hours. Abigail Hepplethwaite, a manslaughterer. The next thing we know, Madame Curie will get accused of putting arsenic in her radium. There seems to be some beast in most everybody, Scoop. Let's grab a cab."

WHEN we get to the scene of the rub-out, there is no cadaver there. Snooty is indignant. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy sneers at us.

"Maybe if I knowed you two jerks was coming, I would have got some dry ice to preserve the stiff. I can't think of everything. And keep off my feet, Piper!"

"To do that I would have to go out in the corridor, Superfatso," Snooty says. "Where is the murder weapon?"

"Just where we found it, flathead!" Iron Jaw sniffs. "All wrapped up by the assassin an' tied with blue ribbons. He left a note makin' an appointment with me."

"Even then he would be safe from apprehension," Snooty says. He starts casing the scene. It is quite evident that some tough gees blew the strongbox open

with some very powerful stimulant. The force of the blast kicked over some tallow candles they had used for illumination, for there are some charred papers on the floor.

"Seventy grand, huh?" Iron Jaw says. "Rocks and lettuce both. I wonder was it an inside job."

"No," Snooty butts in. "They could have took the safe outside in an empty lot, blew it, then brought it back to keep clever dicks like you puzzled, Iron Jaw. What was the deceased called by?"

"The watchman?" Iron Jaw replies. "Mischa Skilch. I jus' got that last smart remark, Piper. One more dig at me an' I'll throw you out the window just like I would this cigar butt—see?"

"If that smoldering hunk of poison should have hit somebody—" Snooty shrugs and ambles about the office.

"They didn't leave a single clue, I bet. That has been the trouble with murders lately. You get anything, Iron Jaw?"

Iron Jaw looks quite facetious as he lights another stogie the size of a sash weight. "Me? Not a thing, Piper. Only who done it. It is a coincidence me and the killer both smoked cigars. Cigars are very short these days. I picked up a very long butt which happened to be here and found it has recently been used. The guilty citizen also left other evidence to hustle him to the rotisserie in record time. This is my lucky day."

"Is it, you fathead?" a gruff voice says. We all turn and recognize the mayor of the Hub. His Honor shoves a very battered high silk hat right into O'Shaughnessy's face. "I was getting out of my car across the street when that hunk of smoldering broccoli knocked my hat off. I see only one window open, so it was evident—why, was there a robbery here?"

"Not at all," Snooty says by force of habit. It would not have mattered if he had been talking to President Truman. "We own the joint an' left a pack of cigarettes in the safe. The clerk who has the combination was home sick today an'—"

I step on Snooty's foot and manage to stick my elbow in his mouth. "Yes, there was," I says. "We—"

"You are O'Shaughnessy, aren't you?" the mayor says to Iron Jaw. "Have heard of you. Got a perfect record in the police department, they tell me. The only crime you ever solved was in a detective publication. You got a prize of twenty-five

dollars because you knew somebody who worked on the magazine and purchased the solution for ten bucks. Well, you big false alarm, you find out who robbed that safe there or I will have your badge, understand?"

"You will git a conviction within twenty-four hours, Mayor," O'Shaughnessy says. "Or you can have my badge. Already I know who done it."

"Hmph!" the mayor sniffs, then snaps his fingers. "But I can't waste no more time. Abigail is—oh, she must not be allowed to take the rap. Says she must be guilty as charged—"

"You mean Miss Abigail Hepplethwaite, Your Honor?" Snooty says. "We are her pals. We can ride over there with you as we are newspapermen an'—"

"Piper, stop gettin' familiar with the mayor!" Iron Jaw yelps. "If you don't know your place, I'll kick you into it, you fresh—"

"Why! I—er—that is," the mayor says, "Miss Hepplethwaite mentioned a person named Piper. A screwball, I think she said, but one who generally—come along, Piper. Isn't it lucky I found you without having to go look for you. Where did she say it was? Oh, the Greek's. Small world."

IRON Jaw is quite stupefied to say the least. I can't move myself until Snooty jabs me with a nailfile. "Let's hurry, Scoop, as I could kick myself for not hurrying to her side first. Did she really knock off a pedestrian, Mayor?"

"It was not a Graymond's store window dummy I looked at when I stopped in at the mortician's. There seems to be ample proof that the headlight glass found sprinkled on the remains came off Ab—er—Miss Hepplethwaite's sport coupé. She admits not entirely remembering things from say one A. M. until seven A. M. this morning. In other words, she imbibed too much—er—"

"It is something I can't believe," Snooty says. "Once she tried to drink me under a table and—she has confessed?"

"She says she will take the rap, Piper," the mayor says. "No better than the ordinary citizen, she says, if she commits a crime. Won't get herself a lawyer. This is awful."

"Why does she want me if she doesn't want help?" Snooty asks as we drive to Back Bay in the mayor's limousine. I will not be surprised if some day the

crackpot rides down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington with Joe Stalin.

"Why," the mayor says, "if there was ever a time in her life she needed a laugh—"

"Oh, yeah?" Snooty bites, then suddenly remembers where he is for a wonder. We soon see Abigail's big chateau as we drive up her winding driveway, and also a long line of characters stretching from the perennial garden to her front door, a distance of five hundred yards if at least an inch. They are thin and fat, long and short, young and old, and some are packing brief cases.

"Don't tell me the old doll is running her own cigarette line," Snooty quips. "First she is a hit and run, now—"

"That is silly and you know it," the mayor snorts. "What lawyer wouldn't want her case?"

It is a very moot question as Abigail Hepplethwaite has more scratch than a million testy tomcats. It is a safe bet she could underwrite the rebuilding of Italy and Poland and still have enough of the filthy left over to keep U.N.R.R.A. functioning in high until nineteen-nineteen.

We suddenly behold Abigail emerging from her ancestral wicket. She seems piqued at the invasion of the barristers. She remonstrates with them, but gets no farther than Hitler did in invading Long Island.

"Okay, you shysters!" Abigail shrieks, and hops over to a pipe that sticks out of her lawn, on the end of which is a spigot. Suddenly the Hepplethwaite sprinkler system goes into action. It is very difficult to see the stampeding legal eagles in the heavy mist. Soon it is all clear.

"The old doll has an answer to everything," I says.

"Except ones for the D.A., huh?" Snooty sniffs. We pile out of the official jalopy. Abigail waves a lorgnette and waddles over, her locks still in curlers. "Hello, Eddie," she tosses at the mayor. "How many votes you lined up already for when you run again? Hello, Piper, I got a new maid. You keep your distance, see?"

"Hmm," I remark. "She does not look to me like a penitent felon, Snooty."

We go into Abigail's parlor. She says to the mayor. "I changed my mind about givin' myself up, Eddie. I'm goin' to put up a fight with both ducks. I got to make"

things over about the drive I took last night, or was it this morning? I figured at first maybe I did ease off the pedestrian, because after some hookers, you think you have remembered everything but maybe you didn't, understand?"

"Perfect," Snooty says, but shakes his dome.

"It is just that I don't believe that an extra couple of snorts can scatter my marbles like pool balls at the break, boys," the old chicadee goes on. "Had a few of the girls in for a rummy game and served snifters as usual. When they'd scrambled, I took a spin in my little coupé. When I got back I had me two nightcaps besides the one I wear to the old sack. Somethin' happened after that. I don't remember hittin' the hay, boys. So did I go out in the coupé again with a Brannigan on? Or didn't I? Well, you can go out and see the jalopy with the busted headlight."

"Sounds bad," Snooty says. "They might have you as cold as a polar bear's heel, Ab-er-Ma'am. I'll tell you what. I had an old relative once who got paid to fight the war against Spain in 1898 because a pal was afraid of guns. You have got enough dough to get a fall guy. Say, pay him ten grand to serve from five to ten an'—"

"It is wonderful to have a friend who believes in you like that, isn't it, Eddie?" Abigail says to the major. "Just stand aside and I'll fracture his skull with my lorgnette."

"He is only trying to help," I says. "He would throw a can of gasoline into a forest fire to save a pal caught in the middle of it any time. I—"

A DOLL walks in. I hear Snooty's breath hiss in. The cupcake wearing the black tight dress and crisp white apron has more curves than Hal Newhouser of the Detroit's and a pair of eyes that would make Merle Oberon's very dull-looking indeed. Even the mayor ogles her and bares his teeth.

"What does your guests wish, Madam?" the cute trick says in a voice that has bells on it.

"If you are askin' me, Sugar," Snooty Piper says brashly, "a date for, say, next Saturday night?"

"Lay off!" Abigail yelps. "Piper, isn't there anything wearin' skirts you wouldn't bother?"

"Only a Scotchman," Snooty cracks,

and the maid giggles. Abigail chases her out. Then she looks scimitars and land mines at Snooty.

"Don't you dare write no story on me like this for instance: 'Abigail Hepplethwaite, Back-Bay's best-heeled old doll, took down her hair today and said she would stand the rap. It seems the Hepplethwaite babe was loaded to the gunwales early in the light of dawn and drove a coupé around Beantown's streets and eliminated a human life. Although she broke one headlight on the jalopy, she used her nose for a spare to wheel the rubout chariot home.' Don't you dare, Piper! Say, where is O'Shaughnessy?"

"Didn't you know?" Snooty says. "He has a slaying to solve and had better, as ask Eddie here."

"What was that, Piper?"

"I mean Your Honor," Snooty corrects. "You said you'd take his badge if he didn't, huh? Iron Jaw—"

"You can say that again, Piper," the mayor snaps. "But let's see what we can do for you, Abigail. Now, let's get our heads together—"

"You'll excuse me for a moment, won't you?" Snooty says and leaves the room. He starts whistling a tune that has to do with a citizen saying what he would do if he had the wings of an angel.

"Odd character, isn't he?" the mayor mumbles.

"Someday I am going to hang one on him!" Abigail says. We start discussing how to help her beat the rap and jog her memory. After a while of getting nowhere, Snooty appears again.

"The headlight sure made contact with more than just a toy balloon," he says. "They could throw the book at you, Ma'am."

Abigail throws a book at Snooty Piper, and it is one of the biggest lexicons published by man. It nearly floors the half-wit, but he manages to keep his feet and goes out of the room once more in waltz-time. I start to follow. Abigail says to let Snooty go as he might easily fall into the goldfish pond and stay down once too many times.

"Well," the mayor says, "Where were we?"

"Getting nowhere, of course," Abigail says. "I should maybe hire a lawyer, huh? I could git five to ten easy, Eddie. I'm over seventy now—you tell anybody about

that slip of my tongue and you'll be an alderman before you shave again."

"You know me, Abigail. Huh! Let's see, Binney. We could tear the coupé apart and bury it. Then where would the evidence be?"

"Whoever elected you mayor?" Abigail yelps. "I could of got more help if I'd called up the Boy Scouts. I'll defend myself and plead guilty. Where's the aspirin? Ohhh, Yvette!"

It is just then that Snooty Piper staggers into the room. He is perspiring freely like a citizen coming out of a burning house in mid-July in Alabama. I never saw him look more alarmed. Abigail asks him did he see a creditor.

"I—er—that is, up there at the head of the stairs—as you turn left. I—"

"Oh, that doll carved out of lignum vitae, Piper?" the Back Bay female Croesus laughs. "Come off the prow of an old clipper ship. Hoopskirts an' all. Lifelike, huh? Well, that was me as a demure maid. I sat for the figurehead sculptor. Now come clean, Piper! Nothing could scare you wearing skirts, even an ogre!"

"I got startled awright," Snooty gulps. "The doll had her hand out like she hadn't seen me since last summer. For a mnute I thought I was Columbus. Scoop, we need some beer."

"Yeah, run along," Abigail says. "You are as much use around here as the seventh leg on a table. Now look, Eddie—"

OUTSIDE, Snooty wipes his pan and gets as near normal as any man in his own right mind could expect him to. "I don't believe in a character throwing a midget through a knothole in a fence on the first try, do you?" he asks me.

"That dictionary must have been opened to the page where the word concrete was listed when it hit you," I remark. "You are talking more demented than usual."

"That maid of Abigail's, Scoop. She should have many gees wooing her. By the perfume she uses, they are not just small income tax payers. Abigail maybe does not check references. Anyway, I made a date with the broad."

"I don't mind if she hasn't a friend," I says.

"She has," the gland case replies. "But she already goes steady with somebody. I hope the Greek's beer is extra warm today. I have a slight chill."

"It is a wonder Abigail didn't frappe you with that book," I remark.

Late that afternoon we take a gander at a copy of our own *Evening Star*. Iron Jaw is featured on page one as he has tagged a citizen for the murder and robbery at the Cheerful Credit Jewelry Company. It is none other than a partner in the firm named Calvert Prink. It seems that Iron Jaw forced the sparkler specialist's desk drawer after finding a cigar butt that was much too moist on one end to have been there too long.

"It says here, Scoop," Snooty says, "that Prink admits he was at the office in the wee small hours. Said he went there because he suddenly remembered he maybe hadn't locked up a particularly sizable dazzling dornick. When he got there he found that he had.

"It says here Prink had the jewels insured, and that he had been dunned for many debts of late, one being quite large. It seems he has not been amortizing the mortgage on his Wellesley Hills chateau often enough. A certain bank—anyway, he is charged with the crime and is held without bail. Looks like Iron Jaw has at least proven he has learned how to use a brain."

"Miracles do happen," I admit.

"Here is the story on Abigail. It is not a very good one, Scoop. Not the way I phoned it in at all. Those rewrite dopes—"

"Oh, it was in English?" I ask. "Good."

"There is no color to the story," Snooty sniffs and tosses the journal aside. I pick it up. Abigail Hepplethwaite avers she will defend herself to the last and will ask for no breaks, like any common taxpayer.

"Look, Snooty," I ventures. "What scared you at Abigail's house?"

"Awright, Scoop, I'll take you into confidence," Snooty replies. "When I went upstairs, I see Yvette sittin' in the hall. She has a shoe in her lap and is holding some sparklers in her hand. She is right by the window and the sun shone on those chunks of hot ice like—I ducked quick—I bet she figured maybe the cops would come to quiz her mistress. Everybody might be frisked an' she took no ch—"

"Snooty Piper," I says. "Even in a book that couldn't happen. There is a robbery on Tremont. We go to a house where an old doll who has bumped off a pedestrian with a motor vehicle while under the influ—has a maid who holds some of the

loot of the Cheerful Credit Company. Even I won't believe that."

"Truth has fiction behind the eight-ball and you know it," Snooty argues. "But it does sound silly, don't it? I think I will just forget it if I can."

"I wish you'd be more positive you would," I says.

"I wonder where is a good place to take Yvette on Saturday night?" Snooty thinks out loud.

"To a parking lot and leave her," I suggest. "She looks like the dollar a snifter type to me."

"But I got to keep a close watch on her from now on, Scoop. How will I find where are the rest of the diamonds, and who was her pals that knocked off the Cheerful Credit if—"

"It is no use," I sigh. "You really believe what happened that possibly couldn't actually, don't you? I'll look you up in the psycho ward, Snooty."

"Do that, Scoop. I think they allow visitors between three and—what am I sayin'?"

"I think I'll go home," I says.

ME AND Snooty meet Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy the next afternoon. The moose that walks like a man says he will have Prink cooked by sundown. "We had him in the grill room twice already," Iron Jaw brags. "He's about done now—say, medium rare. Another broilin' an' he'll come clean about who he hired to knock that safe off. His accomplishments."

"By the way, I hear Abigail Hepplethwaite is not sittin' too pretty, huh? They had her in the D. A.'s office this mornin'. Somehow her alibi is finding it hard to stick, ha! I'd like to see that cocky old goldilocks sweating it out in a hoosegow!"

"I'll tell her," Snooty says.

"Ah—er—no, please don't!" Iron Jaw says. "I'll do anythin' if you'll only forget—I was kiddin'."

"I'll tell her that, too," Snooty snaps. "But you'd do anythin'? Look, Iron Jaw, I have important business that might come up and I need credentials. Hand me your badge for a couple of days. You are goin' to lose it anyways."

"You look here, you!"

"Okay, I just asked," Snooty says. "Scoop, when we call to see Abigail, remind me to—"

"Here is the badge, Piper," Iron Jaw growls and jumps up and down like he is mashing grapes for wine. "You're goin' to be sorry you ever knew me someday!"

"I was very sorry yesterday," Snooty grins. "Well, thanks, flathead."

"A police badge," I sniff. "You will get a sweet rap some day, Snooty Piper, impersonatin' an officer."

"Who said Iron Jaw was one to impersonate?" Snooty asks. "Come along with me and Yvette when we go out, as a doll is generally left over in most every place."

"Sure. I know, Snooty. With harelips, cleft palates, subject to St. Vitus dance and all," I retort. "Count me out like I am a meatball who has absorbed Joe Louis's toughest punch!"

It is quite puzzling to me at times, the hold Snooty Piper has over me. It is not hypnotic, but I am sure I should have applied early in life as a keeper in a loon's lodge. I am on deck the night he meets the wench. I get a touch of the bends when I see how ready Abigail's maid is for the primrose path. I do not remember ever having ogled a cupcake who could distribute her duds so well over a perfect chassis.

Yvette suggests a place to begin not far away. "I might run into some friends there, and we should have fun," she says.

WE enter a bistro dubbed the Green Goose, after I have been slugged for the taxi tariff. It is quite a fleshpot. I am very glad no Pilgrim father is in shape to return to see what goes on not far from where he docked with the *Mayflower*. Yvette proves quite soon that she has the liquid capacity of a stevedore who has eaten salt mackerel for a week, and also has hollow legs. Also, she seems to be well known in the joint.

Many habitues nod to her and stop by to chat. One asks about a gee by name of Albie Murp. Yvette bites her lower lip and says if anybody asks once more, she will stab them with a shrimp fork. The name sound vaguely familiar to me. I notice Snooty keeps a raw oyster suspended between shell and oral cavity too long before downing the slippery bivalve.

"The party is dead on its feet," a blond babe complains. "Leave us have another round, huh? Can we, Mr. Piper?"

"The sky is the limit," Snooty four-flushes. I step on his foot and caution him, and he glowers at me.

People keep nodding to Yvette. I asks myself how a mere old dame's maid like her can be as popular as Lana Turner suddenly appearing at a redeployment camp in France. I am sure none of it is going over Snooty's noggin. I am more sure that Snooty cannot hit a jackpot with the first nickel. Soon a couple ambles over with another couple. The last mentioned pair seem to know Yvette very very well indeed.

"Why, how have you been, Sammy?" Yvette coos. "Long time, no spree."

"I am doin' okay, Babe," Sammy says. Somehow he seems like an off-color gee. "Why did you ever quit warbling in this night club, huh? It ain't so you are just a chambermaid now, is it? Who is buyin' a drink?"

"Mr. Piper," Yvette says. "It is his party."

Snooty sags in his chair and gets as pale as watered milk. I act quick. "It is his heart," I explain.

"He is not kiddin'," Snooty coughs up. "Take me out for a breath of fresh air, Scoop."

I take Snooty out to the foyer which is as far as a very capable-looking male wearing a tux will let us go. Snooty asks how much scratch I have.

"Three bucks and some odd change," I sniff. "How are you at a sink?"

Snooty shudders. "Scoop, you think now that she was in on the Cheerful Credit Company job? Why did the nightingale quit chirping in a night spot to become a menial for Abigail?"

"I wouldn't know," I says, "but so far you have no more on her than they put on babies when they christen them, Snooty."

Well, we go back and have some more hookers. Soon the waiter brings the horrible tiding and places it right on Snooty's plate. I get a gander at the bite which is forty-one-eighty, not including tip.

"Hah!" Snooty laughs. "I have lost my wallet. Believe it or not."

Yvette snaps her nice white teeth together. The waiter tosses a towel to a table and starts rolling up a sleeve and not to scratch a place that itches. "Pay-up, tinhorn!" he yelps. I says I want no trouble and to show me where the kitchen is.

Snooty flashes his police badge fast. "I just come in here to see if you were sellin'

uninspected steak here, and I found out!" he howls. "Where is the owner of this unpatriotic—"

The waiter throws a punch at Snooty, misses, and hits a character close to me. Yvette picks up a wrap and reticule and heads for an exit. I see a citizen reaching for a Roscoe just as Sammy takes over.

"Aw, cut the clownin'," he says. "Gimme the lousy bill. Here's a hundred."

"Tank's," the waiter grunts, and muffs the C note. It is wafted under a table, and Snooty Piper dives for it. It seems to take him long enough to have made a counterfeited out of the bill, before he finally comes out from under with it. Snooty looks like his heart has lost another valve or two.

"Nice of you to take care of the check, Sammy," he chokes out. "I will settle with you very soon."

"T'ink nothin' of it," Sammy says sourly. "Anythin' for a pal of Yvette's—an' a piker, fishface."

Leaving the Green Goose, I says, "I never was so mortified."

"You are lucky you wa'n't crippled," Snooty says. "Let's hurry as we must tag Sammy. Don't ask why!"

BEFORE I am aware of it, we are in a cab, following one containing Sammy and Yvette. "That was a joint where all kinds of walks of life meet, Scoop," Snoopy says. "Mostly crooked paths. It saves a detective many steps."

"I don't get it," I says irritably.

"You will," Snooty clips. "What I mean, it is a caution about places like the Green Goose. If you want to shoot a certain fox, it is always a good idea to look for it where foxes meet to disport for an evening, isn't it?"

"It is logic," I admit. "But it still makes no sense."

"Give me time," Snooty says.

"I haven't that long to live," I snap at him.

It is still a little hazy to me what took place afterward. We pull up in front of an apartment house about twelve blocks away, and give Sammy and his crony and Yvette time enough in which to get into the pueblo. Snooty leads me into the joint soon after. He takes a quick gander at the names over the mail boxes.

"This one here says he is Sammy Fortissimo," he says. "He is in 4 D, Scoop."

"It is a bad sign," I says. "It could be

Four Dead. Are you sure you got anythin' on—"

I get the answer much too soon. Snooty raps on a door and Sammy opens it up. He looks a little surprised, irked, and somewhat alarmed. He lets out a howl when Snooty flashes Iron Jaw's badge and says bluntly. "Where are the rocks, Sammy? Where is the legal tender you stole along with them? That C note was burnt on one corner. You know the safe was blown and upset the candles you got light to work by an—"

Yvette glances askance at Sammy, then stifles a scream. The tough character with Sammy pulls a rod. He starts blazing away just as I beat Yvette under the davenport. I hear Snooty cry out painfully, then yell for help.

A terrible to-do takes place. I wonder what kind of bullets the tough boys are using as they make very loud banging sounds when they hit. After about a year and a half, somebody pulls me out from under the sofa. I look up and see Snooty Piper with one ear covered with something that it not catsup. Both his eyes are trying to look at each other.

"I am glad I am not a dame, Scoop," he says. "If I wore earrings, I would have use for only one. It is nice Sammy ran a pool hall on the side, as I found me a whole box of ivories. I laid down quite a barrage, also Sammy and his pal."

I see the rough gees are horizontal. Cops begin knocking the door down. We shake the frightened doll like she is a dust mop and tell her to confess to being an accessory. "Yeah," Snooty yips. "How about them diamon's I caught you hidin' in your shoe, Babe?"

"Diamon's?" Yvette screams. "They was pieces of headlight glass, you dumb dope!"

"What!" I yelp. "Headlight glass! You work—for—Abigail an'—keep her talkin', Snooty!"

"You ain't kiddin'," Yvette warbles. "It is better than gettin' a murder rap. I took that job with the old hen to get hunk with her. She fired Albie Murp that time, so we couldn't get married. We had to wait.

While waiting, Albie found another babe he liked better. I swore I'd—"

"Well, bust my girdle!" Snooty exclaims. "Latins are very revengeful people, aren't they? Go on, sister!"

"I happened to see that hit-an'-run comin' home early that mornin'," Yvette owns up. "I didn't figure anybody was killed. Then when I get up to the house, I spot that old hag leavin' the garage. I hit on an idea. I go into the house, give her a cup of black java with a mickey in it. When she hits the hay, I go out and work on the front of her coupé with a pinch bar. I took some headlight glass down to where the guy is lyin' on the side of the road. Some of the stuff must have got in my shoe—"

"You are a female cad!" Snooty says, just as the cops break in. "Call Iron Jaw, Scoop. I am givin' him this one, as where would we git laughs if he got fired? It was his badge—"

"Snooty, I am proud of you!" I yelp. "For the very first time—"

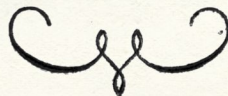
"Ransack the joint!" Snooty Piper tells the cops, after explaining how we all, including Iron Jaw, tripped up Sammy Fortissimo.

Well, Abigail is cleared and Prink is sprung. Me, Snooty Piper, and Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy are sitting in an office next to the D.A.'s early in the morn, with Sammy and his pal sweating it out in a barred boudoir. Iron Jaw is mumbling like a lonesome shepherd.

"Li'l pieces of glass—he thinks they are diamon's—an' he dates a dame who works for Abigail—who knows Sammy Fortissimo—who has one of the burnt bills that come out of—who pays a check with—Snooty, Piper, I don't think the D. A. or no jury will believe it."

"I am glad it is your headache, Iron Jaw," Snooty grins. "I would hate to have to tell a story like that. Well, I give you this case on a platter, you big ox. Look out for me as I will collect double."

Sometimes I think Snooty Piper, among other things, is something of a sadist. He says, "Scoop, it is up to me how Yvette comes out in this deal, huh? What wolf ever had a better setup?"



Pallbearer Mercy

By Emil Petaja



Intern Tommy O'Rourke's emergency call turned out to be deadlier for the doctor than for the gangland patient. And instead of completing his errand of mercy Tommy found himself headed out on an errand of murder.

SOME poor guy over on San Kalso Street stuck a knife through his gizzard, because his babe ran out on him. Ain't it a pitiful thing. Tommy?"

"Umm," said Tommy.

He wasn't listening. His fellow intern rattled on. Tommy O'Rourke's steady hands were busy on the wheel, sending Mercy Hospital's sleek grey ambulance skimming down the Fifth Street hill and into the Los Angeles downtown midnight traffic. The siren wailed its strident warning.

Tommy's youthful, square-jawed face was calm but serious. His blue-grey eyes were cool, alert. While his red-headed companion's babble continued, Tommy's mind busied itself dreaming up visions of cute Nurse Rosemary Callan.

Dreaming of her, his lips relaxed into a happy smile. Then he frowned. The road that leads to an M.D. shingle is a long

and hard one. Especially when you're doing it all on your own, as Tommy was. And interns make less money than Army privates.

Of course there was his uncle, Fortune Blaine. Inventor Blaine was pushing seventy. He had more money tucked away in that big fortress of a house he lived alone in than most people have troubles. It wasn't Tommy's way to beg for help, but when he decided that he had better marry Rosemary before someone beat him to it, he actually did try to put the touch on his uncle. That was yesterday. He didn't even get his foot in the front door. Evidently Fortune Blaine meant it when he said he hated people. That included nephews.

"The guy in the next room called the hospital," Red was spouting. "I got all the dope from the blonde at the desk. Gee, it's sad; that guy's girl is gonna be mighty sorry when she hears he tried to bump himself off, all on account of her."

Tommy grinned. "Red, you're too sentimental for this business."

"I take a personal interest, that's all!" Red bristled up. "I got a big heart. I feel these things."

He sent the big hack careening across the bridge, then swinging onto San Kalso Street, which was revealed by the light of the double row of sickly lemon-yellow street lamps to be a slumlike district of cheap beer joints and bottom drawer hotels. The King Leopold Hotel was probably the dreariest of the lot.

Since there was no clerk on duty at the little desk, Tommy pushed ahead up the narrow, black stairway; Red puffed along behind.

"Funny," Red commented. "Usually there's people around in a case like this. Curious gawkers."

"Maybe the management hushed it up," Tommy said. He added wryly, "They don't want to give their place a bad reputation."

On the third landing, Tommy led the way down the drab, malodorous hallway to the room number he had scribbled in his notebook. "322. Guess this is it." He turned the door knob and pushed through.

His glance showed him a small, musty bedroom garnished with hideous, splotched wallpaper. A dirty ragged curtain flapped at the window. Tommy's eyes went swiftly to the narrow iron bed in the corner. There was a man in it.

"Poor guy," Red cucked behind him.

Tommy went to the bed. The cover was pulled up closely around the man's neck. He reached down and lifted it gently back.

He stifled a cry. The man on the bed was not dying. Far from it. He was fully dressed. And as Tommy pulled back the blanket he found himself staring into the mouth of a revolver.

"Hey!" Red complained. "You ain't no suicide, mister!"

The man smiled roughly. "But you are."

TOMMY'S eyes burned on that revolver. Under his immaculate white jacket he felt his biceps go hard. "What's the big idea?" he asked softly, letting his satchel fall to the floor.

"Don't make a move," warned their alleged patient, in a throaty, bullfrog voice. The rusty bedsprings shrieked as he moved bulkily to step off. Tommy decided

otherwise. While the thick-necked "suicide" rocked on the sagging springs, Tommy leaped. His throw caught the phony midway, sent him crashing back, while the bed shivered.

The phony's hands flailed up. His gun blared. Plaster left the ceiling. The phony fought to bring the gun in line with Tommy's face, but the intern's grappling fists gave trouble. Tommy gouged and slashed at random until the phony toppled back against the bed, grunting thick curses. Tommy plunged in after him, fighting to acquire that gun.

His hand was on it, when he heard gunfire behind. Red's voice gave an agonized shout. Tommy whirled. Big, good-hearted Red was clutching at his chest, with his life's blood oozing between his fingers. He fought to speak, then fell.

Tommy's eyes lanced back of him to a closet behind the door. He hadn't noticed it before. There was a tall, pale-eyed man standing in its doorway, holding a smoking automatic. A haze filled Tommy's mind. Hate and pain for Red welled up into his throat and his eyes. He leaped up, screaming hoarsely.

That was as far as he got. He had a faint split-second's glimpse of the phony's slanting shadow on the wall, looming with gun uplifted. Then heaviness crashed on his head. He toppled into a black, bottomless pit.

When he came out of it, he felt turning wheels beneath him. He was riding. His head throbbed like white-hot fire, and to open his eyes was agony. But, as moments passed, he was able to assimilate knowledge. He now saw that he was lying on the stretcher in the back of his own ambulance. The tables were turned. He wasn't the doctor anymore!

Grinning a mirthless, painful grin, he stared ahead at the two men in the front seat. Obviously they were the two frauds who had lurked in that shoddy hotel room to nail the interns as they stepped in on their errand of mercy. They had shot Red. That was a bitter taste in his mouth, a seering pain in his rocking mind. But he must fight it. He must examine the situation, as he examined a patient before treating him. He must find out what he could do to outwit these human plague-bearers.

He strained to sit up, but the effort was too much. He sank back, groaning.

"Take it easy, Doc," the bullfrog voice

suggested. Tommy saw him lean back and wave his gun suggestively.

The man with the hoarse voice was squatty and heavy-set. His cauliflowered ears indicated years in the ring. But the way he kept glancing respectfully at his companion told Tommy that the tall man with the odd, pale eyes was the leader. Through the car mirror, Tommy glimpsed those albino eyes. They were canny. It was he whom Tommy must beware of most. The bull-necked one had brawn, but Pale-eyes had brain, as well.

"What's this all about?" he ventured, after a tense silence.

Bull-neck said, "You'll find out, sucker."

The other said, in a crisp voice. "Tell him, Foggy. We're getting near the house."

"Sure, Hager," Foggy said. He turned to leer back at Tommy. "Here's the layout. There's an old guy what lives in a house that looks like a castle, out here near the desert. He lives alone, and he's crawling with the green stuff. Only he don't like people, so he has a high wall, an electrified wall, around his joint. No way we can get in, see?"

Tommy nodded, frowning.

"We figure this way," Foggy continued. "A hospital intern, in his pretty white suit, can smuggle us in there. Now, here's how you'll do it."

FOGGY went into detail. As Tommy listened, his jaw tightened until it cracked. These crooks had sent out a false alarm to the hospital, using a crooked, rat's nest of a hotel for a blind. They didn't need both of them. It would be handier to handle just one. So they cut Red down in cold blood. Now Tommy was slated to assist them in burglarizing a helpless old recluse.

Tommy got another shock. A sudden turn in the road sent the car light flashing across the silhouetted towers of a big, walled residence miles from any other house. Tommy knew this citadel-like estate. He had been here, and sent away empty-handed, only yesterday. It was the home of his eccentric inventor-uncle, Fortune Blaine!

He shivered in the night wind, standing before those high iron gates, which he knew to be electrified and virtually impregnable. Two guns at his back prompted him to press the button below

the house telephone box. It would call his uncle to the phone.

He stared curiously up at the shaggy bulk that was Fortune Blaine's residence, while he waited. He didn't know much about his uncle. He'd never even seen him. Blaine was famous as the inventor of many gadgets, some practical and some ridiculous. The practical ones had gained him an immense fortune in the past forty years; the foolish ones had garnered him much publicity as a weird and eccentric old character.

A bitter wind snarled viciously through the elms that fronted the estate. Suddenly the answering telephone bell rang. Hager nudged Tommy with his gun barrel. "Answer it, and be careful what you say."

Tommy unhooked the receiver and listened.

"What is it?" his uncle's rasping voice piped.

"I'm from the Mercy Hospital. I have a patient in my ambulance who needs immediate treatment."

"Then who don't you bring him to the hospital?" the querulous voice demanded.

"I can't," Tommy said, just as he had been told. "I've had a sudden blowout, and the spare tire is shot. I've got to get this man indoors at once, so I can operate. It's a matter of life and death."

"That's too bad," the voice on the other end of the line said. "But I can't possibly let you in. I never let anybody in."

Tommy shielded the mouthpiece and turned to the gunmen. "He won't do it."

Foggy cursed. "He'd better do it," he gritted. "And you'd better think of a way to make him. Think fast, Doc!" His gun moved closer.

Tommy glanced at Hager. The tall man's eyes were merciless and cold. He nodded. "You said it was a matter of life and death. You were right. A matter of your death!"

Tommy mopped cold beads of sweat from his forehead, then picked up the receiver again. "Listen, Blaine. This is your nephew, Tom O'Rourke. And I tell you that you *must* let me in your house with my patient. I am a doctor, and I must adhere to the oath I took: *Anguis in herba* . . ."

His temples pounded violently as he waited. He glanced at Hager. There was a sharp gleam in those pale eyes, but his gun-hand remained steady. The silence

seemed to last eons. Finally his uncle's voice snapped, "All right. If you must, you must. Be ready when the gate swings open."

Tommy's fingers shook as he groped the receiver back on its hook. "He'll do it. We'd better get the ambulance ready. The gate won't stay open long."

They hurried to the car. A hidden mechanism sent the gates sliding back. Hager touched the gas pedal, the ambulance roared through. Behind them the gates whirred swiftly shut.

HAGER had decided that their little plot was to continue until he could get the lay of the land. Foggy crawled back on the stretcher, and pulled a sheet over him. When the ambulance braked before the big front door, Hager and Tommy lifted the stretcher out and carried it up the stone steps. Pallbearers for the doomed, Tommy thought.

"Remember," Foggy's muffled voice warned. "My gat's on you every second."

Tommy nodded succinctly as he knocked on the door. The old man in the shabby smoking jacket who opened it was wizened and brown. He had a brittle wiriness, and quick black eyes darted under his bristling white eyebrows. He surveyed the trio shrewdly, then, without a word, motioned them to follow him in and down a long, draughty hall.

He pushed open a side door leading to a small, white-walled bedroom. "Put him in here." He faced Tommy for a moment. His mouth gave a sudden jerk that was close to being a smile. "When you finish with him, nephew, come into my den. It's down the hall, around the ell. The last door. I want to talk to you."

With that, he stepped out and shut the door abruptly behind him. Hager locked it.

"Stupid old duck," Foggy snorted, tossing aside his sheet and standing. "Did I hear you say he was your uncle?"

"Shut up, Foggy," Hager snapped. His eyes needled Tommy. "That is true. He is your uncle. It must be true. He called you nephew, and he let you come in. That's proof enough. Fortune Blaine with a poor, hard-working intern for a nephew!" He smiled a sly, unsavory smile. "This puts an entirely new complexion on the case."

Foggy gaped puzzledly. "It does?"

"Yes," Hager said tersely. "Don't you

see? Tom O'Rourke has a tightwad of an uncle who refuses to help him so much as a penny's worth. So what? That makes young Tommy mad, and he decides to do something about it. But what? I'll tell you. He figures out a scheme to get into his uncle's house. He uses his job as intern to angle it. All by himself he does this!

"Inside, he kills his uncle and robs him. He's careless, though. He not only leaves his ambulance handy for the cops to find, but he leaves other proof that it was he and he alone who did it. Fingerprints on the weapon, for instance. Then he takes a powder. Heeled with that wad of stolen dough he simply disappears. Where? Who knows? The cops hunt for him everywhere, but evidently he is too smart for them. They never find him."

Foggy blinked. His forehead corrugated, while the wheels in his under-slung mind worked painfully to understand all this. "But where did he go?" he whined.

"Where did he go!" Hager spat savagely. "Why, you poor cluck! He is someplace out on the desert, with the coyotes and buzzards picking at his bones!"

Foggy gloated over this, while Hager paced the floor and chain-smoked. Tommy sat like marble. So that was it! Hager's agile mind had revamped the original plan into a better one. A plan wherein Tommy was to be smeared as his uncle's murderer. This way, Hager explained to his numb-witted partner, they wouldn't even have to leave town. They would be completely in the clear.

Tommy's blood turned to ice. Fortune Blaine, his uncle, was to die in a few minutes. And then it would be his turn. Yet, what could he do about it? If he tried to rush them, one of their guns would surely get him. There was no hope.

TEN minutes later, Hager ground his cigarette under his heel and said, "All right, O'Rourke. Lead the way." His gun flashed out of its shoulder rig.

Tommy traversed the dusky, angled hall, with the gunsters alert at his back. A faint light glowed in the room at the hall's terminus. That must be his uncle's den. At the door, he glanced at Hager. Hager nodded for him to enter.

Tommy stepped in. The room was quite large, looked old-fashioned but homelike, with serried tiers of leather-bound books,

a big crackling fire, and before it a comfortable wing chair. In that chair sat Fortune Blaine. Firelight cast flickering shadows on him, on his unkempt white hair and wizened, waxy features.

Tommy stood there before the mantel, with its big mirror. He wanted to shout a warning to the unsuspecting old man, who sat curled in that chair, quiescent, as if already dead. But before he could get three words out, Hager's bullet would slash into his spine.

The figure in the chair said, "Well, don't just stand there! Come over close to me, so I can talk to you."

Tommy stepped across the shadowed room. The old man didn't move. Tommy blinked at him in sudden awe.

"Did you finish patching up your patient?" his uncle asked.

"Yes."

"You like being a doctor?"

Tommy nodded.

The figure grunted. "Guess you think I'm a crotchety old fool. Like yesterday, when I wouldn't let you come in to visit me. Sometimes, when I'm not feeling well, I don't like to see anybody. I keep occupied with my books and my little inventions. I have quite a workshop in the basement." He chuckled. "I like to play around with gadgets. For instance, I rigged up that gate opener, and the telephone, myself. What do you think of my handiwork, nephew?"

Tommy set his teeth and said, "Uncle Fortune, whatever happens to me, I want you to know that I—"

A revolver cracked sharply behind him. The little figure in the armchair fell forward with a gentle sigh of reproach.

Tommy whirled on the gunmen. Hager's gun smoked as he pushed forward. Foggy trailed behind, wearing a wolfish leer. Tommy moved in front of his uncle's chair, stood there with clenched fists, as if to shield the old man's body.

Hager laughed dryly. "He probably hasn't got anything on him. We'll search the room."

They gave the crumpled figure only a casual glance, then proceeded on their search. Hager wasn't long finding what he was looking for. Pulling aside a velvet arras he disclosed a safe the size of a small bank vault, set in the wall.

"Cripes!" Foggy whistled.

"Think you can open it?" Hager snapped.

"Sure," Foggy bragged. "It's just one of those old-time tomato cans. Won't even have to blow it. Watch me." He stuck his gun in his shoulder rig, and blew on his hands as he stepped up to the safe door. His nimble fingers went to work on the dial, while he listened closely for the click of the tumblers.

Hager kept watch on Tommy. Tommy's eyes gleamed. His muscles were taut, expectant. Foggy worked furiously. There came a sharp click.

"Got it!" Foggy crowed, tugging the big door open.

"All right, go in," Hager told him. "Take only cash—and jewels, if there are any."

FOGGY nodded, grinning avidly as he moved into the darkness of the safe. Tommy heard him give little cries of delight at what he saw. Hager licked his lips in anticipation.

They waited. Suddenly the thug inside the vault gave a sharp scream. This was followed by a scrabbled falling sound. Hager's eyes went involuntarily to the safe. It was a mistake. Tommy was waiting tautly for just such a move. He leaped.

He lashed out, his fist hitting Hager on the right temple. Hager reeled back a step, but kept his feet. His face went purple with fury as he came on Tommy, using his gun as a whip. Tommy winced as the cold metal laid open the skin on his forehead. He reeled back, momentarily smothered with seering pain and cyclonic blackness.

Tommy bit blood from his lips in the effort to cling to consciousness. He must not go under! Slowly, very slowly, he wrenched himself away from that yawning pit. As in blurred slow-motion he saw Hager show his teeth as he raised his gun for the kill. Almost he felt the bullets blasting heat cut into him. This was death.

Suddenly Hager's pale eyes went wide with livid fear. He gave a rasping moan of terror. His revolver tore loose. Twice. Tommy wondered dimly why he didn't drop. Why didn't death snatch him?

Then fury mounted to Tommy's temples in a churning tide. His hate gave him the power to move. He lurched rakishly on the killer, with the sound of Hager's gun roaring in his eardrums. His bullet creased Tommy's scalp.

Tommy's fist hit Hager's wrist, forcing the weapon off him. Hager, breathing fierce little sobs, fought with a frenzied horror. Tommy crushed his fingers around that gun, then gave a mighty wrench. He had it. But before he could cradle it for action, Hager's fists were slashing his face. The gun dropped.

Tommy's inward drive matched the killer's. He battered out at Hager's foaming lips. Hager clawed at him like a madman. Something he had seen had driven his mind loose from its hinges. Tommy finally realized that. He dropped back, covering himself from those torturing lashes. Then, when Hager's burst of terrified hate was spent, Tommy cut loose with cool precision. He had full use of his mind, now. He drove into Hager with the same calculated endeavor he would use in his everyday job of cheating death.

He punched Hager back against the wall. The killer countered weakly, but Tommy's blood spoke for Red, as he unleashed every ounce of power in his lithe, healthy body. He bunched everything, finally, into one decisive smash. Hager's pale eyes rolled, and he slipped slowly down the wall without a moan.

Tommy stared down at him a moment. Then, breathing raggedly, he stumbled back to reassure himself about something he thought he had detected just before his uncle was shot.

"Nice work, nephew!" congratulated a piping voice behind him.

He turned and grinned. Yes. It was his uncle, all right. Fortune Blaine wore a look of roguish glee on his face, like a kid has who has just pulled off some clever prank.

"Thanks, Unc," Tommy said, trying to find enough buttons on his once-immaculate jacket to button it. "You showed up just at the right second."

His uncle nodded, chuckling gleefully. "He decided I was my own ghost. Then when he shot at me, and I didn't fall, he was sure of it. It scared him into in-

sanity. Foolish man! He ought to have known I was wearing my own patented bulletproof vest under this smoking jacket!"

He opened his worn jacket to display a shiny metal sheathing beneath it, which had two small dents in it. Tommy swabbed his torn face and laughed.

"You and your inventions; I suppose it was one of them that got Foggy?"

Blaine rubbed his plump hands together and nodded. "It isn't difficult to get in my safe, but it's quite another thing to get out! I suppose he tried to take down some of the boxes of currency from the shelves. His hands crossed a light beam and a knife sprang out of the wall and slashed his throat. Poor Foggy!" When Tommy shuddered, he blinked. "After all, I didn't ask him to go in there, did I?"

Shaking his head, Tommy stepped over to the big chair by the fire. The figure that looked uncannily like Fortune Blaine was still crumpled in it. Tommy raised its head up and unbuttoned its coat. The dummy was made of carefully painted wax, and had a small radio speaker concealed in its chest.

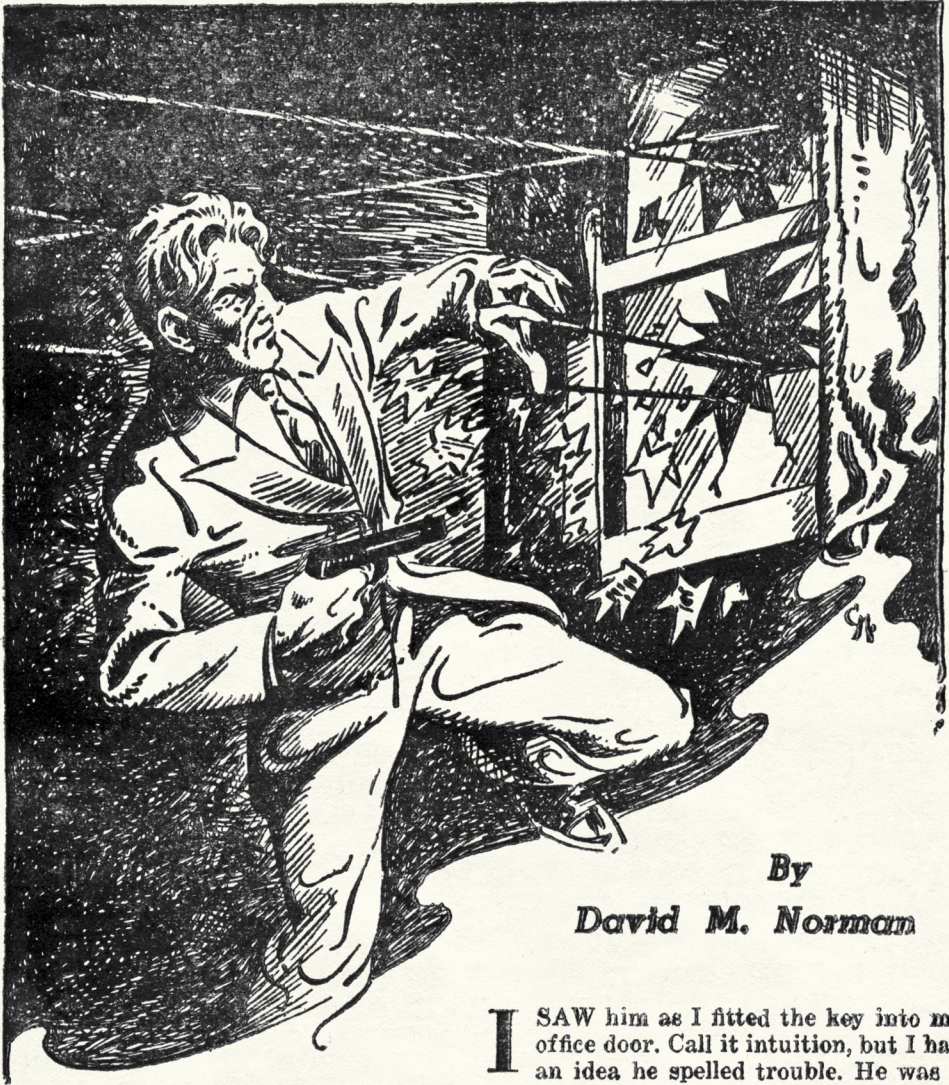
"Like it?" Blaine asked proudly. "I call him my radio double. The microphone is hooked up in the next room—right through that magic mirror above the mantel. The mirror is one of those one-way affairs. From the other side I can see everything that goes on in this room."

Tommy whistled, then grinned. "What a setup! Anyway, all these gadgets kept you from being murdered and robbed."

His uncle nodded gravely. "I knew it would happen sooner or later. And why not put my hobby to some practical purpose?" He put a trembling hand on Tommy's shoulder. "But if it hadn't been for you, they'd have got away with it. The thing that tipped me off was that Latin phrase you pulled on me over the telephone. *Anguis in herba*. After hearing that, I couldn't help knowing there was a snake in the grass somewhere!"



Fee for a Murder Magnet



By

David M. Norman

For a price, Private Detective Reid agreed to substitute for a homecoming hellion. Yet when that fee was paid in hot lead instead of cold cash, Reid had to play out the role at his own expense or receive a wooden coffin bonus.

I SAW him as I fitted the key into my office door. Call it intuition, but I had an idea he spelled trouble. He was a gawky looking guy—like me. The lettering on my office door said, *Theodore Reid, Investigations*. That didn't mean much. I served jury notices, sometimes, to make coffee and.

I kicked a crumpled paper bag, relic of someone's lunch, out of the way and wondered when I'd have enough cash to rent a decent office in a modern building.

The guy came in right behind me. As I was sitting down, he stepped in front of my desk.

"Are you Reid?" he asked.

"Yeah. Can I do something for you?"

"Stand up," he said.

I didn't like the commanding note in his voice, but I stood up anyhow. The guy came around the corner of the desk and moved up beside me. I got it then. He was comparing our heights, which were about even. Neither of us would have needed a ladder for a good second-story job.

"You'll do, if you've got nerve," he said.

"I don't shoot more than one guy a week." I sat down again, and he went around to the other side of the desk.

"My name is Don Corey," he explained. "I've spent three days looking over private eyes to find the right one. You seem to be it. I have to have a man as tall as I am. The features won't matter, just the height and weight. I've been away from town since I was fifteen, so it won't make much difference."

"Did you say town or asylum?" I asked him.

He laughed. "I don't blame you, Reid. Here are the details. I just inherited a big estate down south. My grandfather left it to me out of sheer spite because he hated me, but he hated the others more. When I was fifteen, they all ganged up on me, and I was thrown out over a matter of stealing and wrecking a car. I never went back, but I'm going back now. The estate is mine. They're living on it, and I'm going to make history repeat itself in reverse."

"Why not call in the local gendarmes?" I asked him. "They'll throw anybody you say off the place."

"It isn't quite so easy. If I die, the estate is divided among the rest of them. Four of 'em. They've lived there all their lives and won't like working. In fact, I think they'll dislike it enough to see that I never get a chance to throw them out. Follow me?"

I nodded. "What do you want, a body-guard?"

"No. That's the obvious way. I said it would take guts. They haven't seen me in eighteen years. All they'll remember is that I'm very tall and lean, just like you. I want you to go down there and pose as me."

I leaned back, contemplating the idea and not liking it.

"Targets come high, pal. A hundred a day and expenses."

"You're hired, and if you're smart, you won't get hurt. All I want you to do is

duck fast if they start shooting, and find out who is the trigger boy. Then I'll take over. Brother," he rubbed his hands, "will I take over!"

THAT was how I found myself, first on a jam-packed train, and then in utter isolation at a dinky little railroad station in a sleepy town. I couldn't believe it, but at nine o'clock every blasted light in every house was dark.

There seemed to be nothing better to do than pick up my suitcase and dog it. I knew the estate was on the outskirts of town, about a mile and a half away. There were big rusty gates and a high fence around it. Here were some signs of life. Lights!

The whole place looked as if the inhabitants were the laziest people on earth. The porch steps sagged. Paint was peeling off what had once been the familiar pillars of a southern mansion-type house. But the brass knocker worked and made a terrific clatter. I kept on hammering with it.

The big test was coming now. Don Corey had showed me pictures of everyone I'd probably find in the place. They'd been older and less apt to change over those years than Corey. I thought I could spot each one.

A stolid, squat guy opened the door and glared at me. I knew him at once.

"Hello, Uncle Stan," I said casually. "Am I welcome in my own house?"

He peered at me for a moment, then snapped on the porch light. He stared some more.

"So that's what you look like now. Can't say it's so much. Come in if you want to."

I grinned and passed by him, half expecting to feel one of those thick arms wrap around my neck. Uncle Stan didn't look like a man who bothered to plan ahead very much—like shaping alibis for murder.

In the living room, which wasn't so big—only about half the people in crowded Grand Central Station could have fitted here—sat the other three characters. I grinned at each one and wondered why I hadn't made the ante two hundred a day. It was going to be worth it.

I bowed to each in turn. "Cousin Alan." He was the squirt of the family. Runty with a wrinkled face like an old man's

though he was about my own age. A six months old kangaroo would have felt at home in the pouches under his eyes.

"Jim Forbes." I glanced at the next one. "How are you?"

"Nicely," Forbes answered, "until just now."

Forbes was thickset too, but soft with the obesity brought on by laziness. He had pale grey eyes that never changed. Not even when he smiled or got sore, as I learned later. Those eyes were the true beacon of his character. Behind them lay brains and animal cunning.

The only one who hopped up and came to greet me was Emory Sterling. He was some kind of a fourth cousin twice removed. Not a bad-looking man either. Emory had a wide, genuine smile.

"Welcome home, Don," he said. "It's been a long time. I'd never have known you if we met head on. Except for that lankiness which I remember."

"Hello, Emory," I shook hands with him. "I'm glad to find one human being here."

Stan Archer, who had opened the door for me, sidled forward and his chin was outthrust. It was quite a chin. Three layers deep.

"I resent that, Don. Emory can welcome you without fear because he has nothing to lose. He owns the guest house clear, and you can't put him off. But the rest of us. . ."

I had to act as I thought Don Corey would have taken this. Sore, bitter and vindictive. Anyhow, it was best to make them show their hands as soon as possible.

"Yeah," I said in a flat voice. "I can't do anything about Emory. Maybe I don't want to. But the rest of you can pack and scam. This place looks like something in Japan after the atomic bombs came down. It's got to be cleaned up before I can offer it for sale. That's going to cost me plenty because you lazy critters didn't have enough ambition to even mow the grass. Twenty-four hours, you've got."

I PICKED up my bag and hiked for the staircase. It was quite something, wide and big, curving to the left with a graceful sweep, and just meant for somebody in a hoop skirt to descend with slow, impressive steps.

I climbed it, with a cold feeling of horror beginning to set against the nape of

my neck. Those birds were sore enough to kill. They'd have to do it cleverly. Make it look like an accident, because they'd hardly continue enjoying this estate if they were locked in a death cell. I didn't blame Don Corey for wanting someone else to take his place.

I knew where my room was. Corey had described the place in complete detail so I'd have no occasion to fumble the ball. I began to unpack, and the first object I took out of my bag was a thirty-eight. I felt safer with that handy.

Someone knocked on the door. I let Emory Sterling in. The one man of them all whom I trusted. He had some envelopes in his hand.

"These came during the last couple of days, Don. That's why we were expecting you." He threw the letters on the bed and sat down. "Nice warm welcome, wasn't it?"

I shrugged. "How could I expect anything else? You're the only one who is sitting pretty. You were smart, Emory, in not letting go of the guest house you bought from Grandpa."

"It splits up the estate pretty much," he said. "I often wondered if that's why the old man sold it to me for a song. So as to make trouble after he was dead. We're a strange breed, Don. We were bred on trouble, weaned on double-talk and deceit. And the worst one of us was Grandpa. He willed you the estate because he knew you were tough and would kick the others off. I'll bet, in that graveyard behind the house, he's got one ear cocked for the first sounds of the riot."

I sat down too. "There will be no riot," I said. "The others get out of here tomorrow. Willingly—or I'll kick them out. I don't owe those people a thing."

Emory smiled in that lazy, good-natured way of his. "Well, there are two points to any argument. You weren't exactly lily-white when you lived here as a boy. The village still talks about you. You'd probably feel the earth shake from their shudders if they knew you were back."

Emory got up and walked to the door. "I might add," he looked back, "that you didn't get much in this estate. It's as run down as a European dictator. Good-night."

I smoked a few cigarettes and looked out of the window onto the back of the

estate. It was a dark night. I couldn't see much.

I picked up the envelopes which Don Corey apparently had arranged to be forwarded here. They all had to do with the estate. From lawyers, the local tax office, and the probate court. They all wanted money. One was from a real estate firm in a nearby big city. They wanted to see Corey at his convenience.

I had no qualms about opening and reading them. In the first place each had been steamed open beforehand and crudely sealed. The Messrs. Stan Archer, Alan Corey, Jim Forbes, and maybe even Emory Sterling were letting nothing get past them. I put the letters away and started removing my shoes.

Something hit my window with a slight clatter. A handful of dirt, I figured. I walked over to the window, and for one of the few times in my life, played the idiot. I was nicely silhouetted there, with the light behind me.

The next thing to hit the window didn't make any chattering sound. It smashed the glass above my head and showered some slivers down my neck. I just went limp at the knees and fell as fast as the weight of my body brought me down. My own gun was in my hand, but I didn't dare raise up to hunt a target because I'd be the more perfect one.

I hopped away from the window on my knees until I was in the middle of the room. Then I got to my feet and streaked for the door. I went out of it fast, raced along the balcony above the big reception hall, and looked for any of the others in the house. Nobody came out. Maybe they hadn't heard the shot. I estimated it came from nothing bigger than a twenty-five.

I did get the idea, as I ran down the staircase, that they might all be in on it and meant to confuse the issue by not showing up at all. I didn't care much. My idea was to get my hands on whoever pumped that slug through my window.

I opened the front door and left it open, barged across the porch, and leaped the east railing. I reached the back of the house about two minutes after the shot had been fired. Someone was running through the brush, and I cursed my incompetence in not bringing a flash along.

I tried to follow those sounds, but it was almost impossible. I guess I was about a hundred yards from the house when I heard another shot, and then two

more. Small, vicious little cracks from the same gun which had been fired at me. I couldn't make out if they came from inside or outside the house.

REVERSING myself I rushed back to the house. Stan Archer was in the hallway. Alan Corey, armed with a fireplace poker, was starting up the stairs. On the landing, looking down, stood Jim Forbes.

"The moment you come home, all Hades breaks loose," Stan Archer growled. "Why didn't you stay away from here?"

"Because this is my property and I'm taking over," I shouted and ran up the stairs.

I stopped at the landing. What was I after anyhow? I turned around.

"Who fired those shots?" I demanded. "Which of you is carrying a gun?"

From below, Alan Corey waved the poker. "Do you think I'd bother with this if I had a gun? We don't know who did the shooting. We don't even know where it came from."

I wondered where Emory Sterling could be. At the same instant I noticed that the door to my room was either closed or else someone had put out the lights. I ran there. The door was closed and the lights were out too. I opened up, my gun ready. I snapped on the lights.

I knew then why Emory Sterling hadn't put in an appearance. He was slumped on the floor beneath the window. There were three bullets through the front of his head, and the window glass was now all broken out of the frame.

Examining him was a mechanical act. I knew he was dead before my fingers searched for a pulse. Jim Forbes stepped into the room and let out a banshee screech. That brought the others. I got up off one knee and faced them. They were forming a barrier across the room. Their eyes glinted. I began suspecting what was about to come next.

"So you haven't changed," Stan Archer said softly. "Not one bit, except now you play for keeps. What do you intend to do—murder all of us?"

I laughed. It was a harsh laugh and sounded strange to my own ears. I took them all into the living room. There was a telephone on the table. It was no use keeping up the pretense now. They'd

tipped their hands. I called the local telegraph office.

I said, "Take this message," and gave the address Corey had told me to wire. "Emory Sterling murdered. Mistaken for you. Come down and take over. I'll have murderer wrapped up. Confirm by telephone."

Stan Archer was the first to recover from his amazement. "Then you are not Don Corey?"

"My name is Reid," I told them. "Private Detective. Corey had an idea something like this would happen, so I came down first to study the situation."

"And you believe one of us killed Emory?" Jim Forbes derided. "That's your mistake. Because while we hate one another, we all liked Emory."

"Maybe so," I agreed. "Emory, however, was killed by mistake. The murderer figured that was me looking out of the window. For some reason Emory entered my room after I'd left to look for the sharpshooter who'd taken one play at me and missed. Emory saw the broken window—bullet shattered—and stood there. The killer let go again and plugged Emory. Now, which one of you did that?"

Nobody answered, but the way they looked at one another indicated each thought the other guilty. I began questioning them. Not one had an alibi. They'd all been in their rooms, according to their stories. I let them stay there and went upstairs.

I looked in on what was left of Emory Sterling. Now I had more time to study the situation. Sterling had, for some reason, slipped into my room. He'd gone to the window. Outside was a tree with a limb below the window.

I studied the wounds and saw that they were straight shots, smashing through the forehead and still lodged in the skull. There were even vague traces of powder burns. Probably from the last shot which had been fired through the window, minus glass by that time.

I heard someone coming up the stairs very softly and took a quick peek. It was Jim Forbes. I drew back before he could see me. He walked lightly and swiftly down the hall and disappeared into his own room.

I gave him about two minutes, then I tiptoed toward the same door. I knelt and looked through the keyhole. It was an old house with big locks and big keyholes. I

couldn't see much, but what my eyes did spot was interesting. Forbes was hurriedly wiping off a pair of white shoes. And using a good shirt as a polishing cloth. Probably the first cloth he came upon. He was in too much of a hurry to worry about ruining the shirt.

I got out of there and let Forbes think he had successfully completed his work and get downstairs again. Then I entered his room. The shoes were all cleaned up, but I hunted the shirt. It had plenty of green stains on it. That's what Forbes had been wiping off—green stains. Grass stains! He'd been out on the estate and didn't want anyone to know it.

I WALKED out of the house, went around to the back and clambered up that tree. It wasn't hard. The branches were low and heavy, supporting my weight easily. I stood erect on the branch below the broken window and was gun-level with it.

Quite apparently, the killer had fired at me from the ground, realized that was a mistake, and climbed into the tree for a better shot. Only he'd killed Emory instead. A natural error. He'd have been nervous, ready to shoot at the first object which appeared in the window.

I got down to the ground again and studied it for footprints. There were none. I did see that the grass was trampled, but you don't leave prints on grass.

I thought of the steps I'd heard running away from the house just before the shooting started. The killer couldn't have caused them, because he was in the tree by then. So there must have been two of them.

I returned to the house in time to get a phone call from Don Corey. He was flying down and would arrive early in the morning. He begged me not to notify the local authorities until he was on hand. I didn't like that, but Corey was footing the bill, so I let him have his own way.

Then I went after the others again, without any luck at all. They were the type who wouldn't say a word. It was hopeless to try and trip them up. I stalked out of the room and went upstairs. There was a murder gun to look for. I found it in Forbes' room, hidden in the water compartment of his private bathroom. I didn't bother to look for prints. In this day and age, there hardly ever are any on a murder gun.

Stan Archer was standing on the porch as I went down the stairs. I heard a car grind along the gravel drive and hurried out, but too late. The car was already going through the gate when I reached the porch.

"Who was it?" I demanded.

Stan said, "Forbes. He thought it might be a nice gesture if he went to the airport and picked up Don. You kept us awake half the night with your confounded questions. Don's plane will arrive in half an hour. It's quite a distance to the airport."

"All right," I said, "if Forbes comes back which I doubt. You and Cousin Alan can go to bed if you like. I'll stay up and wait."

"But what about that—that corpse?"

"Let it stay there." I shrugged wearily. "Corey doesn't want me to do anything until after he gets here."

The two of them went upstairs, and I got to work on the telephone. When Forbes drove back, with Corey in the front seat beside him, I was all ready. I yelled for Alan and Stan to come downstairs.

Don walked in and came directly to me, with extended hand.

"I'm sorry Emory got it, but I'd rather it was him than you. Or me. Forbes told me the entire story. Who did it, Reid?"

I slipped a hand into my pocket and drew out cuffs. Before Forbes could make a move, I slapped them around his wrists and pushed him into a chair.

"Forbes." It was dramatic, I suppose. "He was on the estate when it happened. I saw him cleaning up his shoes. I found the murder gun in his room, and I'm going to turn him over to the local cops."

FORBES buttoned his lips firmly. Corey tried to make him talk, but not a word came out. Corey turned to me.

"Reid, you're a private detective. If I pay you off and you clear out, the case is no longer of interest to you. Is that right?"

"You're the boss," I told him.

"Then leave the rest of this to me. I think these dear relatives of mine have learned a lesson. After all, I don't want any scandal. We can take care of Emory's body. If he is missed, we'll say he left after I arrived."

"It would work," I agreed. "But that means a killer goes free."

"He's related to me," Corey explained. "Despite the way I hated them all, I can't forget we're all in the family. I'll give you a thousand dollars to forget the whole thing, go back to New York, and pretend you never left there."

"You're the boss," I repeated and took his ten one hundred dollar bills. I put them into my pocket. "From here on, I accept no responsibility for what happens."

I unlocked the cuffs on Forbes' wrists and grinned down at him.

"Did you really believe I thought you killed Emory? Look, a detective searches for a motive. You have none. For killing Don, yes, but Don never was meant to be killed. Suppose you tell us what you saw on the estate last night?"

"What do you mean by that?" Don elbowed toward me.

I grinned some more. "You killed Emory. You came down here by plane. Perhaps arrived ahead of me for all I know. At the address you gave me and to which I wired, some pal was waiting. He relayed the message to you down here. You telephoned, but that call didn't come from New York. It came from a city ten miles away."

"You meant to kill Emory all along, because he owned that little guest house smack in the middle of this estate. So long as Emory refused to sell, you couldn't get rid of the estate to that real-estate company which wants to buy it at a fancy figure. I talked to them. They wrote you a letter and I got it."

I glanced at Forbes. He was beginning to tremble.

"And Forbes," I said, "was out on the estate for some reason. He saw you climb the tree, kill Emory and get away. That's why he pulled out of here to meet you. He wanted to tell you he intended to either remain on the estate or get a cut from the proceeds of the sale. So I framed Forbes. You put the gun in his room, of course. You were in the house, hidden, until it was time to strike. Then you contacted Emory, probably by whispering to him from outside his bedroom door. You told him to come to my room if he heard any shooting."

"Then you fired through the window from the ground. I breezed out, as you knew I would. Emory came in and you

let him have it, jumped out of the tree and concealed yourself. By that time I was blundering around far behind the house. Forbes was an unexpected, but welcome detail. He drew me away."

Corey laughed. He turned to his relatives. "I believe this man is mad. The whole solution is clear to me now. He killed Emory so he could get more money out of me for taking such a big risk. Now if he tried to get away and we stopped him and he—had an accident. . ."

I didn't even reach for a gun. "Nice quick thinking, Don," I said. "But a bit late. The local sheriff and some of his boys have been here for at least half an hour."

There were guns poking through some of the windows. They all sat down heavily.

"You double-crosser," Corey shouted. "I might have known a cheap private detective—"

It was my turn to laugh. "You were

funny, Don, the way you tried to pull strings to save Forbes after I framed him. You had to, because he knew too much. It wasn't a bad murder scheme, as far as they go. Only I was sure you did it the moment I climbed into that tree. None of the others were tall enough to aim a gun level at Emory. Their bullets would have plowed upwards. They wouldn't have been able to reach close enough to create powder burns. Their arms aren't long enough. When you selected me to help unknowingly with this kill, you made a mistake in hiring a man as tall as you. I was able to make measurements nicely."

The sheriff and two of his men came into the room. I passed them on my way out. I turned at the door.

"I'll mail you a receipt for the thousand dollars, Don," I said.



The Killer's Home Companion

By Norman A. Daniels

(Continued from page 44)

"So the doctors tell me," King chuckled. "They warned me away from tobacco and alcohol and I've obeyed quite well, too. But, you know, after the past twenty-four hours, I think I could stand some refreshment. Will you have a drink with me. Lieutenant? A couple of drinks. And do you happen to have a cigar?"

"Here is your cigar." Archer took one from his pocket. "If it's no good, I'll brain the man who gave it to me. As for the drink, I don't know."

"How's that?" King queried with a puzzled frown.

"Oh, hang this job," Archer groaned. "You won't want to drink with me. At first, I refused to believe your confession, I laughed at you. Now it's the other way around. I know the truth, and

I've got to place you under arrest, Mr. King. For attempted murder. Crime cannot go unpunished, even a crime as necessary as yours.

"I don't know how the D. A. will feel about it. I hope they treat you kindly but, I'm an officer. You did attempt to murder Vogan and so. . ."

King applied flame to the cigar and laughed as smoke curled around his head.

"If you trust me enough not to put handcuffs on, Lieutenant, I'll still buy you that drink and feel honored doing it. Certainly I tried to commit a crime. I've always said so. Yet, there is a great deal of satisfaction in knowing that what I actually did isn't an offense punishable by death. Let's go!"

Midnight's Deadly Duet

By Rex Whitechurch

Fred Stringer sought to mind his own door-rattling business when he witnessed that trigger duel. But when his night-watchman route took him to the root of the two-man feud, Fred's business made him the skeleton-rattling target of both cops and killers.

BIFF CALLOWAY, the Catfish Man, and Big Lou Stoel, the ex-pug who had nearly won the lightweight championship a few years back, started shooting before anyone could stop them. They weren't very good shots. But Biff ran away as soon as his gun was empty, no doubt afraid of Lou's fists.

The shooting occurred in front of the Buffalo-Apex Saloon on lower Edmond Street. The cops got there just in time to see Lou poking away his gun. I was one of the eye-witnesses, but there wasn't much to tell. All I saw was them banging away at each other. Lou didn't tell who his opponent was in the gun battle. For certain reasons I didn't, either.

For one thing it was dark. You know how they put out the neons and dimmed the store-fronts. We had a good excuse. Even Detective Ike Murphy of the homicide squad couldn't make me say it was the Catfish Man. I took it that was how Big Lou stood. I didn't want to get him in a jam.

"I was just standin' here by this mailbox." Lou shuffled around, with his thick neck bowed.

"The guy came out of the alley and started cutting loose at me. I figured he



meant business. I carry a gun—have a permit to carry it, bein' I'm a guard and driver of the armored truck that packs the money from business houses to the banks. I kept crackin' away at him. Then I heard this guy scam. He ran back into the alley. But I swear he started the trouble."

I couldn't say as to that. I was just a night watchman, a door-rattler. It was my duty to see that the merchants didn't leave their lamps on. If they forgot to lock their doors, I did it for them. I carried keys to more than fifty doors.

Well, they took Lou over to Police Headquarters on Mary Street. Chief of Detectives John Gunn threw a thousand questions at him, and half as many at me. When they turned us loose and we were clumping down the broad steps side by side, Big Lou said, "Thanks, Fred. I'll make it up sometime."

"Heck," I said unconcerned, "it wasn't much. You did me a favor once, Lou. You grabbed my kid brother out from in front of a rushing automobile, and rolled over a dozen times with him in your arms. I would have been screwy if I had told them it was the Catfish Man."

Secretly, I would have been just as nuts if I had said that Big Lou had started the fireworks. You see I figured neither Lou nor Biff Calloway had been injured in the gun fight. Now if there had been a slaying, that would have been different.

I'm a law-abiding citizen, making fifty bucks a week shaking doors. I've got a wife and two kids, an honorable discharge from Uncle Sam's Army, and I'm thankful to be home, just rattling doors. Get the picture?"

LOU wanted to buy me a drink, but I declined. I'd promised Stella I'd never touch it. Lou stared at me kind of funny, and drew me over to a card table in the Buffalo. I took a white soda pop. Lou was talking low, with something burning in his eyes that I had never seen there before.

He was whitish, you couldn't see his eyebrows. There was a pinkish tint to his complexion, maybe like an albino's. But Lou's eyes were ice-cold, blue as sun shining through blocks of ice. His nose was almost flat; lots of tiny scars were hidden in his face, healed over, like white worms that wriggled when his muscles

moved. He wore a blue uniform, after the fashion of the city harness cops. The gun was on a wide cartridge belt around his waist.

"Don't tell 'em it was Biff Calloway," Lou said, his thin lips barely moving. "I've got my reasons, Fred. I'll give you a hint, though. It's over a woman. I don't think he'll tackle me again—ever again, Fred."

Nor did I. Their woman business was their own mixup. That black-haired widow of the Catfish Man was a stunner. She'd driven him out because he drank to excess, because she was ambitious for better things. She lived in a white, vine-covered cottage with a red slate roof on the river bank. It was like a palace inside. And the way she dressed—

Every time I looked at Amelia Calloway, I thought of Cleopatra.

I watched rain fall on the plate-glass window of the Buffalo. The running drops were like pieces of a rainbow on the sparkling glass. Outside, insects formed clouds before the murky light globes.

I saw Fat Ellis peering at Lou. Fat Ellis had managed Lou when the fighter was in his prime. He'd cost Lou the championship, was a mealy mouthed, irresponsible wit of the local taverns. He hated Lou.

"I hope you rot in jail for shootin' at that guy, whoever he was," Fat Ellis sneered.

"Funny old duffer," Lou said, as if to himself. Then he rasped, "Go on before I push your face in."

"Try it," Fat Ellis said, and slithered away.

We moved to the door. "Just tryin' to steal Biff Calloway's ex-wife isn't any great crime," I said, and nudged Big Lou in the ribs. "They've been properly divorced. She won't have anything more to do with Biff. I hope you marry her, Lou, before she gets big and fat and becomes another Tugboat Annie."

Lou scratched his flat nose. "Amelia was born on the river, Fred. She wouldn't live away from it. With all the modernization, she's still a river woman. She can row a boat, swim like a fish, and dance all night in clothes she imports from Chicago. She's a swell-looker, she's a natural, but she belongs to the river. Yeah, I've gone overboard for her. The

Catfish King would like to have my heart for it."

I wished Lou good-night, sauntered to the door, and took up where I had left off rattling doors. It was while I was working my beat down close to the river, sloughing through a cobblestoned alley, that I met up with a shock that knocked me off my pins.

FLASHING my light I nearly stepped in the dead man's face. It was white, ghastly. The puffed eyelids were half-closed. Steel gleamed through them, steel that had begun to coat with frost—the chill of death. Those eyes hadn't seen anything for an hour or more. Yeah, it was what was left of Biff Calloway.

Kneeling there in the rain—it had about stopped now, for it was close to an hour since I'd left Lou at the Buffalo—I ran my hands over his shirt front. The Catfish Man hadn't been bad to look at in his prime, and a remnant of his good looks remained. He had black curly hair and a cleft chin, high cheekbones in a sun-browned face. His attire, although the denim of the riverman, with rubber boots, was clean, his shirt freshly laundered.

There was a blue bullet hole approximately four inches below his heart. Blood had grown too thick to run on his shirt front. He wasn't bleeding any more.

Stymied, I couldn't think. For the first five minutes I was dead as Biff Calloway. It was three blocks to the Buffalo, one block to the river. From where I stood I could see the bridge lights on the water, and the amber lamps of Amelia Calloway's cottage.

I found no other wound on the fisherman, just the one where Lou's slug had struck him.

I thought to myself, *Lou's in for it now. He killed Biff Calloway!*

I felt cold. There was a film of clammy sweat on my brow. I was in for it, too. In withholding information from the police, I'd stuck my neck out. I hadn't realized, of course, that death would step in to twist things out of shape.

It was my solemn duty now to tell the truth, to backtrack, because Big Lou had fired the first shot. Calloway hadn't reached for his gun until Lou's revolver began to speak. No doubt Lou's first slug had hit Biff. Then it was Biff Calloway who had fired in self-defense, not Big Lou

Stoel. That made it nothing less than cold-blooded murder.

I wondered if Lou knew that he had hit Biff the first shot. Why had he tried to murder the Catfish Man? Of course, Lou hadn't expected Biff Calloway to return, or to be able to return his fire.

My own position wasn't an envious one. For two reasons. If I told what I knew, they would jail me for withholding vital information and probably take my job away from me. The second reason, I would brand myself so that I wouldn't be able to get another job in town. I had a wife and two kids to feed.

What had started out to be a perfectly harmless attempt to befriend a man who had risked his life to save my kid brother, had terminated in a murder that had been cunningly plotted by the one for whom I'd made the sacrifice. Within the next few minutes I would have to make a decision.

THE cold sprinkle of rain fell in my face and trickled inside my coat collar. I heard the first drum of raindrops on a nearby tin roof. Those clouds of insects still swirled around the streetlamps. The sky was sullen black, with vivid forks of lightning stabbing across the ebony sea. A million Stygian devils lurked in the wet gloom of the alley. There was a pungent smell of roasting coffee from the wholesale grocery firms.

The closest place to a phone was a small beanery that stayed open all night a block up Edmond Street. Of course I had keys to many doors and access to phones, but I didn't feel it wise to use any of them. I'd always been too modest, I guess.

I could go up to the little restaurant and call police headquarters for a nickel. The call would bring a flock of police cars, screaming sirens, and reporters. In other words, this would spell Big Lou's doom.

I fished around in the sticky blackness for Biff's gun. It was in his holster, all right. Suddenly I changed my mind. This wasn't my job, it was for the cops, for the coroner. Particularly, it was for the homicide squad. By messing in this I might clutter up things, so they'd be more difficult to straighten out. I'd done enough harm as it stood.

Mopping the rain and sweat out of my face, I muttered, "Well, Freddie, here

goes nothing!" I slued around and directed my leaden feet toward the lighted windows of the little beanery on Edmond.

Stepping inside, I said to those on the red leather stools, "You'll have to cut out the juke box so I can phone police headquarters. I found a dead man a minute ago—"

I held my nickel in my fingers, hearing my heart thumping madly against my ribs. Taking down the receiver, I waited for the damned blaring band to stop jitterbugging. You could almost hear the lunchers breathing as they watched me, tensely, with drawn faces that looked spooky in the lights.

I stared at the old nickel between my thumb and forefinger. What's a nickel? It's not much, certainly. But in this case it was worth a man's life. It meant the lethal tank at Jefferson City for Big Lou Stael.

There would be no getting that nickel back, no retracting the clink of the coin in the metal box. Nope. When she dropped, it would be like lowering the curtain on the last act of Big Lou's life.

Clunk! The slug hit the bottom, rang metal on metal. Then I heard Ike Murphy's coarse, sepulchral voice say, "Booking desk."

It was all I could do to keep the receiver from sliding from my sweaty fingers. That was one monkey I was afraid of. I'd gotten him instead of the desk sergeant.

"Murphy," I said, trying to keep the pounding of my heart from making me deaf, "this is Fred Stringer. I've found a dead man. Yeah. Up in the alley, off Edmond, between the one and two hundred block."

"Who the hell is he?" Murphy's voice sounded cold, impersonal. "You know him, Fred?"

I swallowed hard. "Yes, I know him," I said, making it all in one gushing breath. "It's Biff Calloway!"

"Damn!" Murphy said.

The rain machine-gunned the window. It had started to pour down again.

"You go on back there and wait, Fred," Murphy said. "Stand guard over that corpse. Biff Calloway, dead as he is, is mighty important."

IT WASN'T a funny deal, I can tell you. As yet I was undecided about talking. No doubt they'd arrest Lou Stael just

as soon as they'd picked up the body of the victim. Crouching down in the darkness, with my collar up to ward off the chilling raindrops, my light extinguished, I waited.

It seemed hours, then the crazy skirl of a police siren came cutting through rain-drenched Edmond. Other cars were following, an ambulance and police cruisers that had been radioed. A light as big as a full moon was focused on the alley. Lying there, motionless, in that white beam, crumpled against the cobblestones, Biff Calloway didn't look like much.

I listened as they shoved forward like an avalanche of spooks. Ike Murphy, Steve Ketchum, Charley Pape, three of the ace homicide men. The coroner was peanut size, in a tubular greatcoat.

Talk about fast work. There wasn't toothpick or an old empty matchbook in that alley that they missed.

The coroner's voice whined like a fishwife's. "Bled internally . . . Been dead more'n an hour, maybe less'n an hour. It will take an autopsy to tell for certain. He wasn't shot here . . . He must've been running . . . Both knees are skinned where he fell on the cobblestones." He peered up at Murphy. "You know this guy?"

"Yeah" Murphy grated, "and I know who killed him. This case is in the bag. He was shot up around the Buffalo-Apex, and ran off with the slug in him. They had a gun fight up there tonight. The other hombre is Big Lou Stael."

"Well," the coroner said cryptically, "you can take the stiff away. I'll go over to the morgue and see what else I can find. The slug's still in him."

"I'll have the gun it fits over at headquarters by the time you dig it out." Murphy barked orders to his confederates and they galloped away.

The cold air swooshed from my lungs. They hadn't asked me a single question. I wasn't half as important as I'd figured.

Returning to my work, I started rattling the doors of the wholesale house offices. It required time, climbing those short wooden steps to the loading docks, shaking the door knobs; climbing back down again, slogging through the puddles in the sunken pavement. Some trucks were loading in the street; groups of drivers were talking. It seemed practically everyone knew about the gun battle and the death of Biff Calloway, the famous Catfish Man.

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My head ached from the turbulent struggle going on in my brain.

THE rain let up again, but the moon didn't come out. The lights from the river bridge made bright paths of gay colors on the river. As I paused near Amelia's low cottage I saw a slit of gold beneath a lowered shade. It was two minutes past midnight; I heard a radio going softly, on a blatant dance number.

I've no patience with people who run their radios all the time; to me it's a discredit to human intelligence. There's a time and place for everything. And a widow's home at midnight, with her former husband dead on a cold marble slab eight blocks away, isn't the time or the place.

I approached the door, knocked. Nobody answered. I went around the house. Feeling that perhaps the comely brunette hadn't heard the news of Biff Calloway's death, I was determined to find out for sure. That radio played hell with my nerves.

Across a vacant lot back of the house and down the embankment, was the river, sluggish, muddy, and doleful with driftwood. Several rowboats were staked there, their chains rattling as the waves rocked the craft.

I walked out over the rain-soaked field, trampling down sodden weeds that rasped against my boots. Clumping down the wooden staircase, beyond which Calloway's boats were chained and where Amelia kept her three rowboats, I stopped two steps from the bottom.

Downriver, perhaps three hundred yards, was Biff Calloway's shack, nothing like the modern cottage where his widow resided and where they'd lived together before their separation. If I wasn't mistaken, the cops would pay the shack a personal visit before many hours elapsed. Arresting a murder suspect is one thing, convicting him is quite another. The police would be searching for concrete evidence before the night was done.

I heard voices. Silhouettes against the murky water skittered nervously. I turned my light on them.

Big Lou's voice stabbed at me. "It that you, Fred?"

I guess he could see me, for I hadn't spoken.

"Yes," I said. "What're you doing down

here?" A cold feeling encompassed me. I heard the rattle of a chain.

"Just going to take a boatride," he said. "It has stopped raining. Rowing over to the Kansas side, Fred, to see a man about a dog. Come on down."

I felt of my gun, made sure it was ready, and clumped down the two steps to the gumbo. The water stunk, and there was a pungent fish smell. It was cool, dank, the chill biting through my clothes. I could see the lights from the arched bridge on the water.

"Who's that with you, Lou?" I asked suspiciously.

"Amelia."

I shuddered. Was she going with him? I'd heard strange stories about her. Some of them were true, maybe all of them. I didn't know. But I'd heard she wasn't above rowing a fugitive to the Kansas side, if there was enough in it. Perhaps that was the secret of her apparent prosperity. Even the cops had to guess, for there wasn't adequate proof to jail her.

"Don't put that light on us, Fred," Amelia cautioned. "We don't want to be seen."

Running off! So Lou Steel had heard of Biff's death, and now was preparing to beat it.

"Listen, Lou," I said desperately, "you can't go. I've got to talk to you up at the house."

"The devil I can't go." His voice took on a sharpened edge. "Why can't I? I'm a free-born American citizen, Freddie boy."

I gulped, didn't know what to say, didn't know how to select the words to explain how I stood. I was involved in this thing. I'd be picked up, would have to tell the truth. It would hurt, maybe it would fix me for good in Mason City. But I wasn't going to have any part of a cold-blooded murder.

"No, you can't go, Lou," I reiterated. "The cops are hunting for you. If Amelia takes you across the river, you'll implicate her. Biff Calloway's dead!"

I HEARD them in the heart-hammering silence. They made funny sounds. Their feet sucked at the mud as they lifted them. Amelia let go of the chain. It clanked, dropped to the ground.

"Biff—Biff's dead!" She got the words out, then choked. I heard her sobbing. It sounded mighty strange to me. "I—

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"You didn't tell me you killed him," she said to Lou. "You said the cops were after you for just shooting at him, Lou. I can't go with you, not now. You go on alone. I can't."

"Yes, you're going," Lou said. "I didn't kill him. He may be dead, as Freddie says. But it wasn't my slug killed him."

"Then why are you running?" I said acridly.

"Fred, damn you, you stay out of this." Lou's voice was heavy with indignation. I felt sure he was about to blow up. No doubt he was still armed with that heavy gun. I could see the cartridge belt around his waist.

"I can't go with you," Amelia said. Despair throbbed in her words. "You must go, Lou. You know they'd get me the moment I returned. Can't you see? Fred is right. You go on. Please?"

He appeared to be thinking this over.

Suddenly, I flicked out my gun. "You're not going, Lou," I said. "Not yet. I'll plug you if you reach for that gun. I can see you plain as day. Make one false move—"

"What's come over you?" he said angrily. "I thought we made a deal."

"Yes, we did," I admitted. "Only then I didn't know the deal involved murder. I owe you a lot, but I don't owe you that much."

He coughed, stood motionless. "Is that the way you want to play?"

"That's the way," I said tersely.

He hesitated. "Well, it's your move." His voice was calmer now. Not once had he thrown it at me that he had saved my kid brother's life. I couldn't help but admire the way he was taking it.

"We'll go up to the house and talk it over," I suggested. "But the cops—" He spoke in a low tone, pulsating with apprehension. It was a hard decision for him to make.

"We'll have to risk the cops," I remonstrated. "Give Amelia your gun."

"I have no gun," he replied. "Heck, fellow, I left it up at the house. You'll find it there. I'm—"

"He's telling the truth, Fred," Amelia said. "His gun's up at the house, as he told you—in a bureau drawer."

"Then," I resumed, "let's start up there. We'll talk it over and decide what's the best thing to do. If the cops come,

you'll have to go with them. There's no alternative, Lou."

"I didn't kill him," Lou insisted. "You saw him run off, when he emptied his revolver."

"We walked up the steps. I followed behind, alert to a possible surprise attack. We trudged back across the weed-infested lot, into the backyard of Amelia's cottage. When she opened the back door I heard the radio going on another band number.

AMELIA conducted us to the living room. I sat down with the gun in my lap. Lou was pale, all the pink was gone from his complexion. His blue eyes were as cold and steady as ever.

"I'll fix some drinks," Amelia said.

She wore overalls, a plaid, woolen shirt of mixed colors, open at the throat, a rain hat and short rubber boots that came halfway to her knees. I watched her leave the room.

"I'll be picked up, I guess," Lou said. "I heard that Biff had died in the alley, about them finding him. But common sense should tell you I didn't do it. He was three blocks away from where you found him when we cut loose at each other."

I nodded. "True enough," I conceded. "But the coroner said Biff wasn't shot in the alley, that he was running when he fell, and bruised his knees. So it had to be your slug that killed him."

"I'm no good," Lou moaned, covering his face with his hands. "I'm worthless as they come. He was going to kill me on sight. I was warned. I saw him coming toward me, groping for his pocket. I dove for my gun. I guess I can prove that, if I have to."

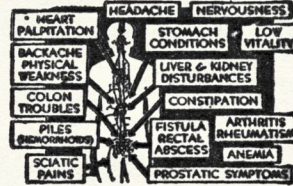
"Everything's in your favor, pal," I said softly. "Why not give up and take your chances? You'll get off with manslaughter."

"I'm not so sure," he said. Anger came back into his voice. "Don't try to decide for me. I never did like that sort of thing."

I got up, just as Amelia's dark, glowing face appeared in the kitchen door. She carried two glasses on a black tray. Gin rickies. I took mine. Lou grabbed his, shook the ice and red cherry around before he downed it in a gulp. His hand trembled when he put the glass back on the tray.

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Amelia smiled and again withdrew to the kitchen.

"Where's your gun?" I asked casually, but thinking I was a fool for stalling along, trying to pull punches.

"Amelia put it away. I came out here and told her I'd had a shooting match with Biff.

"We were going to get married. Biff heard about it, came over here and told her he was gunning for me, would let me have it on sight. He had a mean temper and was carrying a grudge. It just happened I saw him first, couldn't move away from the mailbox without leaving myself wide open. So I did the first thing to enter my mind, and started banging away."

"How long you been here?"

"Ever since you left me at the Buffalo," Lou confessed. "I hiked straight down Edmond Street. I didn't even reload the gun. It's empty, just like it was when Biff ran off and left me."

I struggled with this. But it didn't matter. His first slug probably had struck Biff inches below the heart. He'd run as far as he could before dropping dead.

"Show me the gun," I said succinctly. "I need it. If I'm to help you, I've got to believe in you. I'll start by demanding proof of what you say. After all, I feel indebted to you. You saved my brother's life. If Biff was gunning for you, if he said he was going to shoot you on sight, then it wasn't murder. The law's bound to feel the same about it. Let's get this all washed up and—"

He nodded, started for the bedroom, just as Amelia again appeared in the door, the kitchen light gleaming behind her. Lou stopped.

"Where did you put the gun?" he asked quietly.

"I told you where I put it," she said. "I just want to see it," I said.

She smiled, and Lou went on into the bedroom. He came out a moment later, with the heavy gun on his palm. I'd listened. All he did was open and close the bureau drawer.

"There," he said, "you can have it."

I BROKE the .45, inspected it closely. The gun was loaded, with just one chamber empty.

I guess I got a little sick at my stomach. "You've started lying already," I said. "You said this gun wasn't loaded."

He looked like he was going to fall dead.

"I can explain that," Amelia said quickly, removing her rain hat and letting her black curls tumble out in profusion. "I figured maybe he'd need the weapon."

"Why?" I almost shouted. "Why did you figure that way?"

"Because Biff said he was going to kill him on sight," she said. "Biff wouldn't change his mind; he'd try again." She gave me a hard, cold stare.

"Then why did you leave one chamber empty?" I persisted.

Lou stepped quickly forward, grabbed the gun out of my hand. "Just what are you getting at?" he demanded.

He had the gun leveled at me now. I knew I couldn't reach mine in time.

"Did she leave the house after you came here?" I asked.

"Why, you—" She started forward. But Lou stabbed out his left hand, spun her across the room.

"Yes, she left here, went out in town to find out if the law was still looking for me. She was going to fetch back some fruit."

"Did she take the gun?"

He got pink again. Those ice-cold blue eyes froze me. "Are you trying to say—"

"Answer me, Lou, your life depends on it." My voice was steady, but my nerves were tense as hell.

He jabbed out with his left. I was slammed back against the wall. He came at me, shoved the gun against my stomach. I could hear his rasping breath.

"You'd better answer me, Lou," I said, dazed by the blow. "It looks funny. Maybe she shot Biff."

"Why? Why would she kill him?" he snarled. "You crazy?"

"We'll find out," I said, "but not with you keeping that gun on me. She'd like you to let me have it."

"That's no lie," she whispered, her hands clasped to her throat. "I wish he would."

Lou half turned his head, and I knocked the gun down. A straight jab found his chin. I put all my weight behind it. With him I'd have just one lick. If it didn't work—

It did. He reeled under the impact, gave me time to cover him with my gun. I weighed two twenty, was hard as iron. Ten months in the Pacific makes you that way. It was like being kicked by a mule.

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"All right," I said. To myself I thought, *Well, Freddie, here goes nothing!*

"Put away that gun," Lou said, feeling his jaw, opening and shutting his mouth several times. "You think she double-crossed me, Fred?"

"Maybe she'll get Biff's life insurance," I hinted.

He tossed the .45 into a chair, and I scooped it up. I didn't want that woman to get her hands on it.

"He left her five thousand, double in case of accidental death," Lou said. "She spoke about the policy tonight."

"I'm calling Murphy," I said, and turned to the phone.

Well, she didn't look pretty under the police light. Her face was ugly without makeup, the clammy sweat had washed off the color. Murphy towered over her.

"You left Lou at your house, went out and met your former husband going home." Murphy was hard as nails. "Just admit that you wanted his insurance. You took Lou's gun, thinking you might meet Biff Calloway. You had it loaded and ready. You tried to stir those men to a fighting pitch, and figured Lou would kill Biff. If it went the other way, it didn't matter. You were playing for high stakes, had nothing to lose."

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"You left these, forgot them after you took Biff's wallet. The sack's stamped with your bloody prints. We found the spot where you shot Biff; it was covered with blood. Now we have a surprise witness, Amelia. Here, fellow, you come out of those shadows. It's Fat Ellis, Lou's old enemy. He saw you running away from there, with the gun, didn't you, Fat?"

"I sure did," Fat Ellis said. "I don't like Lou, but damned if I'll see a man burn when he's innocent."

Can you beat that? But I felt that way, too. Only I liked the big pug. Besides, I felt a lot better when I heard Amelia say, "I killed Biff, sure, and I'd do it over again. I—"

Well, I'd paid Lou back for saving my kid brother.

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