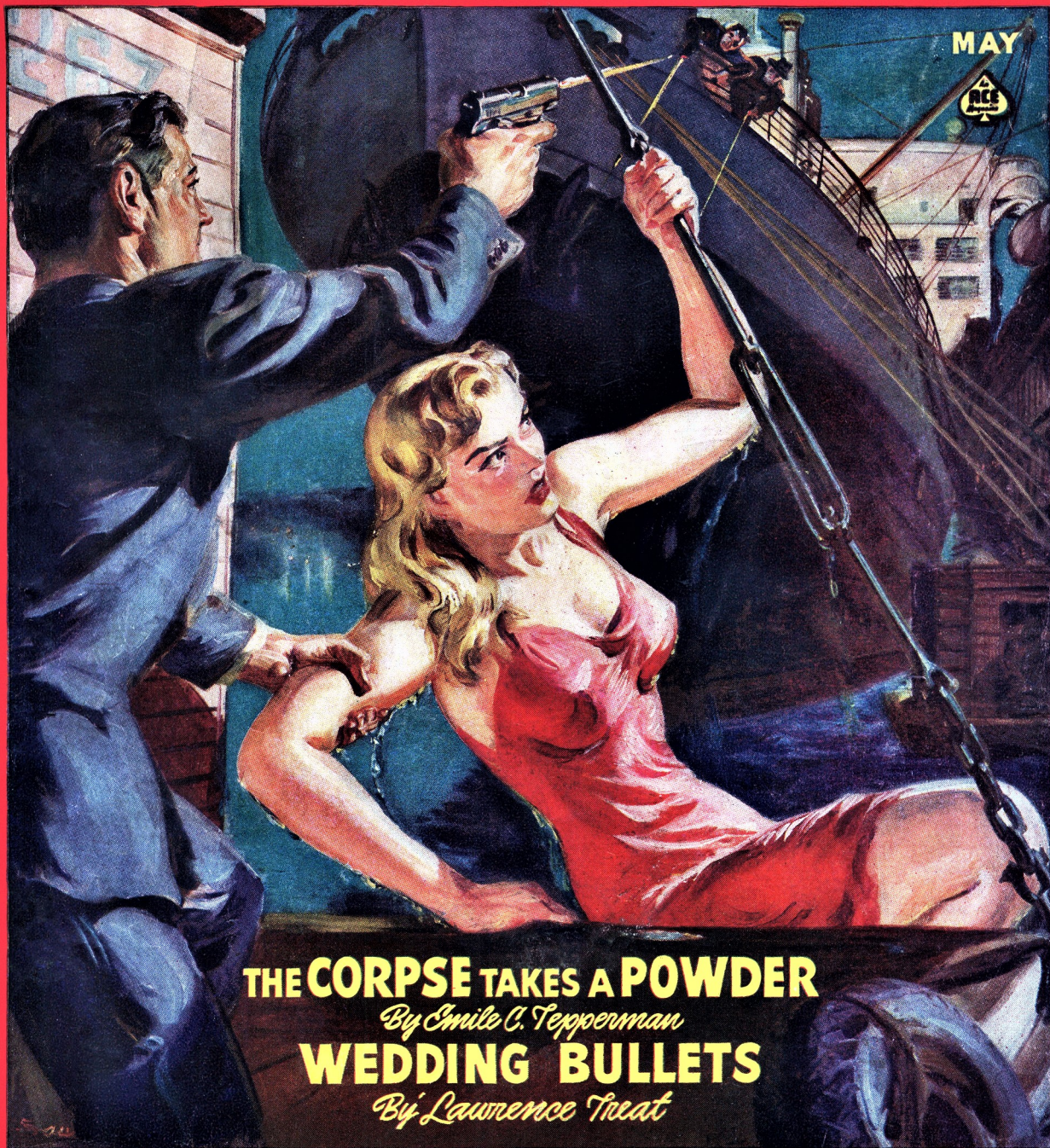


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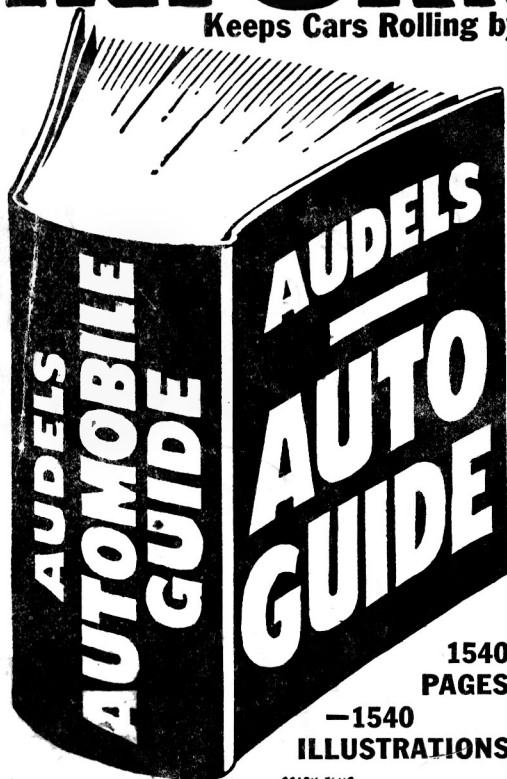
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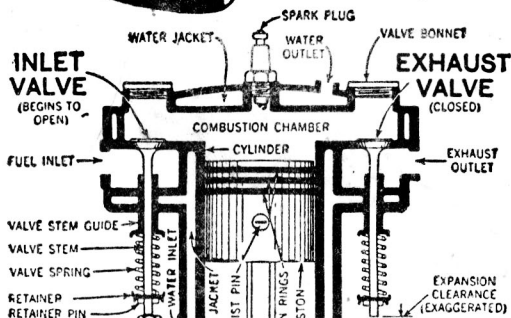
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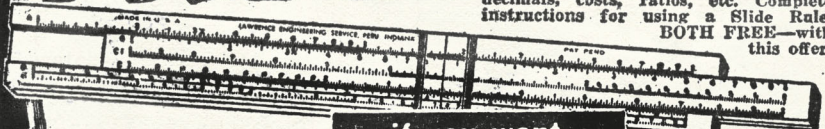
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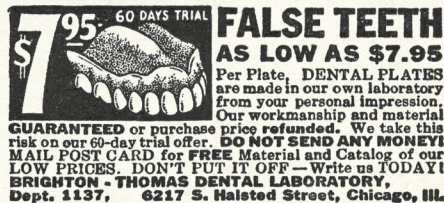
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« *Photographs of a sinister killer's crimes gave Marty Quade a homicide print to develop—for the morgue's gallery.* »

CHAPTER I

IT WAS significant that on the night Nick Devons was stabbed in the back, in his own office, he didn't call the police. He called Marty Quade.

Marty got there in five minutes.

Powder

"Marty Quade"
Novelet



Marty threw himself forward as the gun swung up.

The only thing he had been able to get out of Nick's incoherent mumbling over the phone, was the impression that Nick was dying. He found the

bookmaker slumped over his desk, with the knife still sticking out between his shoulder blades, and a stream of blood soaking into his shirt.

From the nature of the wound, Marty knew that Devons should have been dead. But he was still alive, hanging on to that tenuous thread of existence by a sheer effort of will.

Marty didn't dare to move him, for fear of starting an internal hemorrhage which would kill him instantly.

He said, "Nick, you should have called the doctor, not me. I'll phone for Doc Parsons—"

Devons' eyes were closed, as if the weight of his lids were too much for him to lift. But the fingers of his right hand twitched spasmodically, and he managed a feeble croak. "No—doctor. No—use— Listen to me, Marty—I only have—a few minutes. Must talk—"

"Go ahead, Nick," Marty said grimly. "I'm listening." He bent his ear close to Nick Devons' lips, while the bookmaker forced words up through the blood which bubbled at his mouth.

"All my life—I've been working for my kid—Beatrice. She's in—Miss Hargreaves School. They don't know her old man is a—bookmaker. I was saving the Capistrano jewels—for her. They killed me—for the jewels—"

A horrible smile flickered at Nick Devons' bloody lips. "But I—fooled 'em. Gave half to Taylor Bennet, and half to Roy Gaston—to hold. Get the jewels from them—sell 'em—and give the money—to Bitsy—"

"All right, Nick, don't worry. I'll do it. But who killed you—"

Marty stopped. It was no use asking questions. Nick Devons was dead.

MARTY QUADE straightened up. Bleakly, he looked around the office. The place had been ransacked with merciless thoroughness. The drawers were all yanked out of the two desks, the rug pulled up, the filing cabinet gutted. The floor was strewn with papers from the safe, which yawned wide open.

The autographed pictures of famous jockeys, which had hung on the walls, were lying about among the

littered papers. They had evidently been removed in a search for hidden compartments. Among those pictures was one which was not of a jockey. It was a picture of an exotically beautiful woman, with coal-black hair piled high on her head, and long black eyelashes which veiled her eyes.

The picture was autographed: *With best regards to Nick Devons—Countess Eve Capistrano.*

Marty had met her several times, at the rack track. It was her jewels which Nick Devons had spoken about with blood on his lips. She had played high, and lost frequently, and had finally given Nick the Capistrano jewels as security. That had been a month ago, and she had continued to lose consistently since then, too. Marty had seen her at the track in the company of Taylor Bennet, the artist, and of Roy Gaston, the theatrical producer. Marty had had dealings with Gaston, but he didn't know Bennet very well.

He stood there, next to the desk, thinking for a moment. Then he reached over Nick's body, and picked up the phone. He dialed Roy Gaston's number, and waited. The phone rang a long time. He was about to hang up, when it was answered.

He recognized Gaston's voice.

"Hello," he said. "This is Quade."

"Marty!" exclaimed Roy Gaston. His voice was actually quivering. "I'm in a terrible jam. Nick Devons has been murdered!"

Marty's hand tightened on the phone. "How do you know?"

"Somebody just slipped a picture under my door. It's a photograph of Nick Devons, lying on his desk, with a knife in his back. The print is still wet!"

"Now listen, Roy," Marty said hotly, "don't try to hand me anything like that. If you killed Nick, by hell, I'll see that you burn for it!"

"Marty, you've got to believe me. I didn't kill Nick, but they're going to think I did. I was in his office less than a half hour ago, with Taylor

Bennet. They'll say we both killed him. I'm going into hiding, and so is Bennet."

"You're crazy," Marty told him. "If you do that, you'll convict yourself. If you're innocent, why don't you face it?"

"You don't understand, Marty. It's not the law I'm afraid of. It's murder."

"Murder?"

"Yes. The ones who killed Nick will kill Bennet and me—if they can find us."

"Have you got anything that belongs to Nick?"

"Yes. And so has Bennet. What made you ask?"

"Never mind. I want it. It belongs to Nick's daughter. Stay there—I'm coming up—"

"No, no, Marty. I'm all packed. I'm getting out now. I daren't stay here another minute. It's true, about that photograph being slipped under my door. Marty, there's someone at my door now. I'm getting out the back way. Listen, you eat at Ronson's Restaurant every night this week, and I'll manage to call you there. I'll let you know where I'm hiding out. Good-by!" And he hung up.

Marty said, "Damn!" under his breath.

He clicked down the button of the French phone, and stood that way, with his finger on the button. His eyes were on the bloody streak which despoiled Nick Devons' fifteen dollar shirt.

Nick must have lain here while the search was going on, while the killer ransacked the office—not daring to show a sign of life, lest the killer finish him off for good. He must have lain there, waiting, bleeding to death, while the killer took a flash-bulb picture, and then left—granting that what Roy Gaston said was true. Then, Nick had used his last feeble spark of life to call Marty Quade.

Marty said, "Damn!" once more. He glanced at the torn picture of the

Countess Capistrano on the floor, then lifted his finger from the button, and dialed headquarters.

"This is Quade," he said. "Tell Hansen to come up here with his ghouls. Nick Devons' office. And notify the M. E.'s office. It's murder, all right!"

EDDIE, the waiter, brought in a plate of sizzling frog's legs, fried in butter. "If that don't make your mouth water, Marty," he said, "you ain't human. The chef saved 'em for you. They're the pick of the day's delivery. Nice tender white meat—and done just brown enough!"

He placed the dish reverently on the table in front of Marty Quade, and rubbed his hands. "There's one thing we don't have to start rationing," he said with satisfaction.

"Um," said Marty. He went to work on the frog's legs.

Eddie said, "Don't look now, Marty, but here come a couple friends of yours."

Marty glanced up, and groaned. Inspector Hansen had just come in, flanked by two of his men, Sergeant Boyle and Sergeant Glickstein. They looked around the restaurant, and then headed straight for Marty's table.

Eddie faded away as Hansen came up to the table, with Boyle on one side of him, and Glickstein on the other.

"Hello, Quade," said Hansen.

"Hello, Quade," said Boyle.

"Hello, Quade," said Glickstein.

Marty grunted, and took another bite of the frog's legs.

Hansen said jovially, "Hope you're enjoying your dinner, Quade."

Marty glared at him. "If you really want me to enjoy this meal—"

"Ha, ha," Hansen interrupted. "I know you—always joking. I bet you were going to say—if I want you to enjoy the meal, we should sit down—"

"Like hell."

Hansen motioned to his two satel-

lites, and they all pulled out chairs and slipped in at the table.

"Go away," said Marty. "I haven't committed any crimes today. I'm a law-abiding citizen, eating frog's legs. Leave me alone. Go inflict yourselves on Hitler and the Mikado—"

"Ha, ha!" said Hansen. "Always joking."

"You just said that," Marty told him. He looked suspiciously at the inspector. "What have you got on your mind, Hansen? I never knew you to be so good-natured with me. What are you up to?"

"Why, Marty?" Hansen sounded hurt. "You know I think a lot of you."

"But you couldn't print it!" Marty told him. He sighed. "All right, what is it?"

Hansen chuckled. "Go ahead and eat, Quade. Don't let me spoil your dinner. I just want to ask you a couple of questions about what happened the night before last."

"I didn't do it," said Marty.

"Ha, ha." Hansen poked Sergeant Boyle in the ribs. "He's a great kidder, this Quade. Isn't he?"

"Yeah," said Boyle. "A great kidder." He gave Marty a beseeching look, as if to say, "I'm not responsible for this. Don't blame me."

HANSEN suddenly became serious. He leaned forward over the table. "Devons was a high-class bookmaker. He booked for a lot of big shots."

Marty raised his eyebrows. "You don't say! Who would have thought it of Devons—"

"Lay off," Hansen snapped. "You were one of his customers, Quade. We found records in his office. We found a list of his customers, and we've checked back on them. Do you know what we found?"

"Is it a riddle?" Marty asked. "I give up."

"We found that two of Devons' customers have disappeared. Evapo-

rated. Not only that, they disappeared on the very night that he was murdered!"

"How interesting," said Marty. He kept on eating his frog's legs, but he had become very tense.

"Now I'm coming to the part that interests you, Quade. The names of those two customers. Would you care to have me tell you—or do you know them already?"

"Why should I know the names of the two customers of Nick's who disappeared on the night he was murdered?"

"Because one of them is a very good friend of yours. In fact, he's used you on more than one occasion."

Marty put down his knife and fork. He looked straight across the table at Hansen, and met the inspector's gaze coldly.

"If you're talking about Roy Gaston—yes, I know that he's not in town. If you're hinting that Roy Gaston killed Nick Devons, you're crazier than I gave you credit for!"

Hansen was ordinarily a tough man, and as short-tempered as Marty Quade. Marty knew just what things to say to get Hansen fighting mad, and Hansen could do the same to Marty at will. Consequently, there were always sparks when the two met. Marty expected the blowup now. He actually saw the inspector's face become a dull red, and he saw Boyle and Glickstein edging nervously in their chairs, waiting for the explosion.

But nothing happened. Hansen appeared to hold himself in check by an immense effort of self-control. Slowly, the mottled color disappeared from his face.

"Another man disappeared at the same time," he went on deliberately. "Taylor Bennet, the artist. Bennet was the man who painted all the sets for Roy Gaston's musical revues. They both played the horses heavily, with Devons, and they both lost heavily."

"They didn't owe him any money, did they?"

"No," Hansen admitted. "We looked through Devons' books. They had paid their losses regularly. Pretty big amounts. And they picked nags that didn't have a chance. It almost looked as if they had wanted to lose."

"So?"

"So. I think Devons was blackmailing them. I think they kept on paying till it hurt, and then they knocked him off. How about it, Quade?"

"Sounds good," said Marty. "Why don't you write the scenario? You might sell it to Drivel Pictures, Inc."

Hansen smirked. He took an envelope out of his pocket. From the envelope he extracted a photograph. He carefully put the photograph down on the table, turning it around so that Marty could see it right side up.

"Take a good look, Quade!"

MARTY looked at the picture. It was a photograph of the body of Nick Devons, just as Marty had found him the night before last.

Marty raised his eyebrows. "Why show this to me?"

Hansen's eyes were glittering. "Do you know what this is?"

"I would say it's one of the photographs your boys took, of the murder scene."

"Ha!" said Hansen. "But that is exactly what it is not!" He tapped the photograph with his forefinger. "This is not an official picture. It was taken by some private person. It was taken before the police arrived on the scene, because any photographs taken by the press would show the desk cleared of all objects for fingerprinting. And it would show the chalk marks made by the boys!"

"Um," said Marty. "So this picture was taken maybe by the murderer himself, eh?"

"Either by the murderer, or by some one who knew Devons was dead before the police were informed."

"What has it got to do with Roy Gaston?" Marty asked.

And the minute he asked it, he wanted to bite his tongue off, because he saw he had stepped right into a beautiful trap which Hansen had baited for him.

The inspector's mouth quirked just a little bit, and he said slowly, "*We found this photograph in Roy Gaston's waste-paper basket when we searched his apartment!*"

Marty had lost all interest in his frog's legs. Besides, they were cold and greasy by this time. He raised his eyes to Hansen's.

"So you think that Roy Gaston and Taylor Bennet killed Devons, took a photograph of their crime, and then left the photograph handy in the waste-paper basket, for you to find?"

The inspector shrugged. "I only want to ask Gaston and Bennet a few questions. In view of this evidence, don't you think I'm justified in wanting them?"

Marty couldn't deny the justice of that observation. He was silent.

"And so," Hansen said softly, "I am asking you, Quade, to tell me where Gaston is hiding out."

"What makes you think I know?"

"You're the man Gaston uses."

"I've worked for him on cases, yes. But they were never any of his own matters. He called me in whenever any of his actors got in a jam. But I never had a case of his own."

"Nevertheless, in a jam like this, you'd be the man he'd call."

"And what if I tell you I don't know where he is?"

For a long moment, Hansen looked at Marty Quade. Then he said, "I've got to give the devil his due, Quade. Your word is good. If you tell me that you don't know where Roy Gaston and Taylor Bennet are hiding out, I'll have to believe you."

"All right," said Marty, looking him straight in the eye. "I tell you this, Hansen, and I give you my solemn assurance that it is true. I haven't the faintest idea where Roy Gaston is at this time. The same goes for Taylor Bennet."

Hansen sighed. "I'll accept that statement, Quade, in good faith. And I hope, for your sake, that it's the absolute gospel truth, without reservations. I have two witnesses here, to what you've told me. I hope it doesn't turn out later, that there was something you held back."

Just then, Eddie, the waiter came over, carrying a plug-in phone. He plugged it into the outlet behind the table, and brought the phone over to Marty.

"Call for you," he said. "I think it's important."

"Excuse me," said Marty, to the three homicide men. He took the instrument, put the receiver to his ear, and spoke into it. "Quade talking."

"Hello, Marty," said a cautious voice at the other end. "Do you know who this is?"

Marty suddenly felt as if an ice cube were melting, and dripping down his spine.

It was the voice of Roy Gaston.

CHAPTER II

MARTY threw a swift glance across the table. Boyle and Glickstein were just waiting, without any special interest, until he should finish his call. But Hansen was watching him like a hawk, with a thin little smile at the corners of his mouth.

Marty said into the phone, "Just a minute, Mrs. Jones." Then he covered the mouthpiece and said to Hansen and the other two, "Well, so long, boys."

"It's all right," Hansen said. "Don't worry about us. We'll wait till you're through."

Marty groaned inwardly. He took his hand off the mouthpiece. "Hello, Mrs. Jones—"

"Listen, Marty," the voice of Roy Gaston came tensely over the wire. "I'm taking an awful chance calling you. Can you talk to me?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Jones," Marty said, looking at Hansen. "I certainly can't."

"You're not alone?"

"No. Perhaps it would be better if you called back."

"I can't call back," Roy Gaston said. "I didn't dare to use the phone in the apartment where I'm holed up, for fear it would be traced. I had to come out to the stationery store across the street."

"Why, that's fine, Mrs. Jones," said Marty. "I'll be glad to come for dinner some evening."

"Don't lose a minute. Come right away, Marty. I'm in real trouble. I didn't kill Devons. But it's not only the law I've got to worry about. The people who killed Devons have killed Taylor Bennet too, and I'm next!"

Marty wondered if his face showed any of the tenseness he was feeling. He saw that the queer smile was still lingering on Hansen's face. The inspector leaned over and whispered something in Glickstein's ear, and Glickstein got up reluctantly and hurried out. Marty knew that the sergeant had been instructed to put a tracer on the call.

Desperately, Marty spoke into the mouthpiece. "I have a couple of men here, at my table. An Inspector Hansen of Homicide, and Sergeant Boyle. I'm sure they'd both be glad to meet you, Mrs. Jones. Maybe I'll bring them out some evening, for dinner."

"All right, Marty," said Roy Gaston. "I'll make it snappy. I'm at 15½ Beasley Street, down in the Village. It's the ground floor, and the flat is rented in the name of Eve Negley. By hell, I'm so scared, I'm going to get a couple of bottles. If I stay sober, I'll surely crack up. So long, Marty, and don't fail me!"

There was a click as Gaston hung up. Marty made a wry face, and forked his receiver. He looked at Hansen and grinned.

"Mrs. Jones didn't seem to care for the idea of meeting you, inspector. But I bet if she saw you, she'd like you a lot."

Hansen grunted. "Where does this Mrs. Jones live?"

Marty wagged a finger at him. "Come now, inspector. You don't want to go chasing widows at your age!"

Glickstein came back to the table, stooped, and whispered something in Hansen's ear.

"Ah!" said the inspector. He got to his feet.

Marty glared at him. "Tracing my calls, eh?"

"Why not? It might have been from Roy Gaston. You might not have known where he was—*before* you got that phone call. But I'll lay you a dollar to a dime that you know now!" He smiled tightly. "We couldn't get the number, because it was a dial phone. But give us time. We can do anything if you give us time."

"So long, Hansen," said Marty. "I'm mighty sorry to see you go."

The inspector turned and headed out of the restaurant. Boyle and Glickstein went with him.

Marty followed them with a sultry glance. He could see them outside, getting into a police car. Hansen and Glickstein got in, then Marty saw Hansen speak to Boyle. The car pulled away, leaving Boyle behind.

THE sergeant moved away slowly, casually. Marty watched him through the plate glass window until he went out of sight. But Marty knew that Boyle hadn't gone far. Boyle would be on his tail for the rest of the night, unless Marty shook him. And the sergeant was an old timer—a hard man to shake.

Eddie came over, looking lugubriously at the plate of unfinished frog's legs.

"I think it's a damned shame, Marty—those guys spoiling your meal. Did I do wrong to bring you the phone?"

"No," said Marty. "You couldn't help it. And I'd have had to take that call anyway. Only I would have liked to take it out of their hearing."

"I'll bring you another dish of frog's legs."

"Skip it," said Marty. "I've got to scram. Here—" he put a bill down on the table—"keep the change."

Eddie brought him his hat and coat, and helped him on with his coat, clucking sympathetically all the while.

Just then, two men who had entered the restaurant came up to Marty's table. Marty took one look at them, and his eyes got hard.

Eddie saw them, and said under his breath, "Ugh! Mace and Vallon. I'd rather sit down next to a black widow spider and a poison cobra, than next to those two!"

Red Mace was a tall man, thin and viperish. Henry Vallon was round, almost roly-poly. Anyone would have passed him off as harmless, except for the quick, sharp way his eyes moved around, as if he were ready to pounce on something at any minute. And for all his roly-poly appearance, he moved with a fluid effortlessness that fairly oozed immense strength.

Red Mace was known around town as a handicapper, while Vallon had the reputation of being a man with ready money to back anything that would return a hundred percent profit—and never mind the ethics. Mace didn't say anything as they stood by Marty's table. It was Vallon who did the talking.

"You at liberty to take a case, Marty?" he asked. "I have a nice piece of business for you."

"Sorry, Vallon," said Marty. "I'm busy. Try O'Dwyer's Agency. He's a good man."

Vallon didn't look flustered. He just stood there, seeming round and harmless beside the tall and wiry Red Mace. Only his eyes were lively and shrewd.

"There'd be a couple grand in this for you, Marty."

"No," said Marty. He put on his hat, snapped the brim down in front, and started pulling on his gloves.

"You wouldn't have to do any work for this couple grand," Vallon went

on tonelessly. "You'd just have to give me a bit of information."

Marty stopped putting on his gloves. He stood very still, not looking at Vallon.

"What kind of information?"

"Just an address."

"Whose address?"

"The address of the place where Roy Gaston is hiding out!"

MARTY finished putting on his gloves. He was very meticulous about getting them on perfectly, so that there were no creases, and so that his fingers bent freely. Then he looked at Vallon.

"If I know Roy Gaston's address right now," he said softly, "that means that I'm working for Gaston, doesn't it?"

"That's right."

"And if I'm working for Gaston, what kind of a heel do you think it would make me to tip anyone off to his address?"

Vallon smiled and shrugged. "Money talks, Quade. Two grand is dough, in any man's language. You can save your conscience with the greenbacks. Tell you what—I'll make it thirty-five hundred. That's more than Gaston can possibly be paying you. You can collect from him, and from me too."

Little pinpoints of fire flashed in Marty Quade's eyes. He started to come around the table toward Vallon.

Vallon got one glimpse of the look in Marty's eyes, and started to back away hastily. And now, for the first time, big Red Mace injected himself into the picture. He stepped in front of Vallon, blocking Marty's path. He put a big hand out, against Marty's chest.

"Don't get tough, Quade," he said. "We can be tougher. Vallon wants that address. He's willing to pay for it. You take his dough and give him what he wants, or you'll give it to him without dough."

Marty had a constitutional aversion to being pawed. But he held himself in check, listening to Mace, until the big fellow got that far. Then he had heard enough. He brought his two hands up, seized Red Mace's wrist, and gave it a twist. Then he pivoted on one heel, turning all the way around, so that his back was to the big fellow. But he still kept his grip on the wrist. He yanked it over his right shoulder, and heaved.

Mace uttered a cry, and went sailing over Marty's shoulder. He landed against the adjoining table, which was unoccupied, and brought it crashing to the floor with him. He lay there for a second, all tangled up in the tablecloth, the salt and pepper shakers, the catsup bottle, and a couple of chairs. He shook his head, rested on one elbow, and glared up at Marty, who was half a dozen paces away.

"Get up," said Marty. "I want to hear the rest of that lecture."

Mace twisted around, started to get to his knees. Then suddenly he thrust his right hand into his coat pocket, and brought it out with a small twenty-two caliber pistol.

Marty sprang forward, one long step with his left foot, then a long, loping kick with his right foot. The point of his shoe smacked wickedly against Mace's hand. The gun went spinning into the air. Mace's features became contorted with pain. His hand hung limply, broken at the wrist.

THE short fight had caused a near panic in the restaurant. Men and women had jumped up from their tables. Some sought cover, fearing gunplay, while others shouted for the police.

Marty Quade swung around, expecting that perhaps Vallon might try something, but he grinned when he saw that the roly-poly man had disappeared. Vallon had apparently left his companion holding the bag. Marty caught Eddie's eye. The waiter

winked, and shouted over the tumult and the noise:

"Nice work, Marty. Vallon scrambled the back way—through the kitchen!"

The calls for police had brought Sergeant Boyle, who must have been loitering just a few doors down. He came swinging into the restaurant as Marty was bending over the moaning Mace, and hauling him to his feet by the back of his coat collar.

Boyle took one look at Mace, and started to grin.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "It looks like Tough Red has been on the receiving end this time! Who gave it to you, Mace—a small army, or just Quade?"

Mace had a cut across his left cheek, where he had struck the table in his flight through the air, and he had a lump on his forehead, where he must have struck something else when he landed. His wrist hung limp and awkward, and he was moaning softly.

Marty said modestly, "I cannot tell a lie, sergeant. I did it with my own little ax!"

"H'm," said Boyle. "Assault and battery—provided Mace wants to make a charge."

"No charge," Mace whined. "It—it was all a mistake. We—we were fooling around—"

Boyle glanced at the wreckage. "Fooling around, eh? Who's going to pay for the damage?"

Nielsen, the manager of the restaurant, had come over, and was standing quietly in the background.

He spoke up. "Thanks for bringing the subject up, sergeant. I was just wondering about that little thing."

Still moaning, Mace put his good hand into his pocket, drew out a roll of bills, and flipped off a twenty with his thumb. He thrust it at Nielsen. "I'll pay for the damage. And I'm making no charge. Forget about it."

He started to stumble out toward the door.

Boyle glanced inquiringly at Marty, then at Nielsen. "If either of you guys wants to make a charge, I'll be glad to take the mug in."

"Let it drop," said Marty.

"That's the way I feel about it too," said Nielsen.

They let Red Mace get out of the place. He didn't even stop to pick up his pistol. Boyle got it, and put it in his pocket.

"He has a license for this. I checked him on it once, myself. But I'll just take it downtown and give it to ballistics. They might turn something up."

Marty said, "Well, I might as well be going."

Boyle looked at him queerly. "Listen, Marty, guess you know I've been assigned to tag you. I've got to obey orders."

"Sure," said Marty. "And I'm going to try my damndest to lose you, Mike. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough!" said Boyle.

Marty went out with the sergeant. Behind them, the waiters began to clean up the mess, and the patrons resumed their seats.

In the street, Marty flagged a cab. He grinned at Boyle.

"Under the circumstances, you won't mind if I don't offer you a lift?"

"Not at all," said Boyle, flagging another cab. "I'll be right behind you!"

CHAPTER III

MARTY was in no mood to waste time. Roy Gaston had given him two pieces of information which made it imperative that he get down to 15½ Beasley Street as fast as possible. The first was that Taylor Bennet had been murdered, and that Gaston expected to be next. Hansen had said that the police were equally at a loss as to the whereabouts of Bennet and of Gaston. But somebody else had found Bennet. Which meant that they knew where Roy Gaston was, too.

The second piece of information

was that Gaston was going to buy a couple of bottles of liquor. Marty knew well enough that Gaston was one of those men who can't hold it. Two drinks, and he'd be out cold. So Marty had to get to him quick.

Once inside the cab, he peered behind, and waved to Sergeant Boyle, in the other cab. Then he faced forward and said to his own driver:

"See that guy I just waved to?"
"Yeah."

"I made a bet with him. He claims he can follow me wherever I go, within the city limits, and I'm betting that I can lose him inside of fifteen minutes. It's only a twenty dollar bet, mostly for the sake of the satisfaction. So if you can help me win it, you can have the twenty."

The driver turned around and grinned knowingly.

"Sez you!" he smirked.

"What do you mean?" Marty demanded.

"What I mean is, I been around Broadway a long time. I know who's who, and what's what. The guy in the cab behind is Mike Boyle, homicide sergeant, and you're Marty Quade, the private dick. You might have twenty bucks to make whacky bets—but not Boyle. He's got a wife and three kids."

"H'm," said Marty. "I'm still paying twenty to lose him."

The driver shook his head. "Boyle is wise. It'll be tough. It's worth more."

Marty sighed. He looked at the clock. The flag had not been put down yet. He took out a quarter and offered it to the driver.

"In that case, pal, I'll get me another cab, with a driver who isn't such a wise guy."

"Now wait, Mr. Quade. Don't get sore. I'm just a guy trying to make a living. Isn't it worth fifty?"

"Twenty," Marty said firmly.

"Okay," said the driver.

Marty smiled. He took out a twenty dollar bill and handed it over.

"In advance," he said.

"Could you give me a ten and two fives?"

Marty shrugged. He took out his roll, selected the bills, and exchanged them for the twenty. The driver took them, put away fifteen dollars, and kept out one of the fives. All this time, the driver of the cab behind had been stalling, waiting for Marty's driver to get started.

Marty's man got out of the cab, went to the cab behind, and leaned his head in at the window, talking to the other driver. Looking behind, Marty saw something change hands, then his own driver came back grinning, and got behind the wheel again.

"Watch!" he said.

He started the cab, swung down Broadway, then turned right on Forty-ninth.

"THAT'S a pal of mine in the other cab," the driver said over his shoulder, as they traveled crosstown. "He can use the five bucks I gave him. Boyle was a little suspicious, but I told him I wanted my friend to give my wife a message, because you had hired me to drive up to New Haven. Boyle said, 'Hell, is he going that far?' And I said, 'Yeah.' In the meantime I slipped my friend the fiver, and wised him up."

"Smart," said Marty. "Here's another sawbuck for yourself. You deserve it."

"Thanks, Mr. Quade!" said the driver. "You're a square guy!"

He turned left on Eighth Avenue, and suddenly accelerated to sixty on the stretch south. Marty looked behind. It would have been easy for the other cab to keep up with them, for there was little traffic on Eighth Avenue just now. But for some unaccountable reason, Boyle's cab was falling far behind. They made it to Thirty-fifth Street on the one light, and when they turned left again, Boyle's cab was nowhere in sight.

Marty's driver chuckled. "My pal is just explaining to Boyle that he must

IDA

be out of gas. Will the sergeant be sore, or won't he?"

"He will," said Marty. "But he's a good guy. He'll get over it."

He got out of the cab, waited till another came along, and flagged it.

Twenty minutes later, and without the benefit of police surveillance, he was in the vestibule of 15½ Beasley Street, looking at the names over the bells.

He saw the name of Eve Negley. It was the one Gaston had given him over the phone. It was just like Roy Gaston, he thought, to pick a girl's apartment to hide out in. He wondered which one of Roy's chorines this one was.

In a minute he found out that it wasn't any chorine at all. Because when the buzzer answered his finger on the bell, he pushed into the foyer and saw the door of apartment 1A was being opened on a chain. Through the six-inch opening, he got a glimpse of a woman with coal-black hair and eyes, and long black eyelashes.

"I'll be damned!" he said. "Countess Eve Capistrano!"

"Come in, Mr. Quade," she said hurriedly. "Quick!"

Marty went in, and she closed the door behind him, double-locking it and slipping the chain on again.

In the little foyer, Marty looked her over appraisingly. There was nothing foreign about her except her name. The Count Luigi Capistrano had been her third husband. He had gone back to Italy six months previous, and she had secured a divorce. But she had held on to the Capistrano jewels.

She had come out of each of her three marriages with a substantial profit, and had immediately proceeded to lose the profits on the ponies. But she had the face and the figure to continue business at the old stand for a long time to come. And Marty was sure she'd find herself another husband with plenty of money—provided she didn't die a sudden death.

Sudden death was on her mind right now, as Marty could plainly see by the scared look in those dark eyes of hers. But in spite of that, she wasn't missing any tricks. She swayed toward Marty as if she were going to faint, but when Marty didn't put his arms out to catch her she stayed on her feet. She opened her eyes up wide and said:

"What a relief it is to have you here, Mr. Quade! Now I'm not afraid any more!"

Marty grunted. "What are you afraid of? I thought it was Roy Gaston—"

"They're going to kill me, too, Mr. Quade," she said dramatically. "They have marked me for death!"

"Why?"

THE countess lowered her eyes. "Because I am a friend of Roy's. Because I am standing by him in his hour of need."

Marty gave her a disgusted look. "Have you practiced those lines long? You do them fine!"

She assumed a hurt look, but Marty didn't wait for a reply. "Where's Gaston?" he asked, and not waiting for her answer, he went into the living room. It was a one-room apartment, with a day-bed along one wall, and a recessed kitchenette along the opposite one.

"I thought you lived at the Hotel Traymont," he said.

"I do. But I—er—I've been keeping this apartment under an assumed name."

"I see," Marty said drily, looking at the figure of Roy Gaston, who was seated in the armchair, and manifestly in an advanced state of intoxication.

Roy was a foppish looking man of about forty, with a carefully trimmed mustache, a nicely selected maroon necktie, and well-manicured fingernails. He was trying very hard to look sober. He peered up at Marty and said thickly:

"Hi, Quade. Damned good man.

Any time in trouble—call Quade. You'll fix it. Don't let 'em kill me an' Eve—the way they killed Nick Devons and Taylor Bennet."

Marty squinted at the bottle of rock and rye on the end table at Gaston's side. There were only about three drinks gone out of the bottle, but the dirty work had been accomplished. Gaston was drunk.

Marty looked around the room, went past Gaston and peered into the kitchenette, but couldn't see the body of Taylor Bennet.

"What are you looking for?" Eve asked him. "If you want a glass, you'll find one in the closet."

"I'm not looking for a glass," Marty told her. "All I'm trying to find is the body." He went and stood in front of Gaston. "You told me that Taylor Bennet was murdered, didn't you? Well, where's the corpse?"

Roy Gaston, with his eyes almost entirely closed, began to chuckle drunkenly. "It's a good question. A damned good question. Told you Quade was a smart man. He spotted it right away. No corpse—"

The Countess Eve had come alongside Marty. Her face was pale. "Taylor Bennet wasn't living here. He's been renting a small studio two blocks away, at Twenty-nine Trent Street. He used a fictitious name—George Hervey. We—we thought it best for Roy and Taylor to separate. It would attract less attention than if two men lived together. Taylor carted some of his painting material over there one night. He was doing some painting to keep his mind occupied while he was in hiding. I posed for him."

Marty gave her a queer look. "Living here, and posing there, eh?"

She drew herself up. "It's nothing like that. I'm just letting Mr. Gaston sleep here—" she gestured toward the easy chair—"because his life is in danger. I'd do as much for anybody."

ROY GASTON stirred in the chair, and opened his eyes again. "Sure, sure. She'd do as much for

anybody. An' her life's in danger too. Tha's why I called you, Marty. Save her. They'll kill her, too. Don't bother about me. I'm no damned good. But she's beautiful. Make a good tableau for my next show. Can't let her be killed before show opens—"

He fumbled a wallet out of his breast pocket, and thrust it uncertainly forward. "Help y'self, Marty. Take it all. Couple grand. Don't let 'em kill Eve."

He let the wallet fall to the floor, and hiccupped terrifically.

Marty scowled. He didn't pick the wallet up. Instead, he bent and shook Gaston. "Who's going to kill her?" he demanded. "How the devil can I stop them, if you don't tell me who they are?"

But Gaston was slumped in his chair, and sound asleep. Marty swung away from him, angrily. He glared at the girl.

"All right, baby. You talk."

"What—what do you want to know?"

"Everything that you know. What about Taylor Bennet?"

"He's dead," she said. "Stabbed in the back."

"You saw him? You were at the studio?"

"I was at the studio this morning. I posed for two hours, and then came back here. Taylor was alive when I left him."

"So how do you know he's dead now?"

She looked at him queerly. "I'll show you—"

She went over to the table and picked up a manila envelope, about five inches by seven. From the envelope she extracted a photograph. It was still wet.

"This was slipped under the door just before Roy went out to call you."

Marty took the print. His fingers stuck to the damp matte surface. "H'm," he said. It was an enlargement of part of a photograph. The rest of the picture had been cropped out, leaving only the reproduction of

a man lying sprawled on the floor in front of an easel.

The picture had been taken at such an angle as to show the dead man's face clearly, as well as the partly finished oil painting on the easel. The whole figure on the canvas had been blocked out, showing the outlines of a woman. Only the face was finished, however. It was the face of Eve Capistrano.

As to the man on the floor, there was a knife in his back, driven in between the shoulder blades, just like the other picture which Marty had seen in Hansen's possession—the picture of Nick Devons.

Eve was pressing close against Marty, as if for protection, while he studied the picture.

"That's in Taylor's studio," she said huskily. "I posed for the outline this morning. When I left him at noon, he—he was alive!"

Marty gave her a shrewd side glance. "Did you or Roy go there to see if Bennet's body is really there?"

She shuddered. "I should say not!"

"THAT'S fine," said Marty. "I suppose you know that you're the one who put the finger on Bennet and Gaston?"

"Me?"

"Sure. You must have been seen in the street, and followed to Bennet's studio, then followed back here. In that way, the killer found out where both of them were staying."

There was panic in her eyes. "You won't let them kill me, will you?"

"Let who kill you?"

"Vallon and Mace, of course. It was they who killed Devons and Bennet. It's they who sent this picture. It's they who are going to murder Roy and me."

"Mace and Vallon, eh?" said Marty. "You sure?"

"Positive."

"Why? Why do they want to kill you?"

She dropped her eyes before his.

"I don't know. I swear I don't know. It—it's horrible."

She put both hands to her cheeks, and her eyes took on a fearful, hunted look. "I don't want to die, Mr. Quade. I don't want to end up with a knife between my shoulder blades."

She moved closer to him, almost forcing herself into his arms. "Don't let them kill me, Marty. Save me. I'm afraid!"

Marty grimaced. He took her by both shoulders and held her away from him, at arm's length.

"There's a time and place for everything, baby," he said. "Right now is the time for true confessions. You better open up. You know a lot more than you're telling me."

She shook herself free of his hands, with an angry twist of her shoulders. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"I'm talking about this and that, baby. More particularly, about the Capistrano jewels. Where are they?"

"I—I gave them to Nick Devons. He must have had them when he was killed."

"He didn't have them when he was killed. And you know it."

"Why—why should I know?"

"Skip it," said Marty. "If you won't talk, skip it."

She bit her lip. "Please—don't be so cruel to me. I don't know any more than I've told you. They're going to kill me, to stab me in the back. You must protect me. I can't turn to the police without betraying Roy's whereabouts. So it's up to you—to save me. Roy is paying you well. All you have to do is stay here with us."

Marty turned away from her, stooped and picked up Roy Gaston's wallet. There was twenty-three hundred dollars in it, mostly in hundreds and fifties. Marty took two thousand.

"That'll do for an advance fee," he told her. "I'll send him a bill for the balance—later."

Her face lighted up. "Then you'll stay—"

Marty bent over Gaston, and went through all his pockets. He was looking for the Capistrano jewels. But they weren't on him.

Marty started a methodical search of the apartment. He didn't leave a stick unturned. The Countess Eve watched him, saying nothing. Her dark eyes were fixed constantly on his back.

At last, after he had turned the entire room inside out, he gave up. He knew that the Capistrano jewels weren't in the place.

The Countess Eve said, "Perhaps if you'd tell me what you're looking for—"

Marty's eyes glinted. He crooked a finger at her.

"Come here, baby!"

"Oh, Marty!" she said. But she came over, with a sort of triumphant air about her.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN she got within reach, Marty grabbed her, swung her wrists behind her. He held her that way with one hand, while he used the other to make sure she wasn't hiding any jewels on her person.

When she realized his purpose, she flushed hotly. But she didn't resist. He found a small pistol, stuck in the garter of her right stocking, but nothing else. He kept the pistol, and let go of her wrists. She slapped his face, hard. Marty grinned.

"Give me back that gun!" she flared. "I need it. I need to protect myself."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll protect you." He picked up his hat and put it on. "Where did you say Benet's studio was — Twenty-nine Trent?"

"But you can't go there now. You can't leave me."

"You'll be safe," Marty told her grimly.

"But Roy is drunk. I'll be all alone here. Suppose you go away—and

when you come back you find me with a knife in my back. That money Roy gave you—he told you it was to protect me."

"Don't worry about the money," Marty told her. "If you get killed, I'll return the money to Roy."

"A lot of good *that* will do me!"

Marty grinned again. He stepped up close to her, got hold of her wrists once more, took out his handcuffs. Before she knew what he intended, he had her securely cuffed to the handle of the electric stove in the kitchenette:

"What—what are you doing?"

"Just making sure you're safe," he told her.

He patted her on the shoulder, and crossed the room. On the way he passed the chair where Roy Gaston was sleeping it off. He picked up the bottle of rock and rye, and slipped it into his overcoat pocket.

"Roy won't need this any more," he said. "I better take care of it for him." He went toward the door.

She shouted after him, "Come back, you heel!"

He unchained the door, waved to her, and went out. He slammed the door shut, and hurried into the street.

Marty crossed to the opposite side, and went into a small candy store, about fifty feet down. He used the telephone in there to call the Makin Detective Agency.

"Have you got two good men to spare right away, Lou?" he demanded of Lou Makin, whom he sometimes used when he needed assistance.

"For you, Marty? Any time!" Makin said heartily. "Provided the pay is right!"

"I'll give you twenty dollars for an hour's work."

"Twenty dollars apiece?" Makin asked cagily.

"Okay," said Marty.

"Ha!" Makin grumbled. "This is probably a case where you're grabbing off a five hundred buck fee—and you hand me forty bucks."

"You don't know a quarter of it!" Marty said.

"You mean you're getting two grand?"

"**L**OOK, Lou," Marty said patiently. "What I'm getting is none of your damned business. I'm offering you forty bucks. If you don't want it, there are two dozen other outfits I can call—"

"It's okay, Marty!" Lou Makin interrupted hastily. "I was only kidding. You know me."

"Yeah. I certainly do. Now listen, Lou. You send those two men over to 15½ Beasley Street. Apartment 1A is occupied by a dame named Eve Negley. She has a visitor there, a man, who is a bit tight. She is under the delusion that someone intends to insert a knife between her shoulder blades, to the detriment of her good health."

"Haw!" said Lou Makin. "I'll say that would be detrimental!"

"Put one of your men in the hall in front of her door. Put the other man in the alley. There's only one other window to her apartment, and it faces on that alley. Nobody's to go in there till I get back, and nobody's to leave. Get it?"

"I get it. I'll send Schultz and Gilligan. They're in here now."

"Okay," said Marty. "I'll stay here till they come, but they're not to talk to me. They're not to let on that they know me. And listen, Lou—I'm paying you to see that nothing happens while I'm away. If I find a knife in that dame's back when I return, you don't get the forty bucks. Understand?"

"It's a deal, Marty. Schultz and Gilligan are on the way. And listen—how about making that fifty instead of forty, huh? I got my rent due tomorrow, and I haven't collected a fee for a week."

"All right," said Marty. "Fifty it is—*if everybody stays alive!*"

He went out and lit a cigarette and kept his eyes on Number 15½,

standing where he could see both the front entrance and the alley. He didn't have long to wait, before a cab pulled up at the corner, and he saw Schultz and Gilligan getting out. They were both old-timers in the business. They separated at once, Gilligan hurrying ahead as if he had an important engagement, and Schultz loitering after him.

Gilligan glanced across the street at Quade, but did not nod. He went straight into Number 15½, and Marty could see him through the glass panel of the front, fumbling at the lock of the vestibule door. Gilligan had his skeleton keys and would get in there all right. In a moment, Gilligan's broad back disappeared from the vestibule.

In the meantime, Schultz had crossed over in a leisurely fashion. He passed by Marty, walking slowly and looking at the ground as if in deep thought.

Marty didn't look in his direction, but he said out of the corner of his mouth, "How's tricks, Max?"

"Lousy," said Schultz. "Lou hasn't paid us any salary for two weeks. He won't give us anything out of what you're paying him, either, because his rent is due."

"I know," said Marty. "That's why I held him down. This job is worth more to me. I'll give you and Gilligan each an extra twenty-five on the side—for yourselves."

"Thanks, Marty," said Schultz. "You're a regular guy!"

He turned and crossed the street, and in a moment he disappeared into the alley.

Now that he had his watchers placed, Marty turned and hurried away toward the corner, and turned into Trent Street. Number Twenty-nine was a converted studio building in the middle of the block.

LIKE many another antiquated house in the Village, its old brownstone front had been shaved, and then it had been given a new

facial, consisting of a limestone front and white window-boxes. It was a three-story house and there were three bells on the outside. The lowest bell had the name of Brasiloff, the second had none at all, and the third had the name of George Hervey.

Marty didn't ring the bell. If Taylor Bennet were dead, he manifestly wouldn't be able to answer the bell. Marty put his hand on the knob and turned. The door was open.

But just then there was a rush of feet behind him. A hard, unyielding object was pressed against his spine.

"Keep going, Quade!" said the soft voice of the roly-poly Ned Vallon.

Marty had no illusions about Vallon's readiness to shoot. The street was deserted, and he could easily get away. At the same time Marty knew that Vallon must want something from him. He made no effort to turn around, neither did he start to go in.

"Hello, Vallon," he said over his shoulder. "You do get around, don't you? Too bad you didn't stay for the fun at Ronson's Restaurant."

"Let's not talk out here," Vallon said suavely, pushing just a little harder with the revolver at Marty's spine. "I suggest we go upstairs."

"All right," said Marty. "Since you put it so politely."

He pushed the door open, and stepped into the hall. The gun remained touching his back. Vallon was keeping step for step with him.

"Now look, Quade," Vallon said reasonably. "I know just how fast you are with a gun. I know you have one in your shoulder holster, and that you're just wacky enough to try to pull it. Please don't. I ask you as a favor, please don't."

"I'll think it over," said Marty.

"All right. Let's go upstairs. Do I have to tell you I'll shoot the minute I think you're starting something?"

"No," said Marty. "You don't have to tell me. But I'm surprised you're using a gun. I thought a knife was more in your line."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Vallon said, his voice suddenly becoming dangerously smooth.

"Skip it till later, then," Marty said. He started up the stairs.

The door of the top floor studio was wide open. From the landing Marty had a view of the interior. The easel with the oil painting of the Countess Eve was in full view, in the center of the skylighted room, just as it appeared in the photograph which she had shown him. But there was no body in front of the easel.

Everything seemed to be in perfect order as Marty stepped inside, with Vallon close behind him. There was an oriental throw rug on the floor directly in front of the easel, but there was not a drop of blood upon it.

Two indirect-lighting fixtures were burning brightly, as if the occupant had just stepped out for a moment. The place was a litter of odds and ends, an assortment of queer props which an artist might be apt to use. Taylor Bennet must have rented the place furnished, from some artist who did covers for horror and adventure magazines. There were several oil canvases hanging on the wall, apparently rejected covers.

A TEN-GALLON hat hung on a peg, with an old-time Colt .45 alongside it, while on a row of hooks in a makeshift closet without doors there were costumes of various kinds for models to use. The other walls were decorated with old carbines, sabers, a spear and a mace. In one corner there stood a full suit of armor, with spear and a shield upon which appeared the white cross of a knight of Malta.

But there was no corpse.

Marty felt the hard muzzle of the gun in his spine, and Vallon said smoothly, "Now, Quade, let's talk business."

"Sure," said Marty, without turning around. "The last time we talked, you asked me for Taylor Bennet's

address. All right, I'm glad to oblige. The address is Twenty-nine Trent Street."

"Let's not get funny, Quade," Vallon murmured. "I don't need Bennet's address any more, or Gaston's, either."

"As a matter of fact, Vallon, isn't it true that you never needed them? You knew all along where they were hiding out."

Vallon laughed softly. "Would I have approached you in the restaurant if I had known?"

"You did that for effect, Vallon. Purely for effect."

"Effect? On whom?"

"You did it for effect on Red Mace. Mace was working with you, but you were double-crossing him. You wanted him to believe that you didn't know where to find Gaston or Bennet. In fact, you didn't try very hard to get the addresses from me. If you had wanted me to talk, you wouldn't have tried to bribe me. You knew I'd get sore at you. You wanted it to turn out just the way it did—so you could be free to operate without Mace at your elbow for a couple of hours."

"You're pretty keen, aren't you, Quade? Maybe you know what I want now?"

"Sure. You want the Capistrano jewels."

Vallon's voice was suddenly hoarse. "Where are they?"

Marty chuckled. "I should tell you, eh—so you can knock me right off?"

"Look, Quade," Vallon said impatiently. "I've done a lot to get my hands on the Capistrano jewels. They're worth a quarter of a million dollars. Just twenty-seven stones, but they're perfectly matched. Mace and I were Nick Devons' silent partners. We had as much interest in the Capistrano jewels as he had. But what does he do? He earmarks them for his kid!"

"So you killed him!"

"Never mind who killed him. I want the jewels. I've got a buyer

waiting for them, with cash. Figure it out for yourself. Will I stop at anything now?"

"The worst you can do is kill me," said Marty.

"I think you're wrong there, Quade. This house is unoccupied. That name in the downstairs bell is a phony. I have that apartment. Nobody comes here."

"But they'll come," Marty told him over his shoulder. "They'll come when the Capistrano dame squeals to the police—"

"Never think it!" Vallon interrupted. "That Capistrano dame, and Roy Gaston, will stay holed up in the apartment on Beasley Street till the cows come home. They're scared of their shadows. So I'll have a long, long time to work on you. You're a strong man, and you can stand a lot of pain."

"But I don't like to, if I can avoid it," said Marty.

"Ah! So you're ready to talk sense!"

"Sure," said Marty. "Sure. I'm always ready to talk sense."

MARTY twisted around swiftly, swinging his right arm behind him in a vicious, driving jab. He had nothing to lose, because he knew that in Vallon's plan, there was no place for Marty Quade—alive. The worst that could happen to him this way was a bullet in the back.

But Vallon hadn't been expecting anything like that. Marty's driving elbow caught his gun wrist, sweeping it away from Marty's back. Vallon's exclamation of dismay was drowned by the sharp report of the weapon. The bullet cut a furrow in Marty's coat, and buried itself in the opposite wall. But Marty was already completing his turn, pivoting on his right foot. He brought his left around, putting everything he had into it, and his bunched fist cracked nastily against the side of Vallon's jaw.

Vallon was staggered sideways by

the blow, and something seemed to be the matter with his jaw. But the spiteful anger in his eyes lanced out at Marty as he reeled away, raising the revolver for another shot.

Marty stepped in swiftly, and brought the edge of his open hand down sharply on the other's wrist. The gun went flying out of Vallon's hand, and fell to the oriental rug.

That reeling attempt to shoot had been Vallon's last conscious effort. His jaw was broken, all right. He stood there for a moment, teetering on his feet, then he seemed to deflate. He fell over, landing on his side. He rolled onto his face, and lay quietly, sunk in deep sleep.

Marty rubbed his knuckles. He didn't wonder that Vallon's jaw was broken, from the way his hand felt. He heard a patter of footsteps, light and fragile, running up the stairs. And then a slip of a girl appeared in the doorway, breathless and flushed.

Taking a quick look at her, Marty wouldn't have given her a day over sixteen. She was wearing a knee-length corduroy skirt, and a yellow sweater under a short beaver coat. She was a pretty little thing, with auburn hair and light blue eyes, and a small quivering mouth.

A huge police dog loomed beside her, spare and powerful. It came almost to the girl's shoulders. The dog, on a leash, kept close to the girl's side, as if to protect her from anything and everything. Its small, ugly eyes were fixed upon Marty with an intent and vindictive stare.

The girl's bosom was heaving beneath the sweater as she tried to catch her breath. Her gaze went to the quiet figure of Vallon, adorning the oriental rug. She uttered a little ejaculation of dismay. Then she raised her glance to Marty, and gave him a look which flashed fire.

"You beast!" she cried. "You've killed poor Mr. Vallon!"

She didn't wait for Marty's answer. She stooped swiftly and un-

hooked the police dog's leash. Then she pointed at Marty.

"At him, Berengaria!" she ordered sharply.

CHAPTER V

THE dog growled deep down in its throat. Its eyes were flecked slightly with red as it started to move toward Marty. It stopped, less than three feet from him, and bent its hind legs, preparing to spring at him.

Marty shouted to the girl, "Call that animal off!" He drew his automatic from its shoulder holster. "Call that dog off, or I'll have to kill it!"

The girl in the doorway paid no attention to his plea.

"Go on, Berengaria!" she urged. "Go get him. He hurt Henry!"

The dog growled again.

Marty swung his automatic down, so that the muzzle pointed at Berengaria's mouth. "I hate to shoot an animal like that—"

He broke off abruptly, staring at the dog. The animal had suddenly begun to act in a strange and puzzling manner. It started to sniff all around the edges of the oriental rug, avoiding the lax figure of Henry, and uttering queer whining noises as it sniffed.

In a fraction of a second, it had forgotten all about Marty, all about its mistress' command. It turned its head and looked at the girl, sniffed once more at the rug, then sat up on its haunches and began to howl most dismally. Marty stared at the creature, lowering the gun. The girl in the doorway came slowly into the room.

"Berengaria!" she demanded sharply. "What's the matter?"

The dog continued to howl. Marty looked at the girl. He saw that her face had suddenly become white.

"I never heard a dog howl," he told her, "except for one reason."

Her eyes, wide and frightened, swung away from the dog.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I know. They howl for the dead!"

The dog was running around in circles now, whining and howling by turns. It stopped abruptly before the suit of armor in the corner. Springing up, the dog seized the lower end of the lance in its teeth, and dragged at it. The suit of armor began to topple forward. The dog sprang out of the way, just in time to avoid being hit by the crashing metal.

The armor struck the floor and split open. Shield, breastplate, lance, helmet, jangled in all directions. And there, lying under what was left of the armor, was the body of Taylor

"Ah!" said Marty. "Nick Devons' kid! I'm Marty Quade."

Her eyes widened. "Then—then you couldn't have killed Bennet—and—and Mr. Vallon here."

"Don't worry about Vallon," Marty said dryly. "He's not dead. He just has a busted jaw. What I want to know is, how come you're here? You're supposed to be at that swanky Hargreaves School."

"I RECEIVED a note from Mr. Bennet yesterday," the girl explained. "He told me about dad's mur-



Bennet. The knife was still there, between his shoulder blades, just as Marty had seen it in the photograph.

The dog backed away from the dead body, all the way over to the window. It lay down flat on its stomach, with forepaws extended, howled once more, and became silent. The girl in the yellow sweater stared at the corpse. Then she pointed an accusing finger at Marty.

"You killed him!" she exclaimed.

Marty holstered his gun. "Listen, sister," he said impatiently. "You're just a kid. Where do you fit into this picture?"

"I'm Bitsy Devons!" she said defiantly.

Nobody knew about me, so I wasn't even notified when dad—when dad was killed. But Mr. Bennet told me in the note that he and Mr. Gaston had some jewels that dad had given them to hold for me. He said that he was in fear of his life, and he wanted me to come here tonight and get the jewels. He said he'd tell me where to go to get the other half."

"H'm," said Marty. "And you came?"

She nodded. "Miss Hargreaves refused me permission to leave, but I climbed out the window, and got Berengaria, who is the school mascot. I took the bus and got here an hour ago, and Mr. Vallon met me down-

stairs. He told me that a man was coming here who was very dangerous, and who intended to kill Mr. Bennet.

"He said that Mr. Bennet had left, fearing to wait for that dangerous man." She pointed her finger at Marty. "He meant you. Vallon said that I was to hide with Berengaria on the lower floor, and after he had got rid of the man, he would take me to Mr. Bennet."

Marty laughed harshly. "Vallon had already killed Bennet. I bet he has Bennet's half of the Capistrano jewels!"

He knelt swiftly beside the unconscious man, and went through his pockets. It was in the inside breast pocket that he found the little pouch. It was of chamois, and when Marty poured the contents out on the palm of his hand, Bitsy Devons gasped. Fourteen pearls gleamed, like rare hothouse plants. Their beauty was so delicate and fragile that he dared not pick one up between his fingers, lest it dissolve.

"They—they're marvelous!" Beatrice whispered.

"I'll say so," Marty told her. "Together with the thirteen stones Gaston is supposed to have, they're worth a quarter of a million dollars. Two men have died for them, that I know of—and only the Lord knows how many others have died in the past."

Suddenly a voice spoke from the doorway. "Looks like there's more deaths coming up, Quade!"

Marty jerked his head up.

Big Red Mace was standing in the doorway, looking uglier than ever, with his face plastered where he had been cut in the restaurant brawl with Marty, and with his right wrist in a splint. But in his left hand he held a burnished automatic, and on his face there was a nasty leer.

"I told you I'd catch up with you, Quade!" he said. He kept the gun pointing at Marty, and glanced at Beatrice Devons.

"I'd just as lief shoot you as

Quade," he warned. "So don't make a move I might not like!"

Marty gave him a crooked smile. "Vallon almost double-crossed you out of these stones, didn't he, Mace?"

Mace's eyes were narrow, vindictive. "I'm gonna kill you, Quade. And the girl, too. I'm taking those pearls. I know where to get the rest of them, too. Think about that for a minute, before I put a bullet in you. I'll be spending the dough for those pearls, while you push up stinkweed!"

Marty saw the tight, tense look in Mace's eyes.

"Let the girl go, Red," he said. "She never hurt you."

"Can't," said Mace. "She could talk. When I finish with this, there won't be *anyone* to talk—except Vallon, and they won't believe him, because they'll have him cold for all these murders. So here goes—"

Marty was all set to fling the pearls in Mace's face, and to jump him, when there was suddenly a low growl from over near the window. Mace jerked his eyes in that direction and saw the dog.

"What the hell—"

He was interrupted by Bitsy's high-pitched voice: "Go get him, Berengaria!"

The dog came leaping out of its corner, its long back arcing gracefully in the air, its fangs bared.

Red Mace cried out a choked curse, and swung his gun at the leaping dog. His finger was on the trigger, and the muzzle was lined up with the faithful beast's head. In another instant, Berengaria would have been dead in mid-air.

MARTY threw himself at Mace, sending his hundred and eighty pounds crashing into the gunman's side. He threw Mace off balance. The automatic exploded, but the bullet was deflected, and crashed through the window pane. But now, Berengaria reached her goal. Her teeth sank into Mace's outstretched arm, and the man screamed as the power-

ful fangs ripped skin and flesh, down to the bone. He dropped to the floor, squirming and shrieking, with the dog tenaciously worrying at him.

Marty got an arm lock on the dog's head. With his own revolver muzzle Marty pried open Berengaria's teeth, dragging them out of the wound.

Bitsy was helping him, with her hand twisted in the dog's mane, talking to it, and dragging it off the kill. Finally, between them, Marty and Bitsy got the dog off Mace. The gunman sank back on the floor, almost alongside his partner, Vallon, and kept on moaning.

A police whistle had sounded while the struggle had been going on, and heavy feet pounded on the stairs. In a moment, Inspector Hansen burst into the room, followed by Sergeant Glickstein, Sergeant Boyle, and two uniformed men. Hansen stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the room.

"What the hell goes on here?" he demanded.

Marty was sitting on the floor, pulling pieces of the broken rock and rye bottle out of his pocket. He said ruefully:

"This is what I get for indulging in violent exercise. The bottle broke!"

He looked up, and winked at Hansen. Then he saw Roy Gaston and the Countess Eve coming into the room behind Hansen, together with Schultz and Gilligan, both of whom looked sheepish.

Marty got to his feet, pulling bits of glass and lemon and orange peel out of his pocket. He swished off his hand, which was wet and sticky with sweet rye whisky.

"How did you get on to Gaston's hideout, inspector?" he demanded.

Hansen smiled sourly. "Your friend, Lou Makin, tipped me off. It seems he got to thinking things over, and wasn't satisfied with the deal you gave him. He figured he was entitled to more than fifty dollars, when you were collecting two thousand. Then he heard about the hunt



MARTY QUADE

for Gaston and Bennet, and put two and two together. So he called me up and tipped me that you were interested in 15½ Beasley Street. Naturally, I didn't lose any time."

"Naturally," said Marty.

"And now," Hansen said portentously, "maybe you can square yourself. What have you to offer?"

Marty waved a hand around the room. "First, meet Miss Beatrice Devons, Nick's daughter. And that is Berengaria, who damned near saved our lives just now. On the floor here you have one corpse, representing Mr. Taylor Bennet, and one near-corpse, known as Henry Vallon. This other thing alongside of Vallon is Red Mace. You can arrest them for the murder of Nick Devons and Taylor Bennet."

"H'm," said Hansen.

Marty looked at Eve Capistrano, and saw that she was handcuffed to one of the detectives. He raised his eyebrows.

"Confessed, eh?"

Hansen said, "She talked when I got tough with her. She was working with Vallon and Mace to get the Capistrano jewels back. But she intended to double-cross them both. She alone knew where Gaston and Bennet were hiding out, and she planned to let Vallon and Mace take the rap for

Nick Devons' murder, and scam with the jewels. She was only sticking with Gaston till she could find where he had hidden his half. Vallon had learned that she planned to cross him, and that's why she was afraid of getting a knife stuck in her."

"I figured it that way," Marty said, "which is why I handcuffed her to the stove."

"All right, all right," Hansen said. "But where the devil is Gaston's half of the jewels? I see Bennet's half—scattered here on the floor. But I searched the whole apartment and can't find the ones Gaston hid. He can't remember, either. He was so drunk, he has no recollection of where he put them!"

Marty Quade smiled. He looked at Roy Gaston, who shuddered. His lips twisted wryly.

"I hope to heaven I didn't throw them down a sewer or something," Roy Gaston said. "I'd have to make

up their value out of my own pocket."

"Don't worry," said Marty. "I got them."

The Countess Eve exclaimed, "You didn't get them. I was watching you like a hawk while you were in the apartment. You didn't get them—"

"When I finished searching," Marty went on imperturbably, "I realized that there was only one place Gaston could have hidden the pearls. I didn't have time to look, so I took the whole bottle along. And now it's busted."

Out of his pocket, wet and soggy, he began pulling pearls, one after the other, until he had thirteen of them in his hand.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Roy Gaston. "Was I smart enough to put them in there?"

Marty chuckled. "It's a good thing you didn't take another drink out of that bottle. We'd have had to open you like an oyster!"

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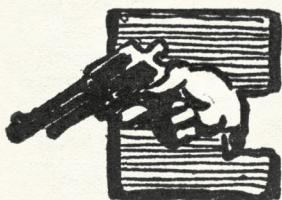
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Justice Deferred

By Edward James



FURMAN dropped to one knee and sighted carefully along the barrel of his Police

Positive. Several hundred feet ahead of him a man was sprinting for cover toward the jagged sea rocks. A taut, thin smile tugged at Furman's mouth as he swung the muzzle just a fraction to the left and squeezed the trigger. On the pistol range at Central City he had often plugged the bull's-eye of a stationary target at a similar distance.

The .38 made a hoarse-throated bark which ricocheted against a nearby cliff and a tiny clot of sand spurted inches from the fugitive's feet. Behind Furman there was the sudden bellow of two closely spaced shots from a .45. The runner dived headlong for the rocks.

And almost immediately smoke puffed up and the whine of lead sounded uncomfortably close to Furman's head. He dropped onto the beach flat against his face, grinning tightly. Sonny Weir was a damn good shot, as he had reason to know.

Furman twisted slowly and watched Sheriff Comstock wriggling up beside him in the sand. Comstock was the man who'd wired Central City headquarters of his suspicions that Sonny Weir had holed up in this God-forsaken stretch of country.

As he lay there, watching the fat man crawling and puffing up to him, Furman was thinking of what the

chief had said. The chief had sat behind his desk, chewing an Upman, and squinting through puff-lidded eyes at the thin, dapper detective.

"We have a tip, Furman, from some small-time sheriff in a little fishing village up north. There's a guy up there in a little shack he thinks might be Sonny Weir. I'm sending you to check up. You worked on that case for six months and this is your chance to bring one of the Weir brothers in. Go to it and good luck."

Yes, thought Furman, he'd worked on that case for six months—and a good deal longer. He knew the Weir brothers all right. They'd had the narcotics racket sewed up tight as a piece of weather stripping until they found out that a certain newspaper reporter was making a little private investigation of his own. And now the Weir brothers were wanted for murder. The narcotics charge would be unnecessary and superfluous.

The Weir brothers had made one mistake. They had shot the reporter in the stomach instead of the heart, and he had lived long enough to make a dying declaration identifying his killers, good enough to be admitted as evidence in any court of law.

Sheriff Comstock mopped at the oily sheen of sweat glistening on his thick, loose-jowled face with a huge square of blue handkerchief. Heavy rolls of flesh clung to a sodden shirt. His voice was a thin, breathless wheeze.

"We'll get him, Furman. He's got to make a break for the dock. That'll bring him out into the open again."

*Justice has long arms
—but those arms be-
come tentacles of
doom for those who
seek to mock her.*

Furman nodded and peered straight ahead at the dock. It was a long, half-rotted platform jutting far out over the water on its double row of greenish, moss-covered piles. A small motor launch moored at its far end was rocking gently under the long slow swell that swept inward and curled into white breakers lashing angrily against the beach.

Comstock grunted. "He bought that boat from Gus Lager an' hardly ever used it. That's what first got me suspicious. I guess he intended to keep it tied up for a getaway. Then I seen some of those *Wanted* pictures. You guys in the city oughta get a better camera." The sheriff gave a wheezy laugh. "It didn't look much like him."

"How about his brother?" asked Furman. "Any sign at all of him up in these parts?"

"Big Joe Weir?" Comstock shook his head. "Not unless the little one keeps him in his pocket." He started to laugh again and stopped short as a shot blasted from behind the rocks and sand splashed into his face. The bullet made a soft thud as it pounded into the earth.

Comstock uttered a soft curse and both men rolled sideways to a small mound of sand rolled up by the wind. It offered good protection.

Furman said: "I guess they split up after the heat went on. Well, somebody's bound to spot Big Joe and we'll pick him up elsewhere."

"Sure," agreed Comstock, "you can't get away with murder no more. Not with all these newfangled scientific methods they got. I was readin' only the other day how some young G-men trapped a fellow by taking his fingerprints off a necktie."

THE sheriff scratched his jaw with the muzzle of his weapon. "Maybe we're not up on all these new methods but we make pretty good records in these parts. One way or another justice always gets served. There's somethin' about all this"—he waved his gun at the sky and the sea and

the distant horizon—"there's somethin' about it that distinguishes between right and wrong.

"Take the Weir brothers, for instance. For years they had things their own way back in Central City, living on the fat of the land, pushing little guys around, piling up bank accounts. And then one of 'em comes out here and look what happens. There he is, a scared little rat running for his life. And when he comes out from them rocks and heads for his boat he'll make as neat a target as you'd want."

"I've seen crime at its worst," Furman said, "and I can tell you that it pays, Comstock, and pays damn well."

"Only for a time. Even if we lawmen don't catch up with them, there's always somebody or somethin' that squares the score in the end."

Furman's lips curled contemptuously. "You mean Providence?"

"I mean God Almighty, friend, and—" Comstock stiffened. "There he goes!"

Furman's muscles tensed. Sonny Weir had bolted from behind his rocky haven and was racing toward the dock, weaving crazily from side to side. It made him a poor target, but it also slowed his pace.

Sheriff Comstock was plunging forward again and Furman loped along beside him. There was a small ladder leading to the dock platform and Sonny Weir started scrambling up it. Furman did not see Comstock take aim, but suddenly the big gun belled and Sonny Weir threw up his hands and spilled over backward into the sand. He sat there, cursing and hugging his leg.

"What did I tell you?" said Comstock. He turned to face Furman and his jaw sagged and surprise rioted across his fat features. The whites of his bugging eyes rolled upward. His voice was a thin whisper. "Furman, listen Furman," he said, and then the bullet caught him between the teeth and his thick body jerked convulsively. He hung loosely onto his feet a

moment, and then slowly, very slowly, he pitched forward with a soft thump into the sand.

Furman's lips twitched and he looked at his gun. His face was hard and cold and tight. He shrugged his natty shoulders and headed for Sonny Weir.

"You hurt bad, Sonny?"

Weir looked up with a twisted expression. "Damn you, Furman, why didn't you give it to him before he plugged me?"

"I couldn't, Sonny. I didn't know he was going to shoot so soon. Can you move?"

"Yeah, I think so. Help me to the boat."

Furman hung back. "You'll have to make it yourself." His mouth twitched again. "I want you to cover me on this, Sonny."

Weir snorted. "Yeah, how?"

FURMAN'S birdlike eyes darted around and fastened upon a rusted iron ring that was screwed into one of the moss-covered piles supporting the dock. He took out a pair of handcuffs. "Here, slip these through that ring and then lock them over my wrists." He backed against the piling and put his hands behind him.

"What's the gag?" Weir was frowning.

"Don't you see, Sonny? I could never have done it myself. There'll be more men here in a while. I'll tell them that you ambushed us and killed the sheriff and cuffed me to this piling, your idea of a joke. That way you can escape and it won't look suspicious for me."

Weir's eyes narrowed. "You want me to take the rap for his death?"

"Why not, Sonny? If they catch you you'll hang for the reporter's killing anyway. They can't hang you more than once. And this way you've got a chance to make a break—a chance I gave you."

Thought moved slowly behind Weir's dull, muddy eyes, and then suddenly he limped painfully behind Fur-



man and locked the city detective to the iron ring.

"Now my gun," Furman said. "It's registered in my name and checks with the bullet in the sheriff's head. Take it and drop it into the ocean."

Weir dropped the Police Positive into his pocket. "You're smart, Furman, damn smart. You made almost as much coverin' us in the narcotics racket as Joe and me did, and without half the risk we took." He licked his lips. "Still, I don't know why you didn't shoot me in the back now you had the chance. Get me outa the way. After all, if they catch me maybe I'll spill my guts. They wouldn't be so good for you."

Furman smiled thinly. "Do you know what Big Joe would do if he read in the papers that you were shot and captured with me on the job?"

"Yeah, sure." Weir's eyes glowed with understanding. "He'd find you if it was the last thing he did, and he'd nail you with so much lead there

wouldn't be enough of you left for a decent police funeral."

"Exactly, Sonny. I've been thinking about that ever since the chief sent me up here. One thing more—and I know you're going to like this. Let me have one on the side of the head with the butt of your gun. And easy, Sonny, no fractures, just enough to put me out for a couple of minutes."

Sonny Weir took the gun out of his holster sling and moved closer to Furman. The detective could see the lips peeling over Sonny's teeth in a cruel, vicious grin. He saw the gun drawn back in an arc and then suddenly lightning slashed across his vision and exploded into darkness. . . .

The sting of cold water brought Furman back to consciousness. It swirled and broke around his chest and rolled on up the beach. For several seconds he was dazed and then recollection returned in a surge. His mouth hung loosely open and his eyes glowed hotly in his head. Panic tore at his chest and deep in his throat he uttered a low, whimpering animal noise.

With a sudden burst of savage movement he tore his wrists against

the locked handcuffs. Tore them until the skin hung in raw shreds. He was insensible to the sting of salt water in the wound.

Furman screamed, the long, blood-chilling scream of a trapped man. His voice echoed back from the cliff in hollow mockery. Good Lord! He was a detective. Hadn't he seen the moss on the pilings? Didn't he know what that meant?

A short distance up the shore he saw the heavy lump that was Sheriff Comstock sprawled out in death. The surf rolled up and touched Comstock's stiffly outstretched fingers. It made a low drumming noise and the sound of it was like Comstock's voice:

"You can't get away with murder . . . One way or another justice always gets served . . . There's always somebody or something that squares the score in the end . . ."

At first the laughter bubbled softly from Furman's lips—then it grew louder, wilder, more hysterical. For ten full minutes it rolled crazily from his throat until it was choked by the tide as it rose slowly, inexorably, over his head.



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Hot Parole



Parole Officer Jud Dallas, whose job was to make up queries for ex-cons, had to find his own set of answers—for a pistol questionnaire.

By S. J. Bailey

JUD DALLAS thought there was something odd about her—aside from her beauty—the minute he saw her coming through the door of Nick's place. Dallas was accustomed to the pallor and the uncertain air that comes from being cooped up. This girl had an air of assurance, and her complexion, though somewhat

pale, lacked the decided pallor you'd expect in a stir bug.

Dallas frowned as he watched her approach his booth at the rear. She certainly didn't act as if she owed the world an apology. Her dossier was ticketed in his mind: Paula Frane, won beauty contest some Western burg, came to New York, didn't have enough on the ball for Broadway, got job as secretary to Wadsworth Ainslee, talent scout, then bounced into prison for stealing nine hundred bucks from her boss.

"Are you the parole officer?"

Dallas motioned to the bench opposite. "Sit down, Paula."

Nick appeared, rubbing red hands on soiled apron.

"Make mine a raspberry sundae," said Dallas.

"I'll take beer," said Paula Frane.

Jud Dallas eyed her sternly. Something flared up in her eyes, but she said, "Er—make it a chocolate soda."

"That's better. No use getting off to a bad start, eh?"

The girl licked her lips, eyes sullen. "I haven't had a beer in so long—it wouldn't have done any harm."

Jud Dallas shook his head. "Little slips lead to big slips. Now let's get this over. You know the rules. No boy friends, no jive, no hooky. Once a week you report here—to me. I picked Nick's because I've got a job lined up for you around the corner. Palace Steam Laundry. Sorting incoming bundles. It's a back-breaker, but then you won't have any pesky energy left to get you into trouble evenings—"

"Just a minute," she cut in. "I've got a job."

Dallas gaped. "How come? You only got sprung this A. M."

"I hit an agency. I'm a maid now. Working for some willowy goose about town, name of Reba Parkinson, Sixty-seventh Street."

Dallas stared. He was accustomed to parolees hesitantly facing an unfamiliar world. But this dame, she had her mind made up. It riled him.

"So you can hang that laundry job behind the door," she was saying.

"Not so fast," rasped Dallas. "What agency was it?"

"Gruber on Sixth."

"Gruber? How'd you happen to hit him?"

"I was talking about this and that with a girl in the prison laundry last week. She mentioned it."

"Oh. They didn't ask for references?"

"Yes. But I whipped up a nice hard-luck story, like that girl suggested, and I got by."

"I don't like it," frowned Dallas.

"What's the matter with it?"

"For one thing, the wealthy boss. Dough and jewels lying around. Too much temptation for a dame like you."

A steely glint came into her eyes. "I never stole anything in my life." Her voice was low, vibrant.

"What about the nine hundred simoleons from Wadsworth Ainslee's desk?"

"He framed me!" she cried.

Dallas sighed. "Fifty-two parolees I got to look after, and forty-six claim they were framed."

"He *did*! I tell you, he's a phony. He holds fake beauty contests in small-town theaters. He has a good-looking girl, whose family have money, picked to win. Then he carts her to New York and bleeds her gently for this and that until she gets tired and goes home. Only in my case, I told him I was going to the D. A."

"Your family got money?"

"No! That's where he made a mistake. There's another Frane in our town with all kinds of dough. He thought I belonged to *that* family!"

"Oh," said Dallas, deciding to humor her. "What then?"

"As soon as I said I was going to the D. A., Ainslee oiled up and offered me a job as his private secretary. I bit, and inside of two weeks he had me framed, with marked bills in my room."

"Well," said Dallas, "that at least is one of the most original I've listened to."

Twin points of color burned high in Paula Frane's cheeks. "I might have known a—a dumb ox like you wouldn't have sense enough to see I'm telling the—"

"You're getting started all wrong, sister," rasped Dallas, getting red. "I'm the parole officer, see? A bad report from me and your parole melts like butter in a cat's mouth!"

Paula Frane bit sharply at her lip. She got pale. "I—I—"

"Now that's better. You have my permission to try this job for a week."

Meet me at Sixty-seventh and Broadway at five on Thursday."

She was rapidly recovering her initial assurance. "Thank you so much." Her voice was edged with sarcasm.

He shook his head. "Something tells me you'll bounce back into the clink before you get your feet wet."

She got up, face flaming. "Thanks for the encouragement, pal."

FROM the doorway of Nick's, Dallas watched her go down the street. She had a nice way of walking. He studied it, feeling a peculiar sense of having been beaten at his own game. The first time a parolee had told him where to get off.

The dame was smart, too smart. He'd make her eat her—

His thoughts were suddenly deadlocked. He stiffened as he saw the guy lounging by the subway entrance. Paula Frane stepped quickly into the aperture. The tough-looking mug ground his cigarette with a deliberate heel, then tugged at his hat brim and strolled after her.

He might be just a guy on the make, but to Dallas he looked more like a professional hood.

It wasn't part of Dallas' job to shepherd his charges like sheep. If stray hoods bumped them off, it merely shortened his list and eased his work for a few hours before they had a chance to assign him some more stir bugs. Right now he had six guys to check on downtown.

But he couldn't get Paula Frane out of his mind. She was too good-looking for one thing; and for another, parts of her story rang with sufficient genuineness to plague his mind.

By the time he got down to the subway platform, it was empty. So he went to the Parkinson house on Sixty-seventh Street, a four-story private dwelling sandwiched in between towering apartment houses.

He rang the bell and Paula Frane answered, attired in trim maid's uniform. "Yes?" she said, staring blankly, without any sign of recognition.

Dallas felt suddenly a trifle foolish and the feeling made him boil inwardly. "That—that hood. I mean, did you notice anybody following you?"

"You wish to see someone?" she asked innocently.

Dallas ground his teeth. He had been prepared for any kind of reception but this. "Yes," he gritted. "Miss Parkinson home?"

"No."

"Mind if I step in and look around?"

She hesitated, then stepped aside. As he passed her, she said, "Take your hat off in the house, please."

Dallas whipped around at her angrily: "I oughta smack you, you little—"

The phone was ringing. "Excuse me," she said, picking up the instrument from the hall table. "Parkinson residence . . . Oh, hello, Miss Parkinson . . . Yes . . . In the night table drawer, yes . . . Just a minute, I'll write it down."

Dallas watched her scribble something on a slip of paper. Then: "All right, Miss Parkinson. Yes, I—what's that? . . . Yes, I guess they'd fit, but—" She held the receiver to her ear a long moment, then said doubtfully, "All right, Miss Parkinson, I will."

Paula Frane hung up. "That was Miss Parkinson. She wants me to do an errand for her."

"What kind of an errand?"

"Deliver something downtown. A—a small package. M-medicine. Yes, that's it, her medicine. It's up in her bedroom."

Dallas noticed that there was a puzzled look in her eye and that her hand trembled slightly as she tore the slip off the jot pad and folded it, dropping it inside the neck of her uniform. It was a deliberate gesture, as if she'd said: "If you think I'm going to tell you more, you can go hang yourself behind a door."

Dallas felt himself boiling again. He didn't know why she made him so mad. Maybe it was her looks and maybe something else. He clamped

his hat on hard and went out of the door, seething.

"Any man is a dope," he told himself fiercely, swinging downstreet, eye out for a cab, "to let himself get so sore at a dame. In a couple of weeks I'll just bounce her back in the can. This job of hounding stir bugs is bad enough, without having 'em come so good-looking."

There was no cab at the corner. He went into a drug store to make a phone call. While he was in a booth, the guy came in. It was the hood he'd seen toss the butt. The hood had a scar on his left cheek, he noticed, as the guy leaned over the counter and talked to the drug clerk.

Dallas stood with the receiver in his mitt and the hum in his ear, while he watched Scar-cheek. Dallas pinched the booth door open a hair's breadth.

"I'm sorry, sir," the clerk was saying, "but we can't sell oil of vitriol."

"Aw, I just want a little bottle," Scar-cheek said, "enough to clean some pottery. I don't want to go over to a hardware store. It's worth a couple of bucks to pick it up here."

After some more arguing, the clerk said, "All right, mister, I guess it's okey."

Scar-cheek stuck the wrapped bottle in his coat pocket and went out. He sauntered up the street, past the Parkinson house, looking neither to right nor left.

DALLAS stepped from the drug store, scratching his ear, a puzzled frown on his face. His calls were piling up. He had to get back on the job. He watched the retreating back of the hood. Scar-cheek turned to the right at the next corner. Dallas walked the length of the block and looked down. Midway down the block a sign stood out: *Elite Garage*. Scar-cheek was not in sight.

"Aw, hell," Dallas told himself. "Oil of vitriol. Sulphuric Acid. It's just my imagination, her being so good-looking and all."

He walked back to the drug store,

consulted his watch. It was twenty minutes of seven. There was an empty cab at the corner now. "One more turn," he told himself, "and then I'll—"

He had started to traverse the block again. A low-hung, sleek sedan flashed by him and halted directly in front of the Parkinson house. It was empty save for the chauffeur at the wheel. It waited.

His pace quickened. By the time he had stepped into the entranceway of the ritzy apartment opposite, the door opened and a girl wearing a dark veil and a slinky black gown came down and got into the limousine. It was Paula Frane!

Dallas had never seen the Parkinson dame, but he knew Paula's figure by now; he'd been memorizing it, against his will. He knew the way she carried herself, in spite of those fancy duds!

Then he saw something that set every fibre of his being on edge. It was already growing dark. But he caught a glimpse of the chauffeur's face as the sedan got under way. It was Scar-cheek, togged out in private livery!

Dallas made good time to the corner. A middle-aged, portly man was in the act of hiring the cab. Dallas thrust him aside and climbed in, ordering, "Follow that sedan, buddy."

"That ain't no way to treat my cus—" the cabby started to say. Then he saw Dallas' face and the badge in his palm, and he thrust smoothly into gear.

The limousine turned south at the corner and bowled down the Avenue as fast as the rush hour traffic would permit. At Forty-Ninth, Paula left the sedan and went into a ritzy jewelry store. Dallas dived after her, muttering.

He maneuvered to the rear of the store, saw her showing something to a thin man with bald head who stood behind a counter on which was a sign: *Mr. Porter, Appraisals*.

Dallas felt his muscles tightening

as he noted the object the girl held in her hand. It was a large diamond ring!

"Yes, Miss Parkinson—" Dallas heard Porter speak the name, then the voice dropped.

What a dame! thought Dallas. What a nerve! Togs herself out in her employer's clothes, picks up a diamond big enough to choke a horse and goes out to have it appraised! Or am I going nuts? Never saw a parolee work so fast.

The girl and Porter exchanged a few sentences, in low tones, then she turned away. Dallas feigned interest in a collection of scarab pendants. He caught a whiff of subtle perfume as she went by him without a glance. He followed her out of the store, watched her climb into the sedan.

"She sure wears clothes," he muttered, climbing into his cab. "Just my luck to have her on my list—instead of—aw, hell!"

The low-hung sedan circled the block and proceeded north sixteen blocks, and stopped at the curb just west of Third Avenue, beside a fire plug.

"Wait here," Dallas told his driver, indicating a spot in front of an apartment house, a few doors west of the sedan.

The sedan waited fully ten minutes while the girl smoked cigarette after cigarette until the car was filled with blue haze. The chauffeur stayed at the wheel. Finally a man came hurrying around the corner and stepped into the car. It had gotten dark and Dallas was uncertain of the figure except that the man was short and chubby.

The sedan moved at once, but did not gain speed. It circled the block slowly, Dallas' cabby staying at a respectful distance. The circuit completed, the sedan halted at the same spot. Paula and her passenger remained side by side, apparently arguing.

"Just making a little trade," muttered Dallas, darkly. "I'll bet she's driving a tough bargain."

The next moment he stared. The man's arm had raised swiftly and it looked to Dallas as if he had suddenly swung at her. Her head dropped from sight. Dallas sprang from the cab, growling an oath.

SIMULTANEOUSLY, the man jumped from the sedan and ran around the corner. Dallas' swift stride brought him abreast of the sedan. He would have overtaken the man in a few more seconds. But out of the tail of his eye he saw that the sedan door hung open and Paula's body hung out head first, one gloved hand trailing in a gutter puddle. Dallas brought up short with an oath. He sprang to her and lifted her up. Scar-cheek, the chauffeur, was getting out, his face inscrutable.

Dallas saw the welt high on her forehead, half-hidden by tumbling hair. Her lips parted, a slight moan escaped, then her eyelids fluttered. Dallas pushed her quickly back on the seat and climbed in beside her.

"Now," said Dallas, "suppose you tell me what this is all about? I suppose you know you've busted your parole all to hell?"

Paula blinked at him a moment, then gasped. "He—he grabbed the ring! Miss Parkinson's ring! He grabbed it and knocked me out!"

Dallas grinned wryly. "Sure. What were you doing with her ring? And this rig of hers, and her car?"

"She—she called up while you were there. You remember? That was her. She told me to do this."

"She told you to take her ring and go out in the car and dress in her clothes and—"

"Yes. She told me that she had a date with this man—and she couldn't make it. I was to have the ring appraised, then bring it here. Only—"

"Only what—"

"The funny thing is that—the man was Wadsworth Ainslee!"

"Ainslee? Your—the guy you said framed you? Your old boss?"

"Yes!"

"Aw, come on now," said Dallas. "I'm ready to believe a good gag. But this—what would Ainslee be doing buying rings from Miss Reba Parkinson?"

"That's what I—" Paula was slowly unclenching her fist. There was a crumpled paper in the palm of her hand. She stared at it.

Dallas grabbed it and smoothed it. It was a newspaper clipping: *Reba Parkinson Beauty Winner. Takes first prize in amateur contest held in prominent night club. Daughter of a well known family. . . .*

"Where did you get this?"

"I found it in Miss Parkinson's night table when I went to take out the ring. She must have—"

Dallas growled: "Listen, sister. Was that phone call you got from Miss Parkinson, while I was there, *on the up and up*?"

Paula gasped. "You—you think I made it up? Why—why, you heard the phone ring—"

"Yes, and maybe it was somebody you got working with you—like this phony chauffeur, for instance." Dallas looked toward the driver's seat. "Where is he?"

"Why, he's gone!"

"Yeah," said Dallas, grabbing her arm and squeezing it. "He's gone. You got a lot of explaining to do. He's got a bottle of acid in his pocket. I was dopey enough to think he was after you. What—"

"Ow! You're hurting me—you— you dumb ox! Ow!" she moaned.

Dallas swallowed hard, letting her go. "Ah, why didn't you stay back there in Peoria and let me alone! I don't know whether to believe you or not! This is a hell of a case!"

She was crying softly. "He—he stole the ring! I'm going to be fired and you'll throw me back in jail! I—I—please drive me back. I want to put back Miss Parkinson's clothes. I—I don't think it was she who called me at all!"

Dallas' mouth dropped. "Now we're getting somewhere. That sounds

more like it. But—" he scratched his chin—"if this Parkinson dame also won a beauty contest and what you said about Ainslee is right, and he met you, thinking it was her—*why did he grab the ring and beat it?*"

He left the question unanswered. He opened the door on the street side and stepped down. He pulled open the front door and started to get behind the wheel.

"Look out!" screamed Paula.

She was too late. Something hit Dallas on the side of the head, just over the ear. He was dimly aware of the shadow that had leaped up from under the front fender. The wheels had been angled away from the curb. Scar-cheek, instead of running away as Dallas had assumed, had slipped from under the wheel in the darkness and crouched under the front fender, against the angled wheel, waiting for Dallas to make just such a move.

Dallas staggered out into the street, barely missing being hit by a beer truck. By the time he had shaken away the grogginess, Scar-cheek had pocketed his sap, jumped behind the wheel and geared the powerful car around the corner.

Dallas' cabby was on his toes. He slithered to the curb in the wake of the big sedan, but the beer truck had begun maneuvers to unload at a tavern on the corner, so that by the time they got under way, they had lost the sedan.

They cruised the streets directly to the north without success. Finally Dallas told the cabby to park again at the spot where the sedan had stopped. He went into the tavern and began to thumb through the telephone directory.

HE WAS muttering to himself as he thumbed through the "A's." "If I hadn't been such a hard-headed dope, she wouldn't be riding around with that bottle of acid right now. If I'd only just listened and let her convince me. But oh no. I am a smart guy. Ninety-nine out of a hundred parolees

have a phony story; so I figure she's got to have one too. Jud Dallas, you're a dope. That kid is on the up and up and they are not fixing to clean pottery with that acid!"

There wasn't any Wadsworth Ainslee listed. He tried the "W's" but there were too many of them. Then he started checking the addresses. He found one only two blocks away. He scratched his jaw reflectively. Then he shrugged. "It's a shot in the dark. I'll try it."

He went into the lobby of the swanky apartment house and flashed his badge at the goggle-eyed doorman. "Wadsworth Ainslee live here?"

"Y-yessuh."

"Don't announce me. Just give me the apartment number."

"Seventeen C, suh."

"Thanks."

The elevator was self-service. He stepped out on the seventeenth floor and his feet sank deep in sound-deadening carpet.

He found the apartment, pressed the button. He didn't hear any bell or buzzer, but in a moment a voice came through the door. "Who is it?"

"Western Union," piped Dallas.

"Slide it under the door."

"You gotta sign for this one."

"Leave it with the operator downstairs."

"Okey, mister. I'll leave the package here and get him to sign. He saw me bring it up."

Dallas scraped the toe of his foot gently against the door, close to the floor, to simulate the sound of a package being carelessly deposited. Then he went back to the elevator and pushed the "down" button, leaping back out of the car and pressing himself against the wall, edging quickly toward the door of Ainslee's apartment.

In a moment the door opened a crack. Before the person had a chance to see that there was no package, Dallas threw all his weight against the door. It jammed against a foot, but Dallas forced it, wedging himself

through the narrow opening, his gun out.

"What's the meaning of this?" demanded a man in shirt sleeves, chubby cheeks shaking with indignation. He wore lounging slippers.

"Never mind the acting," growled Dallas. "You're Ainslee?"

"Yes. Now—"

"Where is she?"

"Where is who?"

Dallas took a step forward. "You know damn well—"

Ainslee retreated a pace. He waved a hand toward a closed side of the room. "Take a look for yourself, smart guy."

Dallas motioned Ainslee to precede him. Ainslee shrugged, stepped to the door and opened it. Dallas moved forward, keeping Ainslee covered.

The room was unlighted except for the illumination which slanted over his shoulder. His jaw tightened as he saw the girl on the bed. Her feet and legs were bare, her ankles tied tightly with a silken cord. Her bare arms were outstretched with wrists tied to opposite bedposts. She could move only the lower part of her body, and that in a short, agonizing arc. On the night table beside the bed stood a bottle, its cork pulled. It was the oil of vitriol!

Then Dallas stiffened as he stared at the silken kerchief which was bound across the lower part of her face. It *wasn't Paula Frane!*

Dallas' eyes swiftly roved the room. "What have you done with—"

Then he stopped, listening. The room was dimly lighted. He heard faint scuffling sounds from the corner, hidden by the partly open door. Keeping his eyes and gun on Ainslee, who was standing beside the bed, Dallas reached out with his foot and heeled the door further inward.

It swung slowly, then snagged against something. As it paused it seemed to Dallas that it exploded in his face. Actually, what happened was that the ugly snout of a Luger with silencer attached crashed through its

panel and the door came hurtling back at Dallas like a whirlwind boomerang, spiked with lead and steel.

It crashed into his gun hand and before he could aim his gun again to shoot through the panel, the Luger spoke once, creasing his side. At the same instant, Ainslee produced a gun and aimed it at Dallas.

THE Luger piercing the door panel was aimed right at Dallas' heart now. "Drop your gun," ordered Ainslee. It was either comply or take a slug in his chest. Dallas wanted to live a little longer. His fingers relaxed, one by one, and his gun bounced on the carpet.

"Turn on the lights, Riker," ordered Ainslee.

There was the click of a switch. The dark corners of the room sprang at Dallas. He saw the man called Riker; it was Scar-cheek, the man who had bought the acid. Dallas also saw a slight figure, hands bound behind her, on the floor, on which she seemed to have fallen. Dallas recognized Paula Frane. Above the silk kerchief which bound her mouth, her eyes appealed frantically. Her arms were pulled tight behind her, her legs threshed as if she were in pain.

Dallas took a step forward, eyed the girl in the bed. "This is Reba Parkinson, eh?"

Ainslee eyed Dallas bleakly. "Who are you? How do you know—"

"I'm a little factor you forgot, Ainslee, I'm the parole officer on Paula Frane's case. You framed Paula Frane when she got wise to your phony talent racket. That was okey, except that you figured when she got sprung she might make more trouble.

"In the meantime, Reba Parkinson, another winner in one of your phony contests, had gotten wise and was threatening to go to the D. A. You had learned that Paula Frane was to be paroled and you arranged to have her tipped off where she could get a job as maid. You wanted to have her working for Reba Parkinson so it

would look okey when you framed her for the murder of Reba."

Ainslee sneered. "Go ahead and get it off your chest, so there'll be room for a slug."

"You had Riker waylay the Parkinson chauffeur and take his place. Then you had some dame call Paula and pretend to be her new mistress and get her to take an expensive ring from the house. You planned to have her found with this ring in her possession so that it would appear her mistress found out she had stolen it and was going to expose her and she killed her in a desperate attempt to keep from going back to jail. "Then you took the ring and beat it, figuring she'd follow you to your apartment, but when I barged onto the scene, Riker had to get rid of me and bring her here by force. I don't know just how you were going to kill Reba Parkinson—"

"You'll see in a minute," mouthed Ainslee. "When she hits the pavement, seventeen stories down, there won't be much—"

"Right under *your* window?" asked Dallas. "That won't look so—"

Ainslee grinned. "Under *her* window. You see, Reba Parkinson had been so overcome with the idea of being a big star that she hired the suite upstairs over this one to throw a party. She still has the pass-key to it, on her."

"You were using acid," said Dallas, "to force Reba to sign some papers?"

Ainslee shook his head. "We were trying a little of it on her toes, so Paula could see how it burns. You see—"

"You mean you're going to force Paula to write a confession and then push her over, in Reba's clothes, with the ring on her, just to be sure everything checks, and she won't queer anything by talking—"

"You guessed it, copper," Ainslee grinned. "But it won't do you any good. You're going to die right now, with a slug in your guts."

"In her confession," put in Dallas,

his jaw tight, "don't forget to have Paula write that I was getting in her hair and she had to—"

He broke off, eyeing Paula. He saw the pleading in her eyes, the feeble struggles of her tightly trussed little body. Something rose up inside him, explosively.

He saw Ainslee, fingers tightening on the gun. Dallas felt the sting of cold needles at the back of his neck. He knew that this was it. Either he did something now, or he was cold turkey.

The knob of the door through which the Luger had snagged was out of reach. But the splintered hole made by the Luger was close to Dallas' elbow. It was the only thing left for him. He slipped two fingers through the jagged opening as quickly as possible, at the same time springing backward, pulling the door with all his might.

Slugs rapped at the frame, splintered the panel, a bullet tore at his coat. He heard the shouts of Riker and Ainslee. But the door slammed into its frame and for a split second Dallas was alone in the outer room.

He cast about feverishly for a weapon. The knob of the door was being twisted. He grabbed up a chair and poised alongside the door. The panel swung inward. Dallas caught a glimpse of the tip of the silenced Luger prodding the opening, but Riker was too wary to throw himself forward, making a target for Dallas' up-raised chair.

Dallas had to take the lead. He lowered the chair, slid its back under his arm, and dived through the doorway heedless of slugs, chair legs outthrust, seat lining his chest.

HE HAD the satisfaction of hearing a loud grunt as one chair leg ploughed into Riker's chest, another piercing through his lips, ramming a couple of his teeth into his throat. Meanwhile, Ainslee had opened up

and Dallas felt the tug of wild slugs, the deadly *spang* of lead glancing off wood.

Riker's gun arm came out past the chair. Dallas let go the chair, grabbed the barrel of the Luger and gave it a violent twist. Just before Riker's fingers let go, his knuckles broken, Dallas felt a slug crease his forehead.

He dropped to his knees, gun in hand. He fired up across the foot of the bed. Ainslee moved a second too soon, missed the slug by a few inches. The corner of the bed was between Dallas and Ainslee. Ainslee was crouching in front of the night table.

Dallas swore. In a moment or two it would be one or the other of them, and the way it looked it would have to be him, because he couldn't very well shift his position without bringing Paula into line of fire!

He gritted his teeth. He sighted over the bed. He couldn't get Ainslee's head. But he fired anyway. There was a loud cracking sound as his slug tore through the bottle of acid, shattering its glass into a thousand fragments. The next moment, as fumes filled the room, Ainslee leaped up, screaming, grabbing at the back of his neck.

Dallas stood up leisurely, grinning slightly. He put a quick slug into Ainslee's gun hand. "Go on into the bathroom and wash some of it off," he said. "That'll teach you not to play with acid."

Dallas went over and untied Paula. "Gosh, kid," he said, "those ropes sure were tight."

"Not as tight as the feeling in my throat," she said, "when Ainslee was shooting at you."

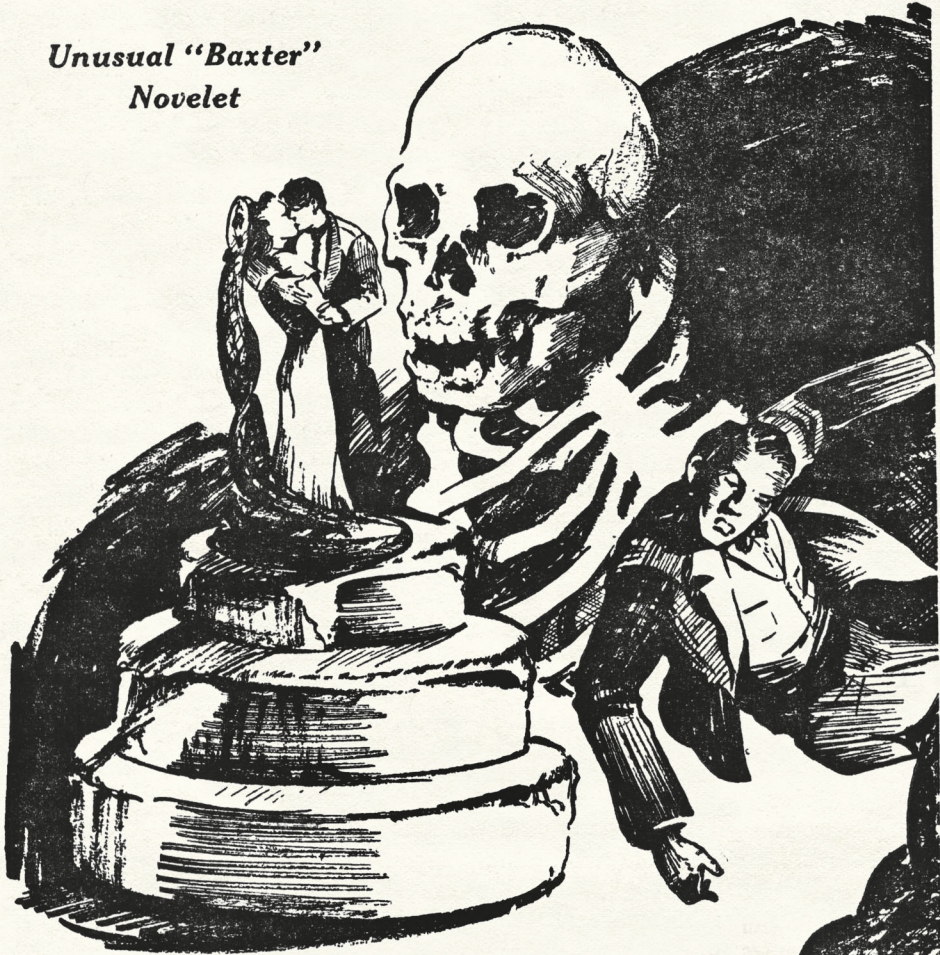
He grinned. He looked her over carefully. "I'm sure glad he didn't get to try any of that acid on you. It'd be a shame to spoil that pretty pan of yours."

"I'm glad he didn't get to put any of those bullets in you," she flashed back. "It would have been a shame to silence that silver tongue of yours."



Wedding Bullets

Unusual "Baxter"
Novelet



By Lawrence Treat

CHAPTER I

THE phone sounded like twenty-seven burglar alarms and woke Baxter out of a sound sleep. It was daylight, but the sun wasn't up yet. Baxter swore under his breath and rocked across the room.

He mumbled a hello, and the voice at the other end came in a whisper. "Mr. Baxter?"

Baxter said, "Huh?" and the whis-



per grew louder. It had a sharp, anxious quality and every word hissed out like live steam.

"Mr. Baxter. Listen carefully. A deserted plantation house, twelve

Baxter, the All-American sleuth, got the surprise of his life when he was lured to the mysterious wedding feast. For though everything was set for a regal repast, only two were there—the groom and the Grim Reaper.



*She struggled like
a wildcat.*

miles south of Algiers. Better go there, if you value your life."

Baxter touched his black mustache, for luck, and said, "What?" He'd heard every word, but he objected to whispers and wanted to hear the voice so he'd recognize it if he saw it on a street corner.

The guy didn't fall for that one. He repeated slowly, still whispering, still with a kind of breathless horror. This time he added, "Things have been happening while you were away. Hear me?"

But Baxter was obstinate. He said, "What?" Then the receiver clicked, and all Baxter could do about it was hang up.

He rubbed his thick black hair and took a deep breath. He was big and solid all over and when he was awake he seethed and rippled with energy. But right now he was only a quarter awake and hating it.

The tip worried him plenty. Not only the urgency in the whisper, which hadn't been faked, but he couldn't figure out how anybody knew he was in town. He'd been north, reporting to the main office, and he'd just gotten back to New Orleans last night and nobody expected him except his blonde secretary. And he'd stake his life on the blonde, any time.

An hour or so later he reached the joint. There was no mistaking it, either. It was set back from the road and its tall white columns reminded Baxter of a row of gams in a chorus line. The house had a new coat of paint and was all ready for the cameras, but the lawn hadn't been mowed since the last war. Which was queer.

Baxter parked in front of the door, but the reception committee must have gotten its signals mixed. No colored butlers came out with the mint juleps and no Southern belles opened the door and made eyes at him.

He strode across the porch and pushed open the door. The house had been the real thing, once, but now it was just a shell. Stained ceilings, and wallpaper that was peeling like spaghetti. A wide curving staircase that hadn't been polished in a generation. Baxter crossed the broad entrance hall and kicked open a door. Then he said, "Jeez," very quietly, and just looked.

There was a long narrow table, set for a banquet. The cloth had come straight from the laundry and the china and cutlery were shined up for a holiday and all the food was ready to swallow. And plump in the middle was a big cake with a toy bride and groom caught shin-deep in the icing. The flowers were fresh and a couple of candles burnt fitfully in their stumps.

But that wasn't what hit Baxter.

It was the old guy, sitting there all by himself and wearing full dress. He was leaning over the table and he had a bullet hole in his head. His outstretched hand almost touched the nearest cookie.

FOR a long minute Baxter didn't move. The old, crumbling house, the wedding table without guests, the dead groom—the setup smelt of ghosts and cobwebs. He stared at the dark, purplish hole in the man's head, and for a minute Baxter seemed to see himself. Some day, somewhere, he'd be lying or sitting down like that, with that same pasty complexion and that same ugly wound. The law of averages said so.

Baxter turned away. The silverware was massive, with an elaborate design, and all the stuff on the table matched up. But it wasn't a nice background for murder.

Baxter noticed the place cards in front of each plate. There were Thraces and Emmets, mostly, and a few Boudreaus and Claibornes thrown in. Swank families, every one of them. Baxter shoved back his hat and wondered why he'd been called in.

He moved down the length of the table, slowly, and stopped in front of the old guy. The long barrel of a shotgun was leaning against the back of the chair. Maybe it was the latest thing to go with evening clothes. Baxter wouldn't know. All he realized right now was that he was up against something ugly, and that somebody wanted him to be here, and that the reason spelt danger.

He picked up a lifeless hand. It was slightly warm, and no *rigor mortis*, yet. Baxter was about to drop the hand when he noticed the ink stain on the fingers. With his teeth gritted, he felt through the pockets. The guy had no pen.

Baxter walked to the door and then walked back. The plate next to the corpse's was sprinkled with little specks of powder. He bent down and smelt. A woman had been sitting here.

There was even a slight smear of lipstick on the table cloth.

The whole thing was screwy. A shotgun wedding, with the groom carrying the gun. Whom did he hope to pick off, anyhow? The girl or the guests? Or the guy who'd shot him?

Suddenly Baxter began to get sore. Why had he been told to come out here, anyhow? He decided he might as well find out all he could. He approached the corpse again and found the exit hole of the bullet. It had been traveling slightly downward, as if the killer had stood in the doorway. Baxter followed the probable line of the bullet and found it in the baseboard. He dug it out of the old wood. It looked like a thirty-eight.

Well, what did he do now? He saw a back door and marched over to it. A piece of white gauze had caught onto a nail in the door frame. Baxter ripped it off. It looked for all the world like part of a bridal veil. Which meant a hell of a honeymoon for somebody.

Baxter stepped outside and saw the car parked under the trees. Maybe somebody else was here and maybe this was the old boy's car. Baxter strode up to it and yanked open the door. The license tag strapped onto the steering post read *Irene Emmet*. Baxter pocketed the key and called out, "Hey—Irene!"

He thought he heard a noise from the front of the house and he remembered he'd left his own key in the ignition. He began running. Before he'd even circled the house, he heard a starter whir. He slipped his gun from the worn shoulder holster. He cleared the corner of the house just in time to see his coupé sway over rough ground and rock towards the highway.

A woman was driving, but all Baxter could see of her was a colored kerchief wrapped around her head. Which didn't prove it was a woman. Or that she was worth looking at.

Baxter replaced his gun. He didn't feel like shooting any women this morning. Or like plugging holes in

his own tires. Besides, the road ran north and south, and nowhere else. If he could find a phone, he'd call the police and they'd get her at the other end, before she crossed the river to New Orleans. She was heading north, and she had to go through Algiers.

Baxter was in no hurry. He made a brief search on the upper floors, but the rooms were empty and there was no sign that anybody had ever lived in them. He came downstairs again. His black, flaming eyes went a little grimmer and more somber as he passed the dining room door, but that was all. He walked out purposefully, climbed into the car and drove north.

A mile or two up the road, he found a service station with a phone. He called the Algiers police and told them his car had been stolen. He gave the make, model and license numbers, and that was that. No more worries. All he had to do was drive to a police station and pick up a dame. And get his car back.

He fished into the glove compartment of the car the girl had left and found her driving license. Age, 23; hair, brown; eyes, brown; weight, 118. But the license forgot to tell whether she'd just bumped off a bridegroom. Or whether she was good-looking. And that was what Baxter wanted to know.

HE spotted his car in front of the Algiers police station, drove past, parked around the corner and then walked back. He was beginning to get ideas.

It was just as well that he hadn't arrived any later. When he got to the precinct station, the girl had almost talked herself out of it. He heard her voice raised in fury.

"I told you who I am, and if you let me use your phone I'll call the mayor and prove it."

The cop's answer was worried. "But, ma'am," he said. "You still don't explain how come you're driving a stolen car."

Then Baxter walked in. The girl whirled and she, instead of the sergeant, addressed him.

"Well," she demanded, "what do you want?"

She was nice. He had her name and weight already. She looked smart, but he decided not to hold it against her. After all, she was Baxter's candidate for the next Queen of the Mardi Gras.

"If it's all the same to you," he remarked, "I'd like my car back."

She got even madder than before. "So it's you who accused me of stealing! Will you kindly apologize and tell the policeman it's a mistake?"

Baxter grinned. "Sure," he said, turning to the sergeant. "She got in my car at a service station. I saw it drive off, and I phoned. Then I found out she'd left hers. Same make and model. Baxter's my name. My identification"—he opened his wallet and took out his driver's and investigator's licenses. "Sorry to make all the trouble," he added.

The girl exclaimed, "I told you, didn't I?" And she swept out.

Baxter took his time and chewed the rag with the sergeant. The girl needed a cooling-off period and Baxter was pretty sure she wouldn't run away. Besides he still had her ignition key.

The sergeant seemed worried over the episode. "It's a bad day for cops," he remarked. "You reckon she'll make trouble? The Emmets—they're a mighty powerful family in this town."

"I can fix that up," said Baxter. "But what do you mean, a bad day for cops?"

"Couple of the boys smashed up this morning, about three-quarters of an hour ago. On their way to check up on one of them funny tips. Get down to an old plantation house and we'd find a murder victim and the guy who did it, still there. But it'll be too late now, if there was anything to it. The fella wouldn't be there any more."

"Yeah," said Baxter. "I guess he'd be gone by now. Too bad about that smash-up."

Leisurely, he strolled out. So that was it. A frame-up. If a patrol car hadn't rammed into something, a pair of cops would have walked into the plantation house and found Baxter and a corpse.

Still, what kind of a frame was that? He'd never seen the old guy in his life, and his gun hadn't been out of its holster in the last two weeks. So logic and ballistics would have cleared him in no time.

Baxter patted the flat mass of his gun, but he didn't feel right. He had a hunch that he'd forgotten something. Logic and ballistics, huh? They were nice big words, but he didn't trust them.

CHAPTER II

THE girl was pacing up and down the street as if she was waiting to run her nails down somebody's cheek. She had that look in her eye.

She marched up to Baxter and demanded, furiously, "Well? Where's my car?"

Baxter frowned. "Baby," he said. "You got no gratitude."

The fury went out of her eyes and a cold, calculating look came in. He'd felt safer when she was furious.

"Why should I be grateful?" she asked.

"Several reasons. But the best one is that I just bluffed you out of being held on a murder charge."

Her expression changed completely again. "Somebody was killed?" she asked sweetly.

Baxter grinned. "Baby, just whisper. Somebody might overhear."

"Hadn't you better explain yourself?"

"All I want is to hear you whisper. And if I like it, I'll buy you a drink. Maybe you better have one anyhow. You look all upset."

"Thank you," she said, "but I don't need one. I took your car by mistake. You said so, yourself, to the police. So why make up stories about murder?"

Baxter took her by the arm and propelled her toward the nearest bar.

And once she got under way, she seemed to like it.

He sat her down at a table, and then leaned forward and whispered. "Don't look around till I tell you," he said. "Just pretend there's nothing wrong."

"What is it?" she whispered.

Baxter leaned back and laughed. "Not a damn thing. I told you I wanted to hear you whisper, but you're not the one. You got a kind of a squeak in your whisper."

"Are you crazy?" she asked.

"Look," said Baxter. "Suppose we quit kidding around. You're in a mess, I'm a private investigator and this is strictly business." He handed her his card. "So let's have it."

She shrugged, but her eyes were narrow with hostility. "I'd like to phone my brother. Dorr Emmet. Because, if you're going to persist, I may need him."

"I'm persistent as hell," said Baxter, "so go ahead."

When she returned from the telephone booth, she was calm and all set to stall. She opened her bag and took out powder and rouge. Baxter, leaning forward to lift up his drink, caught a glimpse of the gun in her bag. And it was no toy gun, either.

"Well?" he asked casually. "Ready to talk?"

"Do you do this often?" she asked.

"This blackmail?"

"Nuts," said Baxter. "Can't you tell the difference between a crook and a shamus? And you all grown-up and wearing lip rouge!"

She met his eyes, and then blushed as if he had seen straight through her. Which he hadn't, by a long shot.

"Does it matter what you call it?" she asked. "But I suppose you'll have to know, eventually, so—this is the story.

"My uncle, Colonel C. Aubrey Emmet, lives with my brother and myself, and owns the house you saw. He used to live there about forty years ago. He was engaged to Deborah Thrace. They say she was very beau-

tiful, and he was terribly in love with her and it was going to be a big wedding. Everything was ready. The banquet, the guests—everything. And then, instead of the bride, he received a note. She'd run off with somebody else.

"Uncle was broken-hearted, but he tried to conceal it by acting angry. He chased everybody out of the house and then sat down and ate his wedding dinner all alone. When he'd finished, he closed up the house. It's never been lived in since. But he visits it once a year, on his wedding anniversary. He has the dining room fixed up the way you saw it, with place cards for every guest, and all the family silver. But nobody comes, of course. He sits there alone and pretends. He even pretends to sign the marriage license. I suppose you'd call him slightly queer."

She paused to light a cigarette. Her eyes slanted obliquely through the smoke. "When I woke up this morning and found he hadn't returned, I went out to the house. I discovered—you know. Then I heard you come. I tried to sneak out the back, but the stairs were creaky and I didn't dare pass the open door of that room, where you were.

"I waited until you went outside, and you saw my car. Then you shouted and I got scared. So I got into your car and drove away. Are you satisfied now?"

"Does the colonel take his shotgun along with him every year?" asked Baxter.

"Please don't try to be funny."

"It was there, next to him. And he wasn't dressed for hunting."

"What were you doing there?" she asked suddenly.

"I was the uninvited guest," said Baxter. "Who were you? The bride?"

SHE began laughing uproariously, as if she were drunk. After a while, Baxter dropped her car key on the table. She scooped it up and stuffed it into her pocketbook, but this

time she was careful and there was no glint of metal.

When the door opened, she cried, "Dorr!" and her face lit up. Baxter turned and saw a dark, handsome man stride in. He sat down next to Irene and surveyed Baxter as if he were a Persian rug at an auction sale. The guy had a lot to learn.

"Is this the man who's trying to blackmail you?" he asked.

Baxter said, "Listen—about this blackmail stuff. She was in the house and she beat it. I'd tell the police if it was my own sister. I figure you need help on the case and I'm willing to talk business. That's all."

"What's business?"

"Five hundred retainer. Plus expenses."

Dorr Emmet tried to act like a nineteenth century French nobleman on his way to the scaffold. He had the smile down pat, but he lacked the wig. And he said the wrong thing.

"Go to hell," he snapped.

Baxter stood up and started to reach for his hat. Then his hand dipped down and wrenched Irene's pocketbook from her lap. He was starting to open it when she flung herself at him.

If she didn't have the barroom technique, it was only because the table got in the way as she tried to kick him. But her nails clawed out and tried to rake Baxter's face, and her mouth contorted as if she'd gone insane. And at the same time, Dorr rose up and uncorked a haymaker.

Baxter ducked out of range, gripping the pocketbook under one arm, and decided not to take chances. He caught Irene on the chin with his elbow, weaved and shot a hard, booming cross-blow at Dorr. Both the Emmets were out and Baxter was standing over the table when the barkeeper strode up.

"Hey, you!" he shouted. "What's the idea?"

Baxter grinned. "They had too much to drink," he said. "You wouldn't think two little ones would knock them

out, would you? But just take a look at them."

The barkeeper started to object. Then he noticed the gun that Baxter had just taken out of the pocketbook. The barkeeper coughed and retired gracefully.

Baxter dropped the bag on the table and looked at the gun. It had a familiar scratch mark on the butt. Feeling as if his favorite shaving mirror had just turned into a Tommy-gun and was about to let fly, he broke open the gun and examined the chambers. One bullet was missing. Then he checked the numbers and was sure of what he had just suspected.

It was his own gun. The one he usually kept in a desk drawer at the office, in case of emergency.

He knew now that whoever had told him to go to the plantation and had then tipped off the cops wasn't a bit dumb. It was as sweet a frame as he'd ever run into. His story would have been that he was home, sleeping, with no witnesses to alibi a single moment of the night. Connect him up with the corpse—and he was pretty sure that it could be done, somehow—and the cops would have the kind of case they dreamed about.

He stood there and watched the Emmets come to. Then he sat down.

"Have a drink," he said. "It'll do you good. I have the gun, and I'm keeping it. Now—Irene. Where'd you get hold of it?"

Dorr took a checkbook out of his pocket. "Five hundred?" he said. "I think we'll hire you."

Baxter smiled as Emmet wrote out the check. It was a brand new technique for getting clients. Knock 'em out in pairs, and then take their money.

Dorr Emmet blotted the check before he handed it over. His dark, triangular eyes were as friendly as a rattlesnake's. "We expect to be kept out of the papers, too," he said. "That's part of the job."

"Sure. Now, about that gun. Where'd it come from?"

IRENE'S face went dead, and then she picked up her glass and flung the contents at Baxter. He ducked and thrust up his arm as she jumped up from the table. She ran straight for the door and slammed it behind her.

Dorr Emmet didn't move. "My sister has a temper," he remarked frigidly.

Baxter wiped off his coat. "Yeah," he said. "I wish it ran in the family."

"The family," said Emmet, speaking slowly and without emotion, "is a peculiar one. Irene is hot-headed, I am the opposite. As for Colonel Emmet—well, he's cold now, isn't he?"

"I'd say Irene, and probably you, are due for a lot of trouble. Anything I ought to know before I go back to the place and call the police?"

"I think you ought to look up a man by the name of Horace Thrace. Do it at once, before he has time to establish an alibi."

"What for? What's his angle?"

"He's related to the Deborah Thrace whom the colonel was going to marry, and the colonel hated him for his name. Thrace has been trying to expand his hardware plant, for some very fat defense contracts, and he needs a large machine shop which the colonel owns in the neighborhood. The colonel swore he'd never sell to a Thrace and there has been considerable hard feeling. I think Thrace has an adequate motive and should be investigated right away. Anything else you want?"

"Yes. Whisper a few words for me."

"Why?"

"I like it. I'm a little nuts and I judge people by their whisper."

Dorr Emmet laughed and got up. Baxter didn't move. Why in hell did everybody go coy on him when all he asked was a decent whisper? And more important than that, who could have swiped that gun from the office drawer?

Well, the blonde ought to know about that. She'd been pulling down a nice salary while Baxter had been away. The least she could do was tell

him who'd been in his private office. . .

Baxter had a cup of coffee and then called the blonde from a phone booth. Her voice, saying "Good morning—Herald Square Agency," was crisp and businesslike.

Baxter said, "Hello, Blonde. I'm back. I got up early and went to a wedding. Anything doing at the office?"

"Well," she said, and he could almost see her biting her lips and getting that I-won't-bother-him look. "Nothing important."

"Listen. You know that spare gun of mine, that I keep in my desk? What happened to it?"

"Nothing. Nothing that I know of. Why? What's wrong?"

"Somebody got bumped with it, that's all. Ever hear of a Colonel Emmet?"

"He's a client of ours."

Baxter began to get a sick feeling. First his gun, and now the colonel. Whoever was engineering the frame knew more about Baxter than he knew about himself.

"Just tell me about this client," he said. "I never even heard of him."

"He came in while you were away. He wanted protection. He thought his nephew and niece were after him."

"Anybody else? He wasn't scared of me, was he?"

"Well, he said he didn't trust detectives and that he always carried a lot of money with him. He was a crank, with a persecution mania. If he hadn't carried money, nobody would have been after him, would they? You see that he was crazy, don't you?"

"Listen," said Baxter. "Take his name out of the files and destroy every paper that mentions him. Sooner or later the cops will be around. Tell 'em Colonel Emmet came, but I was out of town and so he didn't give us the case."

"I don't think that would be a good idea," said the blonde.

"Why not?"

The blonde got vague. "Oh, there are reasons."

Baxter got definite. "The hell with reasons," he said, and hung up.

He went away thoughtfully. Every new piece of information was one more item against himself. His bones kept telling him that whoever was working against him deserved his respect, and that if an auto accident had messed up the first frame, a second one would come along.

He had the slug and the murder gun, and the gun was his. That was the first thing to get rid of. He bought himself a doll, and then used the box and paper to wrap up the gun. He mailed it to a fake name, General Delivery, and felt a little better. Then he got into his car and headed back to the plantation. He wanted another look.

A few miles before he reached the plantation, a car sped past him going the other way. If Baxter had had any reason for looking at the driver, he might have noticed. As it was, he just had a hazy impression that the man behind the wheel was Dorr Emmet.

Baxter was wondering why Dorr would have gone out there. And then he noticed the smoke on the horizon. He pushed the gas pedal down to the floorboards and kept going. A mile away from it, he was sure. The plantation house was going up in flames.

Baxter stopped in front of the crumbling brick columns at the entrance. A police car was parked at a respectable distance from the blazing building, and a couple of colored field hands had carried over pails of water and then decided to drink it. Which was about as sensible a thing as they could do.

A tall, bushy man whose hair and mustache grew like thick brown grass was talking to the cops. Somebody told Baxter the guy's name was Saliman and that he ran the Emmet plantation. Baxter waited for the plantation manager to finish with the police. Then Baxter strolled over and spoke to him.

"Nice fire," remarked Baxter. "How'd it happen?"

"Right nice," replied Saliman

thoughtfully. "Reckon it was just the Lord's way. Or else spontaneous combustion."

"Who do you figure might be that spontaneous?" asked Baxter.

Saliman shrugged. "I don't figure. I just enjoy life, liberty and good fires, and it don't matter to me how they start. Just so long as I have 'em. I don't recollect as I ever seen you before."

"Name's Baxter."

Saliman jerked to attention. "The man who killed—" Then he broke off and rubbed at his mustache.

"Did Dorr tell you that just now, when he was up here?"

"Dorr wasn't here," stated Saliman.

"I passed him on the road, a few minutes ago. Didn't he speak to you?"

"Mebbe he did, and then mebbe he didn't. If'n he was here."

"Thanks," said Baxter. "What did you start the fire with?"

Saliman stared thoughtfully. Then he said, "I didn't start no fire," and walked away.

On the way back to New Orleans, Baxter sifted the facts that he already had. The colonel asks for protection, and then goes to the plantation and gets shot. He has a bride, a shotgun, an ink stain and no pen.

The next morning Irene turns up with Baxter's gun, and she and Dorr are practically asking for somebody to come along and blackmail them. As for Dorr, he rushes out to the plantation, and after he leaves the joint, it goes up in flames.

Well, Irene and Dorr, Saliman, Thrace and the unknown bride. Which one of them killed the colonel? The answer was simple enough. The one that knew Baxter's private telephone number.

CHAPTER III

BAXTER felt chipper as he came up in the elevator of his office building and got out at his floor. He hadn't seen the blonde in two weeks. He'd go into a huddle with her and learn what she was holding out. And

even if she didn't know much, he'd still have the pleasure of looking at her legs.

Outside the door, he straightened his tie and rubbed at the brush of his mustache. Then, smiling, he turned the knob and walked in.

The two big guys had *cop* written all over them. They unfolded themselves from their chairs. The blonde, looking something like Lana Turner, only better, shot out, "I couldn't help it! They wouldn't let me out to warn you!"

The first cop said, "Are you Baxter? You're wanted down at headquarters."

So the frame was on again. Baxter wondered what they had on him this time. For the sake of form, he said, "No kidding? What for?"

"Arson."

Baxter put his hands in the pockets of his jacket. He faced the blonde and tried to signal that there was something he had to tell her. When he turned around again, he was frowning.

"What did I burn?" he asked.

"A house. Colonel Emmet's. Somebody seen you walk away from it with a lighted match."

Baxter's hand came out of his pocket and held up a match. His thumb snapped across the top and he said, "Like this?"

The blonde went into action. She stepped forward and threw her arms around him and got her face between Baxter and the cops.

"Paul!" she cried. "They're not going to take you away! I won't let them! I—"

He was leaning down and his mouth was next to her ear. He whispered quickly, "My left-hand pocket. A piece of cloth and a slug."

He felt her hand fumble in his pocket. Her fingers bunched the bridal veil into a wad and then felt for the metal bullet. She caught on fast to what this was all about.

"Thanks," she whispered. "I'll make up for it. I promise."

Then she looked up squarely and kissed him on the lips. And the way she did it wasn't part of the gag.

At headquarters, Baxter wasn't charged, which was promising. He was taken straight to Captain Arnaud's office. Arnaud, sharp-faced and incisive, was an efficient cop. Which was all right when he was on Baxter's side and all wrong when he wasn't. And this time he wasn't. Definitely.

Baxter said, "Morning. Who trumped up this arson charge?"

Arnaud adjusted his pince-nez glasses carefully. "You were at Colonel Emmet's house, weren't you?"

"Sure. But not when the fire started."

"Where were you?"

"In Algiers, buying a doll. It cost me a buck forty-five and I don't even like it."

Arnaud got sore. "You've helped me out a couple of times, but if you think that gives you the right to walk in here and wisecrack, you're making the biggest mistake of your life. A doll! A jackass like you walks into a store and buys a doll!"

"The doll's in my car right now, and you can check up at the toy store and they'll identify me and prove I was there around the time the fire started."

"I wouldn't insult a cop by asking him to go over and check up on one like that. From the report I just got, that house was set on fire intentionally. Furthermore, a man was seen leaving the place and he was tall and dark, and I got a tip it was you and that you're mixed up in the craziest setup of your career."

"There's a little truth in that last remark," said Baxter, "but the rest of it's bunk. I was at Colonel Emmet's place earlier in the day. I was trespassing, and if the colonel wants to charge me with that, I'll plead guilty and you can lock me up. But as for arson—get Dorr Emmet down here and I'll prove I couldn't have burnt the joint down if I wanted to."

Arnaud picked up the phone and spoke softly into it. Then he smiled

at Baxter. "Now we're getting places," he said.

And Baxter grinned and slapped his hands together and bellowed out, "Where?"

When Dorr Emmet entered the room a half hour later, the temperature dropped a full ten degrees. He was wearing a new hat and he'd changed his clothes, but he still looked at Baxter as if Baxter had leprosy.

Baxter began it. "You went down to Colonel Emmet's this morning, didn't you?"

"No," said Dorr.

"Saliman saw you down there."

"He didn't," said Dorr.

Arnaud drummed his fingers on his desk and smiled contentedly. "Nice going," he said.

Baxter tried another tack. He took the check for five hundred bucks out of his wallet. It hurt to return it, but there wasn't any alternative.

"You used to be my client," he said. "Now you're not. Arnaud, charge this guy with arson. A guy who was tall and dark—fits him as well as me, doesn't it? I passed him on the road when he was coming from the house and I was going there, and it had just started to burn. I have a witness who'll testify Dorr was there. Book him for arson. Then let me go up and see his sister, and I'll have a murder case for you, too."

ARNAUD snapped, "Murder?" and Dorr's mouth went the shape and hardness of a knife blade. He was still figuring it was blackmail, and that if he didn't play ball, Baxter would make trouble for his sister.

Dorr returned the check. "I was joking," he said. "I burnt the house."

Baxter said, "Book him, and if you make any more mistakes like this, Arnaud, I'll sue you for false arrest."

Arnaud said, "What's this about murder?"

Baxter repeated, "Book him first. I charge him with arson. That's enough for you, isn't it?"

Dorr remarked, almost lazily, "He's

referring to Colonel Emmet. There's a story around that the colonel is dead, and Baxter thinks it's murder, I don't know why. But if it is, then the house belongs to me, as his heir. I have a right to burn my own house, haven't I? It isn't insured and nobody was harmed. If it turns out that the colonel is alive, then it would be arson. But if it turns out he's dead, then Baxter has already opened himself to a suit for false arrest. Possibly you'd like to be a co-defendant, Captain Arnaud?"

Which made Dorr Emmet a hell of a client. And he had Baxter cold, too. And the only way out of it was to get Dorr for murder.

Well, Dorr had admitted his motive. If the house was his, he was the colonel's heir. But then how did Irene Emmet tie in? And how had Dorr gotten the gun, and known about Baxter's return?

It was too soon to build a case, but if Baxter wanted to get something on Dorr Emmet, there was only one place to go. Horace Thrace's. Dorr wanted to make trouble for Thrace; it followed that Thrace would want to make trouble for Dorr.

Headquarters for the Horace Thrace Hardware Company was on an upper floor of a Baronne Street building. By the time Baxter got there, he was all worked up. A big man with dark seething eyes and a strong, reckless confidence, he strode across the room and slapped his hat on the desk.

"I'm Baxter," he said. "You ought to know why I'm here."

Thrace, a rubbery little man with gray hair and a hunter's complexion, reacted like Donald Duck. "Why the hell ought I to know why you're here? I'm no mind-reader. Never heard of you before in my life, and haven't missed a thing, either."

"I'm working on the Emmet case."

"What's the matter with Emmet?" demanded Thrace. "And which Emmet?"

"The colonel. He got shot in the head. Here." Baxter leaned forward

and poked a finger at Thrace's temples.

Thrace jerked back. "Served him right," he snapped. He was peppery as a shrimp gumbo, New Orleans style. "He was a damned screwball. But what's he got to do with me?"

"You wanted to buy some property of his," remarked Baxter. "Did you?"

"What do you want to know for?"

"Don't," said Baxter. "Don't try to be smart. Just answer my questions."

Thrace clamped his lips shut. Baxter said, "Well? Did you?"

"Get out of here!" snorted Thrace. "You're not a cop. Who the hell gave you the right to ask questions?"

"Nobody," said Baxter. "And I don't need permission, any more than I need a tin badge or brass buttons. Listen—you want to get flattened out slow or fast? Because if you get in my hair like this, I'm going to lay you out on the carpet and stamp you clean through the parquet. If you got a parquet. So don't quack at me and pretend you don't know anything. You'll talk either to me or the police. And if you got any sense you'll do you talking to me. Now."

THRACE veered with the suddenness of the Goebbels' propaganda machine. "Shut up and listen, and maybe you'll find out something. Irene phoned me and said the colonel had been killed and William hadn't returned. William is his chauffeur and valet and steward, and maybe his mother, too. He ties the colonel's bow tie every morning and laces up his shoes and lacerates his whiskers. William doesn't recognize the thirteenth amendment and I don't see why the hell anybody should. It was a Yankee conspiracy shoved down our throats and it isn't legal without our consent."

"Don't fight the Civil War," pleaded Baxter. "Just stick to your murder."

"I'm telling you!" roared Thrace. "William didn't come back! I said that, didn't I? William didn't come back! Understand English? William

didn't come back and I know where he is and I was going out to see him. William went out there with the colonel yesterday, and if anybody knows what happened, it's William."

"What made you change your mind about seeing him?" asked Baxter. "Even a prima donna like you has to have reasons."

"I'm no prima donna and I don't need reasons and if you go on like this, you'll get me mad. I don't want to get mad. I don't believe in it."

"How about your scrap with the colonel?"

"I didn't scrap with him!" yelled Thrace. "I don't scrap with anybody! I'm calm and even-tempered until somebody like you comes along. I use psychology. I studied the colonel and learned his moods and when to approach him and when not. Sometimes he raves at me because I'm a Thrace and sometimes I'm the best friend he's got."

"I'd been after that machine shop a long time and I figured out the colonel would be soft and sentimental just before his anniversary. I'm crafty. So I went out to the plantation yesterday afternoon and tried him there, and he wouldn't sign up. What do you think of that?"

"Puts you in a nice spot," remarked Baxter.

"How? Come out with it, instead of sitting there and making insinuations behind my back. Why the hell am I on the spot?"

Baxter thought of the ink stain on Colonel Emmet's fingers. He'd signed something out there. And it probably wasn't the hocus-pocus wedding certificate, because then he would have had his pen in his pocket after he was dead. So why couldn't he have signed the deed to a machine shop?

Baxter shrugged. "Dope it out for yourself. Who was the bride?"

"What bride? What would I know about brides? I'm a married man and I have two children and bigamy's a jail offense. Who's talking about brides? I made a mistake twenty

years ago and you want to remind me of it."

"Forget it," said Baxter. "What do you know about William?"

Thrace grew purple with rage. "I just finished telling you! Where William lives! He was born on that plantation and his brother still works for Saliman and that's where he'd be!"

Baxter leaned back. Thrace was nicely worked up and he'd come out with anything. "Why," asked Baxter, "did Dorr Emmet accuse you of killing the colonel?"

"He didn't."

"He did."

"Then he was scared they'd think he killed the colonel himself. Is that why you came up here, because Dorr told you to? Your mind twists around like the Mississippi and has just as much mud. The colonel hated Dorr. Said he reminded him of a glass of warm fish."

"If the colonel hated him, why did he leave Dorr the house?"

"Who told you he did?"

"Dorr."

"Then he lied. The colonel hated him and left everything to Irene Emmet, and if any other kind of a will turns up, it's a forgery."

"Listen," said Baxter. "I need relaxation and I'd like to see William, and you're a nice quiet guy to have along for company. So take your hat and let's go."

ON the trip out, Thrace forgot to be peppery, except in spurts, and he talked more or less rationally. And chiefly about Irene Emmet.

She'd always been a wild, headstrong girl. One year she'd sneaked out to watch her uncle eat his solitary banquet. William had heard her skulking outside the house and he'd told the colonel someone was after the family silver. Ever since, he'd insisted that the colonel bring along his shotgun.

Thrace had gotten the story from Irene. She hadn't dared let her uncle know she'd been spying on him. She

was quite a girl, according to Thrace. She had courage and spirit, and she could handle a gun like a man. She was a pistol expert and had been runner-up for the women's state championship last year.

At Thrace's direction, Baxter drove to a small gray house a mile beyond the plantation. Saliman came out as the car drew up in front of the doorway. With his slow, deliberate drawl and his bushy hair that shot straight up from his long face, he seemed like two people. One of them talked, and the other looked at you.

He squinted to look into the car. Thrace called out, "Hello, Jeff. I brought out a fella named Baxter. He wants to find out from William what happened at the plantation house."

Jeff Saliman thought it over. "William's got blisters on his feet," he said finally. "He can't talk good."

Baxter got out of the car. "Stop kidding around and let's go."

Saliman shrugged and then suddenly snapped a flashlight in Baxter's face. "The spontaneous fella," he said. "Reckon he can't do no harm."

He led the way to a row of board shacks with yellow, unsteady light shining through the chinks. He stopped at the second of the shanties and called laconically, "William. Come on out."

A voice answered. "Yes suh, Mr. Jeff. Comin' fast." Then the door opened and a Negro appeared. He was wearing old pants and a tattered shirt, but he had slipped a clean, white, messboy's jacket over his shoulders.

Baxter said, "William? You were Colonel Emmet's man, weren't you?"

"Yes, suh, boss."

"And you came out here with him yesterday. What happened?"

"Well, we come out like always, and then the station wagon come with the plates and silver and food, and I set it up like every year." He stopped and rolled his eyes. The whites of them looked large and frightened.

Thrace said, "Tell him, William. I came out and stayed about a half hour

and then went back. You can tell it."

"Yes, suh," said William, brightening. "Like Mr. Horace say. He come and he go."

"And then?" asked Baxter.

"Then it get dark and I hears a car come and somebody outside. But I looks and there ain't no one at all. I says, 'Colonel, there's haunts hereabouts.' He say, 'Nonsense, William. The only haunts is here,' and he tap his forehead. But I hears that noise and I knows better. I tells him I won't stay where there's haunts, 'cause they always goes after the black man firstest. So I makes sure he has that shotgun, and I goes. And sure enough, when I turns around I sees the ghost of Miss Deborah, all in white, like a bride."

"And the car?" asked Baxter. "You passed it? Notice the license numbers?"

Again William hesitated until Thrace gave him the go-ahead signal. Then William said, "Yes, suh. Wrote it down."

Baxter took a slip of paper and a pencil from his pocket. "What were the numbers?" he asked. But instead of copying them, he wrote his own name and address. He'd remember the numbers, all right.

Baxter questioned him further, but all William did was shuffle his feet and say, "Don't know, suh." Baxter folded the paper with his name and stuffed it inside a dollar bill.

"Thanks," he said. "Come around and see me, any time."

William's white, frightened eyes seemed to follow Baxter all the way back to New Orleans.

CHAPTER IV

AFTER leaving Thrace at his parking lot, Baxter did some fast work. The license number of the car William had seen belonged to an auto owned by a Drive-It-Yourself agency, and the agency gave him the name and address of the person who had

hired the car the previous night. Ida Lou Waggoner.

The bride, Baxter told himself. The woman who had ripped her veil on the door frame and who had left powder and lipstick marks alongside the colonel's body.

Driving out to her address, Baxter began to see a little light. The colonel pretended to sign his marriage certificate every year, on the anniversary of the wedding that hadn't come off. Suppose a paper had been substituted. Suppose someone wanted the colonel's signature on a document which he wouldn't otherwise sign.

On a will, for instance, leaving everything to Dorr Emmet. Or on the bill of sale to a machine shop.

Baxter walked up the stoop of a small wooden house and rang the bell. The girl who opened the door was small and dark and looked up at him with big eyes.

Baxter said, "Miss Waggoner?" She nodded and he went on. "I'm Baxter. You hired a car and drove out to Colonel Emmet's last night, didn't you?"

She shook her head no. Then a hall door opened and Baxter stood there while his heart stopped beating and his stomach felt as if he'd stuffed it with raw dough. His voice stuck in his gullet and he couldn't make a sound.

It was the blonde. He knew now why she'd kissed him so hard when he'd turned over the evidence to a murder, and he knew that Irene Emmet must have picked up the gun while she was in the house. And he also knew how the gun had gotten there and how it had left his drawer, and he knew who the bride was.

He turned around slowly. His feet plopped heavily and each step jolted his spine. A couple of years ago the main office had let him open a branch here in the South. It was kind of an experiment, and he'd started out with nothing except his mustache and the blonde. He'd paid her slave wages at the beginning, but she'd stuck and

they'd taken the bumps together and she'd risked her life for him more than once.

They'd built up the agency together until it had the best reputation in town. He'd started off by liking her face and her legs, and he'd reached the point where he'd have liked her just as much if she'd gotten elephantiasis and legs like a couple of barrels.

So it was tough to take.

He heard her scream and call something to him, but his ears didn't pick up the words.

It would make a nice story, too, when the papers got hold of it. He'd close up the office tomorrow and send his resignation in to the main office. As for the blonde, she was just another dame, after all.

He pulled open the door of the car. Heels tapped down the steps and along the sidewalk. The blonde grabbed his arm and said, "Let me explain."

Baxter shrugged. "Better not," he said. "Let's just call it quits. I'll mail you a check tomorrow."

"Are you crazy?" she demanded. "Just on account of that suit?"

"What suit?"

"Dorr Emmet's. Fifty thousand, for false arrest and for slander, for accusing him of murder. There was a process server up at the office just before I left."

"Oh, that," he said. "Who cares?"

"If it isn't that, then what?" she demanded. "I may have gotten into a little trouble, but we've been in worse."

He turned savagely. "You want it?" he barked. "All right. You killed Colonel Emmet!"

HER mouth fell open and her gray eyes looked startled. Then she slapped his face. Hard. He tried to smile, feebly. He was glad she was going to fight it, anyhow. But he wasn't on her side anymore. He couldn't be.

"What under the sun are you talking about?" she demanded.

"I traced the car. Somebody saw the license numbers out there. You hired it in this Waggoner girl's name. You dressed up as the bride and you shot him. Somebody picked up the gun. I got it back, but you're the only one who could have taken it out of my drawer. Let's forget it, Blonde."

"Get in that car, and sit down and listen," she said. "Of all the mad ideas! I begin to see it now. As for the gun, I don't know how it got there, and I didn't even know it was missing."

"I told you over the phone that the colonel had come in and asked for protection. I thought he was a crank and didn't do anything. And then I began wondering. If something really happened, I'd never be able to forgive myself."

"I knew all about how he pretended, every year. I decided to dress up as a bride and spend the evening with him. It would be easier that way. As a stranger, he wouldn't have let me in otherwise. And it worked out, too. He was very sweet and charming and I pretended I was Deborah Thrace. He said he was supposed to sign the wedding certificate, but that he'd left his pen somewhere around the house and couldn't find it."

"We were sitting there, almost gay, when I looked up and saw a hand holding a gun and pointing it through the door. I didn't even have time to look up and see who it was, because at that instant, the gun fired. The colonel just fell forward, dead."

"I was panicky at first. I had that little twenty-two you'd given me, but it wouldn't be much good. And I was dressed in white and could be seen a mile off, and I was terribly scared. I don't know how long it was before I ran out, but that's what I did. My veil caught on the door. I didn't realize part of it had ripped off, until I got home and saw."

"As for your gun, I didn't even know it was missing. If I'd had it, I would have shot back."

Baxter started the car. If the blonde

was lying . . . But she wouldn't lie. Not to him. He looked at her and smiled. He felt a lot better.

He was crossing Canal Street when the cop held up his hand, glanced at the license plate and marched over. "Your name Baxter?" he asked. "You're wanted at headquarters."

"Getting to be a habit," remarked Baxter. He leaned over and kissed the blonde. "Better run along, baby. I got business."

It was Arnaud again. He had the same sharp, hostile expression, and the same perverted idea about Baxter breaking laws. But this time Arnaud went more cautiously.

"I wanted you here to answer some questions," he said. "We've had a series of tips about the Emmet business, and all of them either mention you or point to you. I realize I can't hold you yet, because the embers of the house are still too hot to handle and we don't even know there was a murder. So let's go ahead on that basis. Were you hired to do anything for Colonel Emmet?"

Baxter thought fast. He had a lot of facts, but no case. And the killer was still at large and working on Baxter. Baxter hadn't needed police help as yet, but in time he probably would. He decided to be frank—within limits.

"Yes," he said. "We were supposed to protect him."

"Did you?"

Baxter thought of how easy it would be to connect up the blonde, and how equally easy to protect her.

"Yes," he said. "I was up there last night."

"What did you do?"

"Slept. I'd been riding on the Louisville & Nashville and I was all tired out. Murders bore me, so I slept clean through this one."

"Thanks," said Arnaud. "That's all."

Baxter got up and walked out. But, as he strode down the steps and reached the sidewalk, he saw the tail that Arnaud had put on him.

BAXTER drove home slowly, to make it easy for his shadow to follow. And, as he was putting his key in the lock, he thought of all the nights he'd stood in doorways and waited for somebody or other to come out and lead him to part of a murder puzzle. He turned around and motioned to the tail.

"Hey, you! Come on over."

The shadow was young for a cop and had a big, chubby face. Baxter grinned. "As long as you got to watch me, come on up and do it in comfort. You'll get tired, standing outside."

"Thanks," said the cop, "but I don't know as I should."

Baxter shrugged. "Stay out in the cold, if you're that kind of a guy. But this is no trick."

The cop followed him inside, through the short alleyway and across the open courtyard, up the stairs and to the balcony on which Baxter's apartment opened. Then Baxter noticed that the door wasn't shut, and that a light showed through the crack.

He stood to the side and gave the door a shove. The draft that swept through told him the full-length window, at the other end of the apartment, was also open. And both door and window had been closed this morning.

Irene Emmet's voice called, "Come in, won't you?"

Baxter's hand dropped from the shoulder holster. He motioned to the cop and stepped inside.

Irene was reclining on the couch. She looked up and saw the cop.

"Him, too?" she asked. "Doesn't one get any privacy here? It's like sitting in a hotel lobby, except that nobody tries to pick you up."

"How did you get in?" asked Baxter.

She lifted her leg in a slow, lascivious motion and arched her foot. "On these," she said.

"There's a lock on the door."

"I didn't notice. I knocked and nobody invited me, and so I turned the

knob. Is the place supposed to be locked?"

"Did you open the window?"

"No. In fact, I thought it rather careless of you to leave it that way."

So the killer was a locksmith. If he could pick the lock of Baxter's apartment, he could pick the lock of Baxter's office and steal a gun. And look through the correspondence and find out when Baxter was due back. Which cleared up part of the mystery. Though it didn't tell who.

Baxter said, "Drink?" and Irene pointed to the cop.

"Who's he?"

"My bodyguard," answered Baxter. "He listens to everything we say and sees everything we do. Any objections?"

"Some. But if you want him here, darling, there's nothing I can do about it."

"Nothing."

Baxter went to mix drinks. He heard her say to the cop, "I don't like you. But it's his apartment. Wouldn't you like to go out on the balcony? You might be embarrassed by—"

Baxter slammed the door of the ice-box. When he returned with the three drinks, the cop was sitting at the far side of the room and blushing deeply. Irene was powdering her nose.

"He's a cop," said Baxter. "They didn't teach him about people like you. They didn't teach me, either. But I learned anyhow. Now tell me where you got that gun this morning."

"It was lying on the banquet table, near the cake. I picked it up."

Baxter believed that. If Irene hadn't happened to go out there and a police patrol car hadn't happened to smash up, he'd have picked up his own gun and had it in his pocket when the cops arrested him.

He sat down next to her. "Baby," he said, "drink your drink and get ready for a shock."

"Dorr?" she asked abruptly. Her eyes were narrow and streaked with green, and though they were sur-

prised, there was no sorrow in them.

"Why would anybody kill Dorr?" he asked. "And who? And how much would you mind?"

She smiled frigidly. "I don't know who or why, and I wouldn't particularly mind. He's been nice to me, of course, and he has his moments, but the only person he really loves is himself."

"He'd do a lot to keep you clear of a murder charge."

"Of course he would. He doesn't want the nuisance or the publicity."

"Dorr wasn't shot," said Baxter, "but maybe this is worse. He gets all the colonel's money."

SHE could have slit Baxter's throat, just for the telling of it. She muttered under her breath and then laughed aloud. "Now how do you suppose he put that one over?" she asked.

"Fraud, possibly. Or forgery."

"I'll pay you a thousand dollars if you can prove it."

"The case smells bad enough already," said Baxter. "I don't want any more of it."

"Please remember whom you're speaking to!" she snapped.

"I'm speaking to a dame who might have plugged him. You thought you were the heiress, didn't you? It would be tough to kill him and then see Dorr get all the dough."

"My beloved brother!" she said sarcastically. "I wish now that I'd asked William, though he probably wouldn't have told me. He never did like me."

"What about William?"

"Didn't I tell you? He was here before. He said something about wanting to tell you who killed the colonel. Really, I'd forgotten."

"You sent him away?" demanded Baxter angrily.

"Oh, I told him he could come back tomorrow some time." She stood up and yawned. "Of course, if I'd known it meant so much to you, darling. Or that you were going to bring someone along with you. Not that it matters."

But I think that I'd like to see Dorr. Mind if I go?"

"Just don't kill Dorr tonight," observed Baxter. "Because you'd never get away with it."

"I suppose not. Not tonight, Josephine. Some other time, perhaps?" She slipped on her coat and turned away from Baxter. The cop held open the door and then stood there while her footsteps went down the stairs and crossed the courtyard. Then the cop spoke.

"And they call that a dame!" he exclaimed. "Holy suffering cats!"

Baxter sipped his drink. He'd been worried, and now everything was straightening out. The killer must have broken into his apartment this evening and been waiting. To do away with Baxter, of course. But Irene had come first, and the killer had slipped out to the front balcony. Then William had come, and—

Baxter got up and marched out to the front balcony. It was empty. If the killer had been there when William had come, he'd heard what William had said. That wasn't nice to think of. And there was no way to warn William, either. And no way to describe him. Just one more, in New Orleans' teeming Negro population.

Baxter sat down again. He knew practically everything except the name of the killer. And the only decent clue he had was the ink stain on Colonel Emmet's fingers. The blonde had said he hadn't had his pen with him, that he'd left it somewhere in the house. Which meant he'd signed something, earlier.

Well, Thrace had said the colonel had refused to sell the machine shop. And Thrace had made no bones about his afternoon visit at the plantation. Which left only Dorr Emmet.

Or Saliman. But what would Saliman have wanted the colonel to sign?

Baxter jerked up. "Did you hear that?" he demanded.

The cop shook his head. "Naah!"

Baxter started for the door, but the cop barred the way. "None of that,"

he said. "You ain't sneaking out on me, fella. They told me you was tricky, and that sort of stuff won't work. Hearing things, huh?"

Baxter sat down again.

If there'd only been some identifying marks on the hand that had held the gun. But the blonde hadn't noticed any. No rings, no scars. Just a hand grasping a gun.

Baxter jumped up again. "Come on," he said. "I heard something that time. Come on!"

CHAPTER V

HE WENT down the stairs two at a time, sprinted across the courtyard and then stopped. A single, dim bulb lit the covered alleyway between the street and the courtyard. Halfway down it lay a man. One arm was stretched forward and one knee was bent, as if he had been trying to crawl forward and then had passed out.

Baxter bent down. The back of the man's coat was wet with blood and Baxter could see the wide rent where the knife had gone in. He lifted William's head for a moment, and then dropped it. The guy was dead.

For a moment Baxter felt a fierce gust of rage at the woman who wouldn't let William sit in the same room with her. Then he shrugged. It was the way she'd been brought up, and she certainly hadn't known she was sending him to his death.

Baxter gazed at the cop. "I'm going upstairs and phone," he said. "You better wait here."

But Baxter made one other call before he notified the police. He phoned the Emmet home. Irene's voice answered. "Hello?" she said.

Baxter had heard the first yell, when William had been struck. That had been ten minutes ago, at the outside. And ten minutes wasn't long enough for Irene to have reached home. So she was clear of this murder, anyhow.

"Hello," he said. "This is Baxter. Is Dorr there?"

"No," she answered. "And at this hour. I could have stayed with you ever so much longer. Isn't it tragic?"

The following morning, Baxter got up early. The cop was snoring on the couch and Baxter had to wake him up.

"What time do you go off duty and turn me over to somebody else?" he asked.

The cop rubbed his eyes. "I'm supposed to report first and get instructions."

"Call up now and tell 'em you had a good night's sleep and you're sticking on the job. I can use you, maybe, and I want to clean up this business today. So go ahead and phone."

Baxter had no illusions. Arnaud would have a squad digging up the embers at the site of the plantation house. As soon as they found evidence of murder, Baxter would be held. For questioning, at first. That was the reason for the tail. And that was the reason Baxter planned to be unavailable.

He took the cop with him for breakfast and then drove him out to the airport and asked a few questions about plane arrivals, just to fill up time. It was well on in the morning when Baxter reached the Emmet house.

"You stick outside," he told the cop. "Grab anybody who runs out too fast."

"I'm staying with you. Orders were not to let you out of my sight."

"Sorry," said Baxter, "but they won't let you in. Not without a warrant."

He left a considerably baffled cop on the sidewalk and then walked briskly up the Emmet path and rang the bell. The butler took him straight into the drawing room.

They were all there. Dorr and Irene Emmet sitting at a table with a lot of papers spread out in front of them, Thrace marching up and down like Julius Caesar dictating to all his stenographers, and Saliman, tall and gloomy, standing at the window.

Irene said, "Oh, good morning.

Wasn't it perfectly horrible about William, and Dorr not having any alibi at the time? I hope that isn't the reason for your being here."

"I'm here because I just can't stay away from you," said Baxter. "What's the gathering about?"

"I came to buy that machine shop," said Thrace. "They're the heirs, and they're willing to sell. Jeff Saliman just happened to be with me."

"*They* are the heirs?" asked Baxter.

Irene explained hurriedly. "The will in Dorr's favor had some irregularities, so we made an arrangement."

Baxter turned and faced Dorr. "So the house isn't yours, huh? And you admitted in front of Arnaud that you'd burnt it up. I guess that arson charge of mine will stick."

Dorr Emmet turned white. Baxter enjoyed the sight for a few seconds before remarking, "About that suit against me, for false arrest."

"I was a little hasty," said Emmet. "Just forget it. I'll phone my lawyer and tell him to drop it."

"Thanks," said Baxter. He was wondering whether he could slip in an assault charge on the trade. Emmet's jaw was a nice target. Baxter moved forward, smiling, but his intentions were obvious.

Dorr Emmet whipped out a gun. Baxter halted and heard the front door bell ring.

"Put it away," said Baxter. "You wouldn't want to use it, right in front of all these people. Put it away."

THE front door opened and he heard the cop's voice. Baxter kept looking at Dorr. From the corner of his eye, Baxter saw the cop size up the situation, draw the wrong conclusions and reach for his gun.

Irene was nearest to him. She stepped backwards and grabbed a small, heavy ash tray. She slung it with all her might. The cop's hat saved him from getting killed, but he sagged suddenly and collapsed.

Nobody else moved. Irene's voice

came sharp and controlled. "Dorr! Where did you get that gun?"

"It's mine. The one I always have."

"But I thought—"

Dorr turned to look at his sister. Baxter punched at his wrist and the gun dropped to the floor. Baxter stamped on the butt and then stooped to pick it up. "You're easy," he said. "Almost too easy."

But Dorr wasn't even listening. He was still staring at Irene.

"You thought that was my gun, out at the plantation," he said. "You thought I'd killed him."

They looked at each other, as if for the first time in their lives each of them realized that the other had really taken risks that weren't really essential. They realized they'd done something for each other which was completely unselfish.

Well, maybe. And maybe it was just an act. Irene could be an angel and a hussy within the same five minutes, and be faking both times.

Baxter walked over to the phone and called his office. "Hello, Blonde," he said. "I'm up at the Emmets' and I need you, so hop along."

He walked back and sat down. He knew who'd killed Colonel Emmet and why, but he had to have a little more proof. Just finger-pointing wasn't enough.

So he sat down and waited. The cop came to and Irene went maternal and put a compress on his forehead and took him upstairs to rest. Thrace put his signature on the papers, and then Irene and Dorr followed suit. Saliman still stood at the window, taking part in nothing.

When the blonde came, Baxter had no way of coaching her, but he figured she'd catch on fast enough. He introduced her as the best blonde in the South, which she was, and then he went ahead and told how she'd played the bride the night before last.

"And what's more," he finished, "she saw the guy's hand holding the gun, and she can identify it, and that's why she's here now. It's pretty easy

to dope out, even without that," he added. "The colonel signed something, and lost his pen. Well, what did he sign? Either the will in favor of Dorr, or the deed to the machine shop."

"If he'd signed the deed to the machine shop, I wouldn't have to kill him, would I?" asked Thrace.

"Maybe," said Baxter. "But if he signed it under duress and then threatened to expose you, you'd have to kill him to keep out of jail."

Thrace stuck out his chest like a pouter pigeon. "I'm a gentleman," he said proudly.

Baxter's laugh was contemptuous. "You're a little pip-squeak," he said.

Thrace hit him in the face. Baxter shook his head and glanced at Thrace's fist and didn't move. Thrace hit him again, harder. Baxter grunted and stood his ground without returning the blow.

Thrace began to enjoy himself. He telegraphed his next punch and started it low and from the side. It smashed at Baxter's chin. Baxter swayed slightly and gritted his teeth. Thrace was only a little guy, but he could hit hard. Hard enough to rip his knuckles.

BAXTER took a deep breath and then bored forward. His two arms drove out and his fists boomed a half second apart. Thrace got that dazed look and dropped into a chair. Baxter bent down and went through the pockets. He found a small, folded sheet of paper with some numbers scrawled across it. He was grinning when he stood up.

"It was either Dorr or Thrace, right from the beginning," said Baxter. "Because of that ink stain. But Dorr has too much sense to forge a will and then kill. He knows the heir is always the number one suspect."

"Besides, he had a gun of his own, and Irene had a few more. She was a pistol expert. Dorr would have taken one of those, rather than have gone to the risk of breaking into my office. And finally, he can't pick locks, that I know of. But Thrace is in the

hardware business. He handles locks, among other things, and the chances are he used to be a locksmith. And if there's any further doubt of his guilt, this piece of paper ends it. My phone number, and the combination of my office safe. Only the murderer could have that.

"William saw him, too, and William was going to tell me last night. He was scared to talk in front of Thrace, and he knew he probably wouldn't even be believed. You caught on to that, Saliman, didn't you?"

"Well, I kind of suspicioned. And then, when Horace took me into town and kept me next to him, I suspicioned some more. But I weren't sure."

"You can be sure, now," said Baxter, "because the blonde saw the hand

holding the gun. She noticed the knuckles were ripped, as if he'd hit somebody. And Thrace is the only one here with ripped knuckles. You can see that, can't you?"

Baxter rubbed the bruise on his face. The evidence wasn't always what you'd like it to be. Which meant that sometimes you had to help it along, even if that meant taking it on the chin.

The blonde was giving him a queer look, as if she wanted to tell him a few things. He remembered he'd accused her of murder as recently as last night and that somehow or other he'd have to make up for it. The least he could do, he supposed, was marry the girl. Or else take her out to dinner.

He figured he'd try dinner, first.

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JUNE



Out April 29

Half a Share in Hell

By Richard Vigil



JACKIE FALE'S pulses hummed as he glanced innocently at the man crouched beside him under the darkness of the bridge abutment. Sweat suddenly beaded his small, chubby overcoat-clad body. It would be easy, he decided. No one knew they were here. And Dan the Dope was too dumb to suspect a thing.

"It's still here, Dan," Jackie muttered.

The tall, thin man known as Dan the Dope leaned forward tensely. He coughed softly into his topcoat sleeve.

"That's good," he said. "Get it."

Jackie's gloved hands tightened around the chisel as he scraped away the last of the hard-packed dirt surrounding the strongbox. Two years it had been buried here, and no one had found it.

"Not bad," Jackie grunted, as he drew the heavy box toward him. "Not bad at all—after two years of stir."

"We was smart. Hidin' the loot here and denyin' we pulled the job. They got us for another job we pulled, but that was all right. Now we start clean. Wit' fifty grand in hot ice."

"Sure, sure, and we'll cash in."

Strongbox in hand now, Jackie followed his unsuspecting companion out from under the abutment, around it, then onto the small bridge itself. He had no intentions of splitting the loot with Dan. His mind was made up on that. Had been made up for a year.

Dan's days in crime were ended.

Stir had made him a sick man, and he'd taken too strongly to drink since they'd got out a month ago. Besides, he was so dumb. It had been because of him they'd been caught red-handed and sent up the river for two years.

Then too, there was that smart dick—Pickett. Even though he'd known they'd pulled the Simmonds' jewelry job, he'd been unable to prove it. But he'd still be after them, waiting to jump any weakness they'd show.

And Dan the Dope was that weakness. So Dan the Dope had to die!

And up ahead, in a small park called the Indian Gardens was the place to kill him. No one should be there at this late hour. Late in the afternoon, when he and

This lawless duo split up their partnership—to make separate deals with Satan.

Dan had first come down to see that no flash-flood had carried away the bridge, they'd seen a couple of white-clad men in a truck hanging around the park. But they had been there only a short while, and the place should be deserted now. Indian Gardens wasn't popular; even with lovers. The city politicians for some reason or other had let it go to seed, Jackie remembered.

But entering the park now, Jackie Fale sensed a change in the place. There was no light in the whole block the park occupied, but he was sure improvements had been made. For one thing there was no longer any weeds in the graveled paths, as he remembered there'd been two years before.

Dan, peering into the wooded darkness, found a bench. "Here," he grunted. "We'll look over the stuff here."

Jackie, heart pumping excitedly in his chest, sat next to him. In a minute it would be over. He'd have the loot to himself, and in a week or so he could skip town, start life anew, maybe settle down. . . .

"Your light, Dan."

Dan the Dope pulled out a small torch. He flashed it briefly between shaky, gloved hands. The light had illuminated his thin, dark, eager face. Dan was anxious as hell about getting hold of the loot!

Jackie's left hand took the torch from him. At the same time his right reached into his own pocket, drew out a silencer-equipped gun. Momentarily Jackie lit the light, brought up the gun. There was a low, muted sound. Then Dan's gasp as the .38 slug smashed against his temple!

For a moment Dan the Dope seemed to fight with himself. Then he toppled to the side, his body rolling off the wire bench to the ground.

Horror gripped Jackie's heart. He trembled, the terrible thought riddling his mind that now he was a murderer. Almost frantically he started wishing he hadn't shot. But he'd had to. Dan was no longer of any use to him, and fifty grand in hot ice was fifty grand in hot ice.

He had to get away. He snatched at the strongbox which he'd placed on the ground, hurried out of the park and back to the bridge. Into the river he threw the murder gun and Dan's torch. Then he crawled under the bridge abutment, hid the strongbox, making sure the ice in it was intact, and left the scene.

He kept to the shadows as he got back to town. He knew just what he had to do. It was certain the cops would question him tomorrow, demand an alibi. But he had expected that and had prepared accordingly. Two pals of his at the hotel would swear he'd been with them up until two a. m. playing poker.

So there was nothing to fear, he assured himself. Nothing at all. . . .

"Go ahead, you rat," the hatchet-faced Pickett growled, as he and other dicks shook Jackie Fale awake next morning. "Say you weren't at the Indian Gardens last night. Say you didn't murder Dan the Dope. Say it wasn't over the Simmonds' loot."

Jackie, sitting up in the bed, fought himself for control. He tried to act sleepy but the chill in his blood made him fully awake. Why was Pickett so confident? And what was he holding behind him?

"I—I was here," he gasped. "I swear I—"

"Then how come these square green marks on the back of your overcoat are the same as those on the back of Dan's topcoat?"

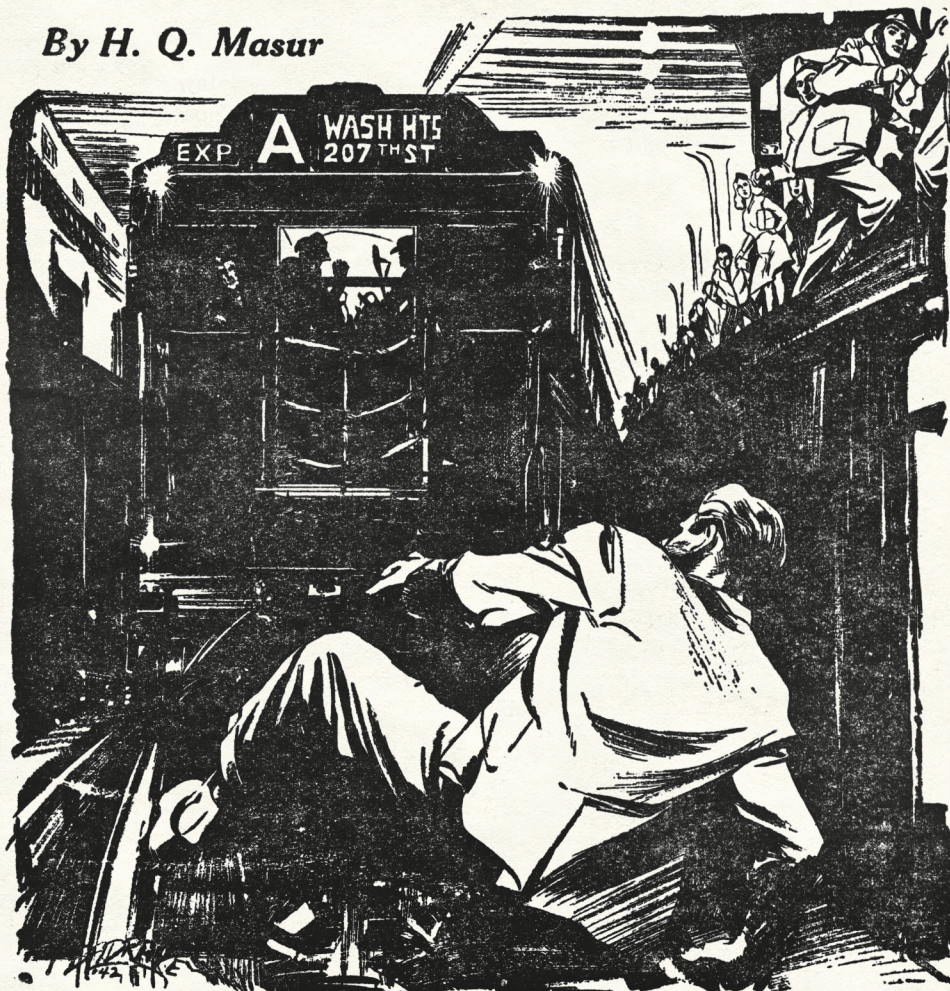
The detective held up Jackie's topcoat, and even as he did Jackie saw his dreams crumbling. Then with a sick, paralyzing fear he remembered. Remembered the two white-clad men he and Dan had seen late in the afternoon. The Indian Gardens were being spruced up, and the men had painted a bench or two.

And Dan, the Dope, had picked one of those benches to sit on!



Carve Me a Coffin

By H. Q. Masur



Gripping Detective Novelet

Three times an unseen, unknown enemy had tried to make funeral arrangements for Ken Hallet. And three times Hallet had refused to push up daisies. But the fourth time he couldn't see how he could escape the hurrying hearse.

HE CAME in out of the darkness. He walked with the rolling gait of a sailor although he'd never been to sea. Sickly grey splashed a drawn and haggard face, and his lips were pulled into a taut grimace over tightly clenched teeth.

The drug store clerk stared at him and swallowed and thought: *Buddy, you better see a doctor—and quick.*

Ken Hallet held onto the edge of the counter a moment and wet his lips. He said: "A bottle of alcohol, please,

some two-inch bandage and adhesive tape."

The clerk wrapped the package, stealing a cautious glance at the stranger. Ken Hallet fumbled a bill out of his pocket, picked up the package and moved with an unsteady stride through the door. Back out into the darkness.

The clerk's eyes were fixed upon the red stains. Five small drops of blood showing in stark crimson relief against the white tile floor.

Outside, Ken Hallet became aware of the sticky wetness dripping down his fingers and quickly pushed his hand into his pocket. There was a sharp throbbing ache along his left arm, as if someone were sticking an ice pick into his biceps. He wheeled into the lobby of the Hotel Rouen, a third-rate hostelry, and signed the name *Thomas Cain* to the register. Why he picked that particular name he could not say.

Once in the small boxlike room he locked the door, drew the shades and went into the bathroom. He removed his coat, rolled up a sodden shirt sleeve.

The bullet, he saw with some relief, had passed clean through the muscle tissue. Uncorking the bottle of alcohol, he poured a liberal quantity into the wound. His breath came out in a sharp exhalation at the searing pain, and muscles ridged whitely along his jaws.

Then he started coiling the gauze around his arm. The bandage was, of necessity, an awkward one. When he'd completed the job he sank exhausted onto the bed and pasted a cigaret against his mouth. Through the upward swirl of smoke he stared unseeingly at the ceiling.

Ken Hallet was not, in the ordinary sense of the word, a coward. Yet he now knew the meaning of fear. It had taken root deep inside his very consciousness. Fear of the unknown. Fear of death before his time. Even a rattle-snake gives warning, but his enemies, whoever they were, and whatever

their motive, had attacked three times without notice.

But beyond his fear there dwelled another emotion. Anger. A man cannot combat the unseen. He cannot fight the unexpected. And so his anger was of the futile kind that literally left him gnashing his teeth.

THE first attack had come two days ago. Since then, his bewilderment had increased tenfold. He could think of no reason why anyone should want to kill him. He was not possessed of great wealth. He had never wittingly made any enemies.

Hallet was employed as a cashier by the brokerage firm of Lamson & Company. He had left the office at 5:30 and was standing on the uptown platform of the Wall Street subway station. It was the rush hour and people were jammed behind him. There was the rumble of an approaching train.

And then, just as it entered the station, a broad flat palm came into contact with Hallet's spine. A powerful thrust threw him violently off balance, and he spilled flounderingly down on to the tracks directly into the path of the onrushing train.

For the space of a single heartbeat the spectators were shocked into stunned silence. Immediately a gasping cry of panic burst out, drowned by the overtone of a whistle blast. Suddenly locked brakes made an ear-splitting abrasive screech. But it was instantly clear that the train would never come to a halt in time. Three women fainted.

Even as he went tumbling into space Ken Hallet knew that his fall was no accident occasioned by the press of the throng behind him. That shove had been too hard, too deliberate, too calculatingly timed.

His glazed eyes saw the huge metal monster bearing inexorably down upon him. His stomach turned over in sickening dread. What he did then was the spontaneous result of his

years of steeplechase riding. His muscles were abruptly galvanized into continued action. It was almost like rolling clear of a falling horse.

He threw himself across the tracks, jackknifed over the third rail and fell clear. The train roared past him. Dank air gusted against him. Scorched electricity bit into his nostrils.

Ken Hallet lay quietly a moment, breathing heavily. The blood was pumping hard through his arteries. Then he clambered to the opposite platform where helping hands hoisted him up. A sea of faces floated hazily in front of him. Questions drummed into his ears. Was he all right? Did he need a doctor? How had it happened?

He straight-armed a groove through the crowd and climbed the stairs swiftly to the street. He flagged a passing hack and sank back against the cushions.

That had been the first attack upon Ken Hallet's life. The second had taken place only the night before.

His employer, Frank Lamson, had asked for a full report on the accounts of several customers. It had occasioned working late. He had called Lisa and told her that he'd pick her up at the club after the last show.

Shortly after ten o'clock he was sitting hunched over his desk, a green eyeshade on his forehead. The office was quite dark all about him except for the bright cone of light drenching the papers he was examining.

Abruptly Ken Hallet lifted his head at the suggestion of a whispered footfall behind him. He twisted in his swivel chair and that movement undoubtedly saved him life. The sap struck him a glancing blow and he slumped forward, badly stunned. But his senses were still functioning.

He felt himself caught in the grip of a pair of powerful arms and dragged toward the open window. He struggled against his opponent, but his efforts were unavailing. His at-

tacker grunted, heaved him to the sill and rolled him off.

The Lamson & Company offices were located on the ninth floor. It was a long drop into the narrow canyon that is Wall Street to the pavement below.

KEN HALLET'S heart had stopped pulsating when he struck the ledge outside some bucket-shop office two stories down. Had he jumped his body would have described a slow arc away from the building. But he'd been rolled off the sill and his body plummeted along the side of the structure so that it struck the rail guarding the ledge. Luckily there had been enough strength left in his muscles to claw himself to safety within the narrow enclosure.

He managed to gain ingress, but did not return to his own office. He was in no condition for another bout with his assailant.

That was the second attempt upon Ken Hallet's life.

Lying on the bed in the small room in the Hotel Rouen, he was reflecting with a certain awe the amazing providence that had so far protected him. To all intents and purposes he should be dead. He had the depressing sensation that he was living on borrowed time.

There may have been a time when Ken Hallet could have faced death stoically, with a shrug. But not now. Now he had too much to live for. There was Lisa.

His fingers curled around the counterpane, his knuckles showing bone white. He tried to thrust from his mind the insidious thought that Lisa might have something to do with all this.

For the first attempt to kill him had followed by one day his marriage to Lisa in Greenwich by a justice of the peace.

Anyone visiting the Club Lido would have seen her. A slender long-limbed girl with bronze hair and turquoise eyes and the kind of throbbing

beauty it hurts to look at. When he married her Ken Hallet knew how her whole life had been wrapped up in music, how she had loved singing to the exclusion of all else, and so he had promised not to interfere with her job.

The Club Lido was an ultra swank spot catering to the exclusive café society crowd. They had taken Lisa to their hearts, and business was a nightly boom. Which did not make Philip Archer angry. Archer was the operator of the Club Lido and it was common knowledge that he'd been in love with Lisa ever since her first engagement.

A frown pulled Ken Hallet's brows together. Would Archer murder him because of jealousy? It was an angle that heretofore had eluded his mind, one that might bear investigation.

He winced at a sudden stab of pain through his arm. He'd been on his way to Long Island to visit his uncle when the shot blasted from a darkened alley to burn a searing hole through his biceps. Hallet's brain had been functioning sharply these past few days and he'd let his body drop awkwardly to the pavement in simulation of death. In this way he may have avoided a second and more accurate bullet.

He did not go to the police because by now he was a little afraid what an investigation might lead to. He did not want Lisa tied into this thing if he could help it. And for the same reason he had avoided a doctor. In the case of a bullet wound a doctor, he knew, would be compelled to notify the police.

Ken Hallet got up and slipped into his topcoat. There was no rent in the sleeve of that garment because he'd been carrying it on his arm when he'd been shot at. He went into the street and darted into a parked cab. He gave the driver a Long Island address and settled back, glancing at his strap watch. He was already a half hour late for the appointment with his uncle.

IT WAS a great cavern of a room filled with trophies from the far-flung shipping empire which Roger Sabin had built. Ken Hallet's aged uncle sat rigidly in a high-backed leather chair, his hollow-jawed bony face frozen into an expression of displeasure. Skeletal fingers toyed with the links of a heavy gold watch chain. Deep-set eyes focused upon Hallet for several moments before the old man spoke.

"Where is she?"

"You mean Lisa, my wife?"

"Yes," snapped Roger Sabin. "I asked you to bring her here."

Hallet smiled. "I'm sorry, Uncle Roger. You'll have to wait until Sunday afternoon. You see, she works at night. She's a singer."

The old man snorted. "She should stay at home and have children. Can't you support your wife?"

"That's not the point. She loves singing; it's her whole life."

"Humph!" The thin lips curled contemptuously. "A woman's husband should be her principal concern." He squinted shrewdly. "Why didn't you talk to me first, Kenneth? What was your hurry? What kind of a chippie hooked you?"

For a moment Ken Hallet did not answer. His eyes met the old man's in a long direct look. Then he said in a quiet voice:

"I can understand your resentment, sir. After my parents died you took care of me. You brought me up and sent me to school. I suppose I might have consulted you first. But you seem to have forgotten two things. First, I passed the age of adolescence some time ago and consider myself quite capable of making my own choice in such matters. Second, Lisa is my wife. I am overlooking your last remark, but in the future I will thank you to refer to her with the proper respect."

The old man grunted. "Well, that was quite a speech, Kenneth. I should like—"

He was interrupted by the ringing

of the bell. A moment later the butler ushered in a tall, solidly built man with iron-grey hair and a square, rugged face. He strode forward, hand outstretched.

"Hello, Ken," he greeted heartily. "And how are you, Roger?"

"Fine, Walter, fine."

They shook hands. Walter Chisolm was Roger Sabin's lawyer, a man whose professional services were limited to handling the affairs of three or four principal clients. After the usual amenities, Chisolm dropped into a chair.

Roger Sabin blinked at him. "Well, Walter, what did your investigation show?"

Walter Chisolm's gaze shifted obliquely to Hallet and then back to the old man. He said: "Her name was Lisa Wray. She comes from a middle class family in Missouri. There is absolutely nothing in her record to indicate any activity you might regard as—"

Ken Hallet came up to his feet. His jaws were tightly locked, his fists were knotted lumps pressed tightly against his thighs. He planted himself squarely in front of Chisolm.

"Just a minute," he said between clenched teeth, "do I understand that you've been investigating my wife?"

CHISOLM shrugged, but did not supply the answer. That came from his uncle. "Take it easy, Kenneth. It was done at my request. I learned you were seeing a lot of this girl and I wanted to find out about her background."

Ken Hallet spun on the old man. Anger flared hotly within him.

"Of all the rotten deals I ever heard of," he growled, "this is the worst. Sneaking behind a girl's back and prying into her private life. It turns my stomach."

"I wouldn't take it so seriously," Chisolm put in. "If you're afraid Lisa might find out about it, don't worry. The way Kincaid operates she'd never guess that anybody was—"

"Who's Kincaid?"

"A private detective. I've used him on a number of matters. I can positively vouch for his discretion."

Ken Hallet's face suddenly sickened as the accelerated blood coursing through his arm started the wound to throbbing again, with those stabbing bursts of almost intolerable pain. He felt a little faint.

Anxiety flashed in Roger Sabin's eyes. "What is it, Kenneth? What's the trouble?"

"Nothing, nothing," he muttered.

But the wound, he knew, was bleeding again. He wanted to get out of there. He turned on his heel, and walked from the room, fighting to hold himself erect. He took his hat from the butler and hit the air. It revived him. The cab was waiting and he ordered the driver to take him back to the city.

Perched atop the Television Building, on the fortieth floor, the Club Lido looked out over a large part of the city. Ken Hallet checked his hat, but kept wearing his topcoat. He stood in the doorway, watching Lisa.

The amber spot made a hazy glow around her face. The music was soft and muted and her voice seemed like something out of this world. A slow spell had been woven over the audience as they listened in breathless appreciation. It was something no one could define, something that belonged to Lisa alone, a part of her personality.

And standing there, watching her and listening to her, it came to Ken Hallet that a man might easily be led to kill for such a girl. He gently caressed the sore spot over his wound and turned down the narrow corridor toward Philip Archer's office. He opened the door without knocking.

Archer's hands were twined behind his back. He was staring out the window at the bright necklace of lights strung across the city's throat, sparkling against the jet background of night.

He turned, his strong handsome

face as expressionless as usual. He regarded Hallet through a pair of bleak grey eyes. Ever since the latter's marriage to Lisa, a frigid atmosphere existed between the two men. Archer's brows lifted.

"Yes?"

Hallet advanced to the center of the room and stood there. Without prelude he said: "Have you got a license for your gun?"

Archer stared at him. "I have—not that it's any of your business."

"I'm making it my business," Hallet said. "How much do you dislike me, Archer?"

A faint smile tugged at Archer's mouth. "Intensely, if that will appease your curiosity."

"Enough to commit murder?"

PHILIP ARCHER moved away from the window and hinged one hip on the edge of his desk. He picked up an ivory letter opener and turned it between his fingers.

"Exactly what do you mean by that crack, Hallet?"

"Simply this. If you think Lisa will turn to you after my death, forget it. You haven't a chance. This visit was simply to let you know that I'm on the alert now. If anything else happens, and I imagine you know what I'm talking about, I'm going to come back here, Archer, and kill you in cold blood. Without warning."

Ken Hallet turned and strode through the open door. He narrowly avoided missing a bus boy who'd been standing in the corridor with a tray in his hand. The bus boy had a stupid slack-jawed expression on his thin face, and he was staring open-eyed at Hallet.

Ken moved along the corridor and turned down a narrow passage to the bank of dressing rooms. He opened the door of Lisa's room and stopped on the threshold.

The chap was all arms and legs with a prominent nose, shell-rimmed glasses and a thin pencil-line mustache. He

got up off the chair and grinned at Hallet.

"Hello," he said.

"You waiting for Lisa Wray?" Ken inquired. "I'm her husband."

The grin faded. The thin man bowed awkwardly from the waist and headed toward the door.

"Just some business," he said. "No hurry. Another time will do." His long legs carried him through the door.

The thoughtful frown was still on Ken Hallet's face when Lisa came in. Her eyes lighted and she moved into his arms.

"How nice," she whispered. "I didn't expect you so early."

Ken held her closely, and then the events of the last three days crowded everything else from his mind. He held her away from him at arm's length.

"Lisa," he said, "there was a chap here a few moments ago, wanted to see you on business."

"Who was he, Ken?"

"Tall guy, skinny, with eyeglasses and a mustache."

He watched for some reaction but got none. She shrugged.

"I can't imagine what he wanted. You don't look well, Ken. What's wrong?"

"Nothing much," he lied. "We're under a strain at the office these days."

"You need a drink." She took his hand. "Let's see if the bar still has a supply."

He did need a drink, badly, and the two Scotches were helpful. She had one more number to sing and he waited for her. Later, on the ride down in the elevator, he asked her where she'd left the car. It was his coupe, but Lisa used it most of the time.

"In the parking lot," she told him.

They found it in a darkened corner against the shadow of a tall building. Ken helped Lisa in and walked around the back to the other side. A drunk stumbled out of an adjacent sedan,

lurched violently against him, mumbled an apology and staggered away.

KEN stood quite still, aware that he was trembling, aware that the entire length of his spine was sheathed in a cold sweat. He licked lips that were dry as flint and tried to shake the panic from his tense frame. His nerves were ragged, frayed. Good Lord! Was he to go to pieces every time something startled him?

He climbed behind the wheel and tooled the car slowly onto the highway. Lights blinked on the river as he headed toward Westchester and dark clouds drifted lazily beneath a thin moon.

He pulled up in front of the bungalow. Lisa, too, seemed preoccupied. She snapped out of it as soon as they were inside.

"How's for some scrambled eggs, master?" she said.

He nodded and sat at the kitchen table while she did things. The sudden clamor of the front doorbell was a rough file across his nerves. He got up and went to the door.

Both of the men were big. The leader held a police shield in the palm of his hand. He had a large square face from which all emotional expression had long since been drained. His voice was blunt and came choppily out of a mouth that opened and shut like a steel trap.

"Hallet?"

"That's right."

"I'm Gurney, Homicide. That your coupe parked out front?"

"Yes." Ken was puzzled. "It was too late to drive to the garage and there isn't much traffic out here so I thought—"

"Don't." A broad palm thrust forward. "Let's have the key."

"I don't get it," Ken said.

"You heard him," the second man put in. "He asked for the key."

Slowly, a cold premonition of some unknown disaster blossoming inside him, Ken took out the small leather case that housed the car keys and

handed them over. Behind him, Lisa said:

"What is it, Ken?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'll be with you in a moment. Stay inside."

Gurney was fumbling at the lock of the baggage compartment when Ken joined the two headquarters men. The door yawned open. The light of a pocket torch probed the interior with a bright concentric beam that settled upon the face of a man.

It was the face of death. Grim, violent death.

The eyes were open and staring, the mouth hung at a loose-jointed angle. The bullet had entered just to the left of the bridge of the nose. A wavering line of crimson traced a path diagonally across the cheek.

Ken Hallet knew that face. He knew it well. It was Philip Archer.

Gurney said: "Let's go inside."

A hand clamped around Ken's left arm and fingers dug into his biceps. The raw wound slammed pain through his whole body. He was weak from loss of blood. The shock of sudden death and what he himself had been through suddenly sapped his knees. He stumbled and went down.

KEN jerked away from the smell of ammonia fumes, sat up. He was in the living room, and the first thing he realized was that the wound in his arm had been properly packed and bandaged. A white-clad intern slapped a small leather bag shut and said:

"He's all yours."

There were a lot of men in the room now. Ken understood that they'd been outside, working around the car. A small fat man with a shiny face and large-pored skin hustled in, mopping a bald head. Gurney turned to him.

"Well, doc?"

The fat man cleared his throat. "Bullet entered the frontal lobe and lodged in the cerebellum. Death was instantaneous. Something around two hours ago. I'll know more accurately after the P.M."

"What kind of a gun?"

The medical examiner shrugged. "I'd say a .32 automatic. You can have the slug as soon as you get him to the morgue."

Gurney nodded and shifted a pair of hard accusing eyes on Hallet. Ken struggled to a sitting position.

"Where's my wife?"

"Upstairs," Gurney said.

"I want to see her."

"You will later. Visitors aren't barred at Sing Sing."

Ken started to get up, but Gurney pressed four thick finger-tips against his chest and eased him back onto the couch.

"Just some questions," the homicide man said. "You don't mind. A matter of routine, duty and all that."

Ken stared at him. Gurney's mouth suddenly snagged down.

"All right, Hallet, let's hear it."

"What?"

"Your alibi. You've got one. They always have."

Thoughts made a wild, swirling jumble in Ken's brain. One thing, however, stood out clear. Archer had been killed while Ken was still at the club. He knew he would never be able to prove that unless the medical examiner could set the time of death within a matter of seconds and probably not even then. Who was there to testify that he had not sneaked out of the club for a few moments.

He said: "I was at the club."

"Yeah. We know that. Suppose you tell us why you did it."

Ken's throat was dry, sticky. He tried to swallow and couldn't. "If you think I killed Archer, you're crazy."

Gurney said: "We can prove that you did."

"You're bluffing," Ken muttered, "and you know it."

THE corners of Gurney's mouth turned up in a wolfish grin. His voice was hard and chilled and accusing.

"You think so, Hallet? Then listen to this and begin learning some new

prayers. We know that Archer was carrying a torch for your wife, that he was nuts about her. We know too that she liked him, more than a little, before you came along. Well, sir, maybe you found them getting kind of friendly and—"

Breath came heavily through Ken's flared nostrils. He lunged to his feet and swung a vicious blow at Gurney's chin. The homicide man moved his head smoothly aside and the blow slid past. The other detective grabbed Ken's arm and locked it behind his back, forcing him down onto the couch.

Gurney said: "Take it easy, Hallet. You'll get your chance to fight. With words—in court—before twelve men."

"Go ahead," said the other detective. "Tell him."

Gurney pushed his jaw out. "Here's the way we see it, Hallet. You had a fight with Archer. You pulled a gun. He tried to defend himself and shot you through the arm. But your bullet caught him in a more vital spot. The head. You stuffed him into the baggage compartment, expecting to unload his body later. But somebody suspected what you'd done and gave us a tip."

"You'll never prove that in court," Ken said tightly.

"That's your opinion. Stick with it, brother. Confidence has kept a lot of guys going long after the game was up. Only get this—we have the testimony of a bus boy at the club who heard you threaten Archer tonight. He heard you swear to kill him in cold blood."

Kent's stomach constricted into a knot. He was remembering that scene in Archer's office, remembering too the slack-jawed expression on the bus boy's face as he'd emerged.

"I didn't kill him," Ken said dumbly. "I didn't even know he was in the car."

Gurney gave a short, harsh laugh. "You haven't heard it all, Hallet, not by a long shot. Here's the payoff. We

found the gun in your coat pocket, a short-barreled thirty-two. Archer was killed by a thirty-two. Ballistics hasn't checked yet, but one will get you twenty that it's the same gun which killed him."

For a long breathless moment Ken stared at Gurney, stunned by the impact of this statement and all its implications. The blood hammered hard against his temples and his brain felt as if the jaws of a steel vise were trying to crush it.

Lisa! She'd sat beside him in the car during the ride home. Could she—was it possible she might have slipped the gun into his pocket? A grappling hook seemed to yank at Ken's heart. With a grim physical effort he erased the thought from his mind. Suddenly he stiffened, swiftly alert.

The drunk! That was it. The drunk who'd lurched against him in the parking lot. The guy had only been acting. Relief flooded him. Clearly that's where the gun had come from. The guy'd been waiting there for him, waiting to plant the gun in his pocket.

Ken started to tell them about it and then clamped his mouth shut. What was the use? They wouldn't believe him anyway.

Gurney said: "Get up, Hallet. Let's start moving."

"That's right," chimed the other detective, "we've got a nice cell all warmed up and waiting for you."

SUN slanting through the barred window made diagonal stripes across the concrete floor. A key grated in the lock.

"Here's a visitor for you," said the turnkey.

Ken looked up. Lisa was standing in front of him. Her face was haggard and drawn and white, and her eyes showed the horrible strain under which she'd been laboring. For a long breathless moment they were locked in each other's arms.

"You didn't do it, did you, Ken?" Lisa finally said.

He shook his head. "No. I didn't kill him. You believe that, don't you, Lisa?"

"Yes, Ken."

"Well"—his voice was bitter—"you're the only one who does. They're going to arraign me this morning and I'll probably be held for trial."

Lisa plucked at the frayed ends of her handkerchief. "What—what will they do to you, Ken?"

His shoulders slumped. "They can make out a damn good case against me for first degree murder. Chisolm, my uncle's lawyer, was in here a little while ago. Do you know what he advised me? He told me to cop a plea and save myself from the chair.

"Twenty years he said was all they'd give me." Ken laughed harshly, a laugh from which all trace of mirth had been drained. "Twenty years, rotting away in some cell. I only wish they'd been successful when they tried to kill me four days ago."

Lisa caught her breath with a gasp. She took a step forward. "Tried to kill you? Who, Ken?"

He stared at her, his jaw tight. Why not tell her? This was no time for gallantry.

"It started four days ago," he said. "Someone tried to murder me. They've been trying ever since. That was where I got this bullet wound in my arm, not because Archer shot me in self-defense."

"Why didn't you tell that to the police?" Lisa asked.

"They wouldn't have believed me. At best it's a fantastic story."

"Four days ago," Lisa's voice was a barely audible whisper. "That—that was right after we got married."

Ken was seeing something, the odd twist to her mouth, the hollow, haunted fear that was dominant in her eyes. Her lips were moving faintly; she spoke in a low, earnest voice.

"Listen, Ken, there's something I want to tell you. Please try to understand." She paused for a moment before beginning. "It happened a long time ago, long before you met me, I

was only sixteen, a cashier in a restaurant, earning enough to study singing at night. Then one day some money was missing. They accused me and I was sent to reform school. After a year they let me out, on parole. I had to report every week.

"I got another job, and then a chance came to sing with a small band that was leaving on a tour. I—I left without notifying my parole officer. Oh, I know now how stupid that was. But I was young and I didn't realize. I changed my name and the color of my hair. I thought I was safe and for a long time I was—until some weeks ago."

Her fists were clenched tightly until the knuckles showed like scraped bone.

"And then this stranger, a man, showed up. He seemed to know the whole story, everything about me. He started to blackmail me, threatening to notify the authorities and have me sent back for breaking parole. He only wanted a little at first, but then his demands got bigger until I was paying him more than half of what I was making at the club."

MUSCLE knots made white ridges along Ken Hallet's jaws. "Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded. "I could have helped you."

"I was afraid, afraid for you, Ken. Of what you might do, that you'd get hurt."

"All right," he said grimly. "Go on, what happened?"

She swallowed painfully. "At first I didn't know which way to turn. Then I went to Archer. I knew that he'd been a bootlegger in the prohibition days and I felt he'd know how to handle this man. Please try to understand, Ken. Archer was genuinely fond of me and I knew he'd try to help." The words were caught in her throat. "He did—and now he's dead."

"The man who's been blackmailing you," Ken said swiftly, "what's his name?"

She shook her head mutely. "I don't

know, but you saw him last night at the club—"

"The tall man with the glasses and the mustache?"

"Yes."

The thing was crystallizing now, not altogether clear yet, but it was coming to a head. Ken whirled and gripped the bars, rattled them violently.

"Guard!" he shouted. "Guard!"

The turnkey came running. "Take it easy in there. What's the trouble? You'll have to get out, miss."

"Get Sergeant Gurney down here," Ken cracked. "I've got to see him."

The turnkey was already hustling Lisa from the cell and slamming the door again on Ken.

He waited fretfully and twenty minutes later two more guards appeared. They took him out of the cell and piloted the way along the corridor.

"Where's Gurney?" Ken wanted to know.

"In the courtroom—right where you're goin', buddy. Your hearing comes up in a coupla minutes."

Chisolm was at the counsel table and beside him sat old Roger Sabin, Ken's uncle. The old man's seamed leathery face was set in a hard mold, his mouth turned down sharply at the corners. The magistrate beckoned to the lawyer and Chisolm got up and approached the desk.

Ken sat down beside his uncle. At the other end of the table an assistant D. A. was rifling a huge sheaf of papers, holding a whispered conference with Gurney.

A few early morning stragglers with no place better to go sat up in their seats. A court attendant ambled down the aisle bidding spectators to take off their hats.

Ken's eyes searched vainly for Lisa. He looked at his uncle. There were deep hollows under Roger Sabin's eyes and his lips were like ancient parchment.

"You're in one hell of a spot, Kenneth. This is all the fault of that girl.

If you hadn't married her it could never have happened."

What his uncle had said was probably true so Ken did not answer. There was nothing he could say. But it did not make him love Lisa any less.

The old man rapped measuredly against the table. "No matter what happens to you I'm not going to let her get any of my money."

"Don't worry," Ken told him quietly. "There's a damn good chance that I may die long before you. You don't have to leave her anything."

"That's just it," snapped Roger Sabin. "I've already deeded most of my property to you, secretly, to save administration expenses after my death. Chisolm suggested it. Now, you're going to sign it back or—"

"Just a second." Ken's voice was suddenly strained. He leaned forward and his fingers clamped over his uncle's arm. "Did you say that you've already deeded most of your property to me?"

"Yes."

SLOWLY, deliberately, Ken turned away and his eyes were cold thoughtful slits while his breath came in rapid staccato bursts. He twined his fingers tightly on the table and stared fixedly ahead. So deeply occupied was his mind that he scarcely heard them go through the opening formalities of the case.

Gurney took the stand and told his story. Then the bus boy from the Lido, sweating and nervous and pop-eyed, testified how he'd heard Ken Hallet threaten to kill Archer. An assistant medical examiner took the stand and identified the bullet he had extracted from Archer's skull. He was followed by the ballistics expert from the police department who exhibited a microphotographic chart to prove that the bullet had been fired from the very weapon found in Ken Hallet's coat pocket.

All in all it added up to about as tight a case as any ambitious prosecutor could desire.

Ken heard Chisolm whisper in his ear, and he pushed himself up from his seat. Then, moving into the witness box, Ken took the oath absent-mindedly.

Chisolm preened himself and asked: "You heard the charges against you?"

"Yes."

"Are they true?"

"No."

"You have seen the State's exhibit 1-A, the gun with which Archer was killed? Is it your gun?"

"No."

"Did you ever see it before Sergeant Gurney found it in your pocket?"

"I did not."

"Did you know that the deceased had been placed in the baggage compartment of your car before Sergeant Gurney drew that fact to your attention?"

Ken shook his head.

The court stenographer looked up.

"The witness will answer verbally," instructed the judge.

Ken said: "I did not know he was there."

"Why did you threaten to kill the deceased?" inquired Chisolm.

"Because I thought he had been trying to murder me."

Chisolm frowned. "What gave you that idea?"

"Three previous attacks, one of which resulted in the bullet wound found in my left arm."

Chisolm took a single step forward. "But you did not report those attempts to the police?"

"No."

"And you swear that you did not kill Philip Archer?"

"I did not kill Archer," Ken said clearly and slowly, "but I know who did."

It was like a sudden breeze whipping across a field of wheat. The spectators came forward in their seats with a deep concerted gasp. Gurney stiffened and half rose. The prosecutor's ears pricked up like a hound's

that has suddenly caught a scent. The judge's gavel fell once in a sharp rap, and the courtroom dropped into a well of silence so deep it seemed actually to throb. On the wall behind His Honor the big clock ticked loudly.

"You say you know who killed Archer?" Chisolm asked.

"Yes." The muscles in Ken's face were curiously rigid.

"Who?"

"You did," Ken Hallet said. "You, Walter Chisolm, killed Philip Archer."

FOR a brief instant the accusation was greeted by stunned silence. Then the impact struck home. Turmoil blossomed in the courtroom. Spectators started jabbering among themselves. Both the prosecutor and Gurney came to their feet. The judge bombarded his desk.

When order finally settled over the courtroom Walter Chisolm was standing transfixed, seemingly impaled to the floor. Suddenly he gave vent to a short nervous laugh.

He said: "This is no time for joking. I know that you're laboring under a strain, however—"

"I'm not joking." Ken looked up at the judge. "May I prove my accusation, Your Honor?"

The judge frowned and pinched his bottom lip. The prosecutor moved forward.

"The State offers no objection."

"You may proceed," ruled the Court.

Ken leaned forward in the witness chair and drew in a long breath. This was it. The time had come to test his theory. He spoke slowly and deliberately.

"I was married four days ago and immediately thereafter a series of attempts were made upon my life. Why anyone should want to kill me was a mystery. And then, only a few minutes ago, I learned that my uncle had secretly deeded property of great value to me. The implication was clear. Someone wanted to kill me so

that my wife would inherit that property. His intention was to take it away from her. By blackmail.

"I know that Walter Chisolm had hired a private detective to investigate my wife. He kept secret what he learned: that a long time ago she had been convicted of a minor crime and released on parole; that subsequently she broke that parole. So he hired an intermediary to extort money from her under the threat of sending her back to finish her term. The take, however, was not big enough for Chisolm, so he got my uncle to deed property to me, intending to blackmail it from my wife after I was dead.

"She was desperate and went to Philip Archer for advice. By shadowing Chisolm's man, Archer learned the identity of the blackmailer and threatened Chisolm. So in order to protect his racket and his reputation Chisolm was forced to kill Archer."

"What about the body?" demanded the prosecutor.

"Chisolm put it in my car, and in the darkness planted the gun in my pocket. He figured I would be executed or sent up for life. In either event the field would be clear to extort the money from Lisa."

Mottled splotches showed starkly against the paleness of Chisolm's face. He spread his feet in front of the bench and said in a cold, biting voice:

"I tell this court that the fabric upon which the defendant has woven this fantastic tissue of accusations is false, absolutely false. And I take this opportunity to deny them. I deny them categorically. Anyone can see that this is the last desperate attempt of a trapped man to shift his guilt. He has the temerity to accuse me—me—an honored and respected member of the Bar. I say, where is his proof?" Chisolm whirled and pointed at Roger Sabin.

"There sits my alibi, Roger Sabin, the defendant's own uncle. I was with

him that night, in his home, at the very hour Archer was being murdered by Kenneth Hallet."

The judge looked soberly down at Roger Sabin. "Is that true?"

KEN held his breath. Indecision was written across the old man's face. Slowly, very slowly, he nodded.

"Yes. Mr. Chisolm was with me that night. We sat up together until quite late."

The air went out of Ken Hallet. His shoulders slumped and his arms felt wooden. This was the only way the thing made sense. The judge rapped once with his gavel, sharply.

"I remand this prisoner for trial before the Court of General Sessions."

At that precise instant the door at the rear of the courtroom burst open. Four people filed down the aisle. Lisa was leading the procession. Behind her two policemen were dragging a battered and subdued figure, with a pair of broken glasses clinging to the bridge of a sharp nose under which grew a thin dark mustache.

Lisa smiled at Ken and came to a stop before the bench. "This is the man who murdered Philip Archer. His name is Saul Kincaid. He was blackmailing me for breaking parole. Archer learned about it and—"

Kincaid's eyes darted around the courtroom and spied Chisolm. He leveled a shaking finger and screeched:

"He put me up to it. He made me do it. It was all his idea. He's as guilty as I am."

Chisolm uttered a strangled oath and whirled toward the side door. He never reached it. A flying tackle by one of the court attendants brought him to the floor.

It was necessary after that to clear the courtroom. The spectators, having

been exposed to too much excitement, were unable to control their emotions.

Ken did not need the explanation that Lisa later offered in the judge's private chambers. He'd guessed what had happened. She had been expecting Kincaid on one of his periodic extortion visits. No longer worried about herself, she had planted two policemen where they could hear what transpired. Caught unexpectedly in the very act of blackmail, Kincaid had put up a fight and been clubbed into submission. After that it was not difficult to get him to talk.

Lisa faced the judge with a quiet calmness. "I'm ready to go back now."

It hit Ken then, hit him hard. He was free, yes, but Lisa— Between clenched teeth he said: "You've already served your time. I have money now. I'll spend every cent fighting this thing."

"That won't be necessary."

Surprisingly enough it was Sergeant Gurney who added the finishing touches. He came forward, ruefully scratching his head.

"You see," he continued, "when I went through Archer's desk I found that he'd made his own investigation of Mrs. Hallet's case. There were papers there showing that the restaurant manager had later been caught stealing other money and confessed to the whole thing, admitting that he had framed Mrs. Hallet. She's not wanted on any charge at all. I didn't know how pertinent all this was to the murder case."

A funny thing happened then. Ken and Lisa stared at each other and started to laugh. Maybe it was just the release of nervous energy. But they were still laughing as they walked, arm in arm, down the courthouse stairs.



Knot Guilty

"Dizzy Duo" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

When Snooty and Scoop, those screwball newshawks, try to cut big house bonds for a killer, they find themselves tied up in homicide red tape.

ONE morning I am walking down Tremont on my way to work at the *Evening Star* when I hear a very disturbing sound like three flat cars loaded with old wash boilers has jumped the rails. A big officer of the law looks at me and I look at him and he asks me do I suppose the Japanazis had succeeded in making a landing on the Commonwealth fish pier.

"It is either that," I says, "or the army is tryin' out a new tank on our thoroughfares here."

Then it comes around the corner out of West Street and it is a pea-green sedan that shakes so much that the citizen driving it is only a blur.

Oh, I know what it is now. The cop runs out and holds up his hand and the sedan nearly blitzes him, as it has no brakes.

"Stop that fugitive from a junk yard," the cop yelps. "Or I will shoot the tires."

The jalopy comes to a stop and there is quiet in Boston like you hear in London after the bombers have gone home. Snooty Piper shows his license and the cop throws it back at him and makes him get out.

"I have broke no laws," Snooty says. "Oh, hello, Scoop. I have solved the tire problem."

"You are disturbing the peace," the gendarme throws at Snooty. "How

can one jalopy make all that noise?"

"Well, you can see my tires are down to the quick," Snooty says. "There are no retreads to be had. I poured cement into the tires, then sewed them up with some wire. They will never wear out. It is a little bumpy though."

The cop looks at Snooty and shakes his dome. Then he says for Snooty to go into the nearest store where there is communication with the outside world and phone for a tow-car.

"At your own expense, too," the police officer says, nasty-like. "That heap is goin' to the dump an' if you give me any lip, you go with it. It has only got one headlight, no brakes and two fenders."

"You forget that when I pull out the ash tray, the horn blows," Snooty says. "I will see somebody in the city hall about this. I must have transportation."

"No more lip or you will git it. In a black Maria. Now do like I tell you!"

It costs Snooty ten bucks to have his jalopy hauled away and he says he will start suing everybody from the cop up to the mayor.

"Oh, shut up," I says. "Walking is easy, Snooty. Look, you put one foot out, then put the other ahead of it. Do it maybe a thousand times and we will be at the *Evening Star*. I agree with the policeman. Couldn't you hear the racket you made?"

"It is like when your brakes are burning, you don't hear it inside the car," Snooty says.

WE GO down to the place where Mr. Guppy helps steer public opinion one way or another and Snooty seems to be able to walk very well for a beginner. Crossing Haymarket, we see a jalopy going places in a hurry and Snooty grabs me by the arm.

"That was Red Bantum of the *Globe-Herald*," Snooty yelps. "Some-thing' has happened somewhere. Grab that cab, Scoop!"

We get into the taxi and Snooty says for the driver to tag the black coupé that has stopped for a light two blocks ahead. "Two bucks tip if you keep glued to him," Snooty says and I ask him if he has two bucks.

"That is beside the point," the moron tells me and starts biting his fingernails. "Why don't Guppy furnish us with autos?"

We follow the cab to a warehouse in Charlestown and out in front of it is two police cars.

"It is a jackpot we hit, Scoop," Snooty yips. "Somethin' has happened. Come on."

"How about the scratch, banjo eyes?" the cabby says. "Awright, fork it over."

"Scoop," the nitwit tells me, "if you have two bucks, you better pay him."

I shell out. I take out a notebook and jot the debt down. "That makes eighteen-fifty you owe me, spend-thrift," I says.

"Huh? You will have to git a priority to get it right away, Scoop. Eleven creditors are ahead of you. But let us hurry inside."

It is a warehouse belonging to a big wholesale grocery firm. On the floor of the office is a citizen who worked for a Merchants' Protective Association, and he is not there just to look for a collar button. The back of his pate has been caved in and is beyond repair even by the Mayo Brothers' clinic.

Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy, who is a liability to the taxpayers, is in charge of things and he is taking enough rope off a character in the corner by the window to tie up all the traffic in war-time Washington. The safe is swinging open and we are sure there is not much of value left in it. There are signs of a struggle and a little red vase has busted up on the floor.

"How did you two git wind of this?" Iron Jaw yelps.

"We visited a medium," Snooty says. "Who have you arrested? Who

have you charged with murder this time?"

The character who was tied up and who has a bump on his dome asks first for a drink of water.

"The guy was masked," he said. "About six foot tall and had plenty of beef. He had just tied me up an' gagged me when O'Gatty came in. O'Gatty's the cop from the Protective Association. The killer hid behind the screen there an' then he come out an' got O'Gatty from behind."

The taxpayer who is talking is the night watchman and his name is Ellsworth Wangle. He is not a bad-looking character and not the kind you would suspect would be a nocturnal slave.

"How much was in the safe?" Iron Jaw yelps.

"Seven grand," Wangle groans and rubs the igloo on his coco. "The crook slugged me an' then took the combination of the safe out of my pocket. Also eight bucks I had. When I came to, I was trussed up an' that was when O'Gatty came in. I tried to signal to him, but the light was dim."

Iron Jaw picks up papers from the floor and examines them. There are a couple of cards near the spot where Wangle was winged. The over-sized slewfoot takes a gander at all the stuff and what he sees no one of the cards gets him in a dither.

"Huh," Iron Jaw says. "This is a familiar name on this card. 'Rocco Latalia. Trucking Done Reasonable.' How did this card git in here?"

"I guess it fell off the desk with that vase an' things as O'Gatty scuffled a little before he was bashed," Wangle gulped. "Let me call my wife as she will be worried. I'm usually home by this time."

SNOOTY PIPER is bent over and is picking up the fragments of the thin red vase. Iron Jaw sends two cops out to pick up Rocco Latalia.

"I remember now," Iron Jaw says. "That big mug give us lots of trouble over beer in the ol' days when it was

illegal to sell beer. Then he started gettin' hold of the celery market. It looks like I got a pinch."

"Then wake up," Snooty says. "All Roc wanted was some trucking business here. I bet you will arrest every citizen who left a card here. You are hopeless, Iron Jaw."

"It was a perfect description," O'Shaughnessy snaps. "Six foot at least and beefy. That is Latalia."

We sit around and wait for the guys from LaGrange Street to photograph everything and for the flunkie of the morgue pick-up truck to take out the deceased O'Gatty. It is amazing to me that Snooty sits around so calmly after gathering up the broken glass.

"Rubber heels are valuable too," Snooty tells me. "You can git them cut and where would you get more?"

In due time they bring in Rocco Latalia and Iron Jaw grills him.

"Your card bein' here tells me you was casin' the joint, Roc," Iron Jaw accuses. "Once a crook always a crook. Where was you last night?"

"Look, O'Shaughnessy," says Roc, who is a very mean-looking character. "It is my luck you git me at a disadvantage. From eleven o'clock on las' night I don't know what goes on."

"So I am dumb, hah?" Iron Jaw howls at Snooty.

"You can say that ag'in," Snooty nods.

"Well, he ain't got an alibi!"

"Look," Rocco says. "I am out with a couple of mamas. I'm with a pal. We got to a tavern an' the dolls start talkin' about zombies. They bet me five bucks I can't take three without showing it. Well, no dame can twit me about what I can hold. So I take the zombies. I am oke until I stand up an' then I ask who cut me off at the knees. I start for home on a street car an' that's the last I remember until two hours ago."

"I must take this down, Scoop," Snooty says and reaches for his pad. He has forgotten it. He picks up an

old sheet of paper off the floor near the water-cooler and starts taking notes.

"What did you come here for?" Iron Jaw yelps. "Your card was here. You got a record so—"

"Awright, fatso!" Rocco says. "People are short of tires, ain't they? Well, I have eight new truck tires I picked up when I went in business. I got four I would sell to somebody for the right price. I called on all guys who trucked things like this whole-sale grocer outfit."

"Stop right there as I have heard enough," Iron Jaw howls. "Anybody with that many new tires is a crook anyhow! I bet you stole them, Roc. Anyways, I think you are lyin'. You are big enough to tie up Wangle like he was, as them knots was so tough I had to cut them off. You are a suspect, Rocco Latalia, and you are goin' for a ride."

"He might not be wrong," I says to Snooty.

"There is a chance he has got the right party," Snooty agrees. "Nobody, whether he has no brains or is cock-eyed, can keep throwing stones at a hole in the fence without gettin' one through before he dies. . . . Look, what goes?"

Rocco has taken a hanky out of his pocket an' is about to wipe his brow with it when Iron Jaw pounces on him and grabs it.

"There is blood on it," I gasp. "It never come from spaghetti sauce, Snooty."

"That cooks you, Roc!" Iron Jaw yips.

"I killed me a chicken this mornin'," the suspect says. "I keep chickens out back of my house. The ol' lady wanted some fricassee. That is where the blood—"

Iron Jaw takes Rocco Latalia downtown and me and Snooty goes to the Greek's.

"Look, Scoop," Snooty says. "What would you call this I got here?"

I look at the thin chip of stuff that

the zany places on the table. "A piece of the vase," I says.

"Just pick it up an' look ag'in, Scoop."

I do. It is a dame's fingernail, or I should say, part of one, and it is painted a bright red.

"A doll could have been in on the slaying," Snooty says. "Maybe she started to tie up Wangle and broke her fingernail. Her accessory took over then and—"

"Nuts," I says. "They would of worn gloves. Criminals are smart these days."

"There was a desk and chair there in the office which told me a stenog or bookkeeper works there in the daytime. She could have had a boy friend who worked with her on this job. We will find out where she lives. We had better go over there right now. No, we will wait until four o'clock outside the 'warehouse an' then trail her, Scoop."

"I should walk out on you now," I sniff and ask for another beer.

Snooty takes the notes out of his pocket and he finds out he has made them on the other side of a dunning bill.

"Huh," Snooty says. "This bill says the watchman owes thirty-seven bucks yet on an imitation leopard coat."

"Amazing, Sherlock," I says. "How else could a night watchman pay for anything bigger than a cake of yeast except on time?"

"I only mentioned it," Snooty says.

THE afternoon papers say that Rocco Latalia was let out on bail of ten thousand dollars and that he is a suspect as far as the department is concerned. The lab boys took a test of the gore on Rocco's handkerchief and found out that the corpuscles appearing in front of the microscope did belong to a feathered creature.

"I knew that he would not be as dumb as Iron Jaw thinks," I says. "Iron Jaw would believe that an asthma addict would walk through

goldenrods on purpose, wouldn't he?"

At quarter to five me and Snooty Piper are lurking in a doorway across the street from the warehouse where O'Gatty was rubbed out. At five, a very nifty-looking cupcake trips out of the door marked *Office* and heads across the street. She grabs a trolley for Chelsea and we get on the same public carrier.

"Look at the squab's nails," Snooty hisses at me. "Manicured very far down. No doll who is up to date has them shorter than a Bengal tiger's talons. We got somethin' here."

"Something tells me you mean we're going to get it," I says a little nervously as the doll keeps taking ganders at us. "She is gettin' wise."

"Stop looking at her," the halfwit snaps at me.

"You are not ignoring her," I counter.

The dame gets off the street car at an intersection and walks across town. We follow. When we turn a corner she has taken, we do not see a sign of the skirt.

"She must've gone into a store," Snooty says.

"No kiddin'," an angry voice yips and then the doll winds up like Lefty Grove and brings her reticule down on Snooty's green hat. "You been follerin' me all the way from work, you beasts! I'll show you how a civilian defense physical instructor can handle your kind!"

She misses me with the bag and I start running. Snooty is a little punch drunk from the first buffet and is an easy target for the second. I watch the assault from a distant doorway. Then I move away toward the trolley line as two cops move in and pick up Snooty.

"He's a masher!" the nifty says. "He tried to molest me."

"I can explain," Snooty says as he reels about like a drunk. "I am—"

I do not see Snooty Piper until the next afternoon as they locked him up in the Chelsea jail over night. Mr. Guppy had to come over there him-

self to spring the cluck. Snooty comes into the city room of the *Evening Star* and he doesn't look so good.

"I hope this will teach you a lesson," I says with little sympathy.

"It is a very inefficient newspaperman who gives up that easy," Snooty says. "I am goin' over to the warehouse and confront her and make her talk, Scoop."

"Have a nice time," I says.

I meet Snooty at the Greek's at three P. M. I am surprised to see him without bandages.

"Well?" I begin.

"Her name is Alice and she is swell," Snooty says. "I got her phone number and she said she will make up to me for everything. Oh, she filed all her nails down after she broke her nail so that they would all match up. Well, I can be wrong for once, can't I?"

"What will you do next?" I ask. "I can't wait as you are more interesting than a magazine serial, Snooty."

"Only one thing to do now, Scoop. We will go over and interview Wangle ag'in and see if he remembers anything he didn't after Iron Jaw untied him. After all, how could a dame like Alice tie such tough and intricate knots?"

"She teaches physical savvy for civilian defense," I remind him.

"Are you insinuat' that lovely girl would—you look here, Scoop Binney, you are gettin' too hard-hearted bein' around newspapermen so long. Why, to think she—"

"Oh, shut up," I growl.

I GO down to Wangle's house, which is in Dorchester, with Snooty Piper. The night watchman's wife is about to go out for the afternoon and she is leavin' instructions with Ellsworth before she goes. She is all angles and has a face as sour as hard cider.

"An' don't forgit to start the soup at four. The can opener is on the ice-box an' there's some biscuits in the bread box. Don't you dare cut into

that boiled ham as I am savin' that for the girl next Monday night. And if you leave any dirty dishes, I will bop you good, see?"

"Yes, dear," we hear Wangle say. "Have a nice time at the bridge club."

We go in and talk to Wangle but he does not have anything more to tell us. Snooty is on pins and needles and wants to get out of there. I find out why soon enough.

"Scoop, did you notice anythin'?"

"I noticed that he leads a life very much like a Great Dane's," I says.

"Oh, not that. His wife. When a doll goes out to play bridge with a lot of biddies, she dresses her best and don't you think she don't. Mrs. Wangle had an old brown cloth coat with a frayed rabbit collar on it."

"Awright, Sherlock," I says. "Watson asks what would she have on if she was a watchman's wife, a Russian sable lined with chinchillas?"

"Scoop, the dunning bill for the leopard coat," Snooty says. "Why didn't she wear it?"

"The finance company took it," I come back. "I would make a million on a quiz program."

"Maybe. But would *you* try to take anythin' away from her?" Snooty Piper keeps firing.

"You got me there, pal. Only if I had two marines with me," I admit.

"Somethin' is screwy," Snooty says. "Now I know who I will shadow next."

"You should wear a collar with a leash and hire yourself out," I tell the fathead. "Who?"

"Mr. Ellsworth Wangle, that is who. I think he will bear fruit."

"I hope it is not pineapples," I reply.

Night watchmen sleep in the morning and maybe part of the afternoons. We figure it should be around three P. M. that Wangle should start abroad. We miss by about fifteen minutes since at a quarter past Mr. Wangle emerges from his abode all dressed up like a Nazi general.

"You be sure to come right home

from the movies now," we hear Mrs. Wangle yelp after him. "Don't you dast stop in any saloons on the way back!"

"Yes, dear," Ellsworth says, then sighs so heavily we hear him all the way across the street. We trail Ellsworth to South Boston and he stops on the doorstep of a house on C Street and rings a bell.

"The dirty double-crosser," Snooty says. "He was supposed to go to the movies. Let's sneak across the street from the house when he goes in. I bet he has a torch."

Wangle is in the house for fifteen minutes but the shades are down and we can't see anything. Then Wangle comes out with a great big female dressed in an imitation leopard coat. The doll is no spring chicken and has quite a paint job on.

"He leads a double life," I sniff.

"Who can blame him?" Snooty tosses out. "Let's see where they go."

Mr. Wangle and his flame go to a two-by-four park and sit down. Me and Snooty pause behind a big bush and try to hear what they are saying but we can't. Anyway, Mr. Wangle has his arm around the doll and he has to lift himself half off the park bench to do it. They both look quite happy with life.

"You know what?" Snooty says. "We will double back to the house on C Street as I want to look in the backyard. And maybe a window or a door is left open."

"I bet you would burgle a citizen," I tell him.

"I have a reason for everythin' I do," Snooty says in a huff.

We go back to C Street and Snooty sneaks out back and stays for about ten minutes.

"The plot thickens, Scoop," Snooty tells me. "I tried the windows and the door but everythin' is locked. I looked through one window, though, and you should see the furniture that big dame has in the joint. I bet she is a widow."

"Three times I would say. What now?"

"Time will tell now," the mental deficient tells me. "I wonder how the case against Rocco Latalia is comin' on?"

The next morning the papers say that Iron Jaw has ordered Rocco's bail bond rendered defunct as he is bringing Rocco to the hoosegow to stand trial. It seems Iron Jaw tumbled onto Rocco buying two new suits of clothes, a new hot water bottle and a girdle for Mrs. Latalia. Iron Jaw said that only a character who had suddenly stumbled over a mare's nest or something could afford to purchase those things in one lump. Rocco claimed that he had sold the four new truck tires he had mentioned earlier.

"It looks like Rocco was dumb after all," I says. "It is hard for dishonest citizens to reform for keeps."

WE MEET Iron Jaw in front of the hoosegow and the big flatfoot asks Snooty if he has been accosting any more defenseless females.

"I always knew you was a dangerous character to have on the loose," Iron Jaw twits. "You belong in Danvers. For once, though, you know when I got a case sewed up, don't you?"

"Look, you fugitive from the dinosaur era," Snooty says. "The only conviction you ever got was that Columbus discovered America an' you stayed in the fourth grade three years to git that."

"How I hate you, Piper!" Iron Jaw yelps and I can see his peepers get the color of a rusty crowbar. "I've wanted to strangle you so long, I think I'll do it right now. I—"

Snooty hops away from Iron Jaw and grabs a garbage can and spins it at the big flatfoot. Iron Jaw trips over the can and dives headfirst at a telephone pole and the top of his noggin breaks the glass of a fire alarm box and brings out the brave firemen. Me and Snooty are halfway to

the Greek's when the apparatus goes by.

"Sometimes I think you go too far," I tell Piper.

Two days go by. Then one night just before one A. M., the landlady bangs on my door and says the phone is ringing downstairs. I grope down into the hall and pick up the receiver.

"Hello, Scoop. This is Snooty. Somethin' is cookin'. Meet me at seven o'clock in front of the precinct station on C Street, South Boston. It is a good thing they put a gendarm-erie there, isn't it?"

"What are you gettin' at?" I choke out. "You tell me more or you can go—"

"You will find out, Scoop. Don't forget now. At seven."

I am more asleep than awake when I arrive for my tryst with Snooty Piper.

"Scoop," he says to me. "I am ready to break the warehouse case wide open. Now you act like you are a brush salesman with me when we go and knock on the door of the babe's house."

"Awright," I groan. "Let's get our brains knocked out. No salesmen begin work at this hour. She knows that."

"Look," Snooty says. He has a brief case and there is a big label pasted on it. It says:

BRIGHT & EARLY. BRUSHES THAT BREATHE

"You should take Iron Jaw's advice once in a while," I snap. "Danvers is where you belong."

Well, we go and knock on the door of the dame's house. She opens up and has only got half of her makeup on.

"Good-mornin' Mrs.—er—"

"Mrs. Grimby! So what do you drips want at this time of the mornin'?" the female snaps at us.

"Now we have a supply of streamlined brushes here," Snooty says. "All we want is three minutes, madam."

"You get just two. Come in. But I don't want nothin'."

"Well, well," Snooty says. "Packin' up to go somewheres, huh?"

"It's none of your business, you homely swab!" Mrs. Grimby says. "Now try an' sell me an' then git out!"

"I will not beat around the bush," Snooty says and I smell fireworks. "In those bags I bet is about seven grand in folding money and you did not git it from Wangle like you got the leopard coat. You are trying to

Grimby picks up Snooty and throws him at me and we go down together.

"She must be guilty," I pant. "Or she would not act like this. She will kill us, Snooty."

"You ain't kiddin'," the big Amazon says with a grin like a wolf and gets a breadknife out of the table drawer. "I'm takin' the train I figured on, boys."

"So long pal," I says.

"Stop where you are or I will drill you!" Snooty says and I see that he has brought a gat with him.



abscond with the sugar you lifted off the grocery company. Wangle was to join you in due-time. Grab the bags, Scoop."

"Huh?" I says, a little groggy, and before I can recover, Mrs. Grimby grabs me and she throws me into the kitchen like I am scrap for her cat.

"You try an' git those bags!" the hefty doll says and then I hear a sound like a hurricane has come in by the front door and Snooty starts crying for aid. I stagger into the next room, carrying the cloth off the kitchen table. I climb up Mrs. Grimby's spinal column and get it over her dome.

She shakes me off like I am a piece of lint but it gives Snooty time to get loose and go for the bags. He gets one and throws it through the kitchen window, which is not open. Then Mrs.

"Why did you keep that a secret so long?" I howl as Mrs. Grimby raises the shiv. "Let her have it or—"

THE big doll hesitates long enough for the C Street cops to break in to see what is causing such a Donnybrook on the street.

"Arrest her," Snooty says. "Then git the satchel I threw out the winder an' glom onto that one by the chair. There is seven G's in it she and Wangle stole from the warehouse in Charlestown. You know the case we mean. Where O'Gatty was bumped off."

They pack Mrs. Grimby down to the klink, also the bags she was packing. They find the dinero and I shake my head and look at Snooty.

"How come?" I says.

"Why, they cooked it up together," Snooty says. "Wangle was leading a

dog's life and wanted out. He had to have the sugar to run away with. Two kinds. The widow an' the lettuce. She tied Wangle up herself after they had bonged O'Gatty. Look at the kind of furniture in her house—ship chandelery, Scoop. Her former husband was a sailor an' that is where she learned to tie up a character like she tied up Wangle. Those were some knots she fixed up on him. She bopped him to make it look good. Don't tell me you are not guilty because the knots tell me different, Mrs. Grimby."

Mrs. Grimby would not agree with me—at first. But after the blue-coats begin a barrage of questions she finally realizes she's tied up like a gone gosling.

"I own up," the big doll says at last. "We wanted to run away an' live our own life but we needed dough. I thought up the scheme as I knew Wangle would do anythin' to leave that battle-ax he's got. How did you git wise, you two crumbs?"

"The bill for the leopard coat started me off," Snooty says. "But it was the new clothesline you got out on the poles in your back yard that

about convinced me. It was clothesline that tied up Ellsworth. Well, which one of you two love birdies eased off O'Gatty?"

"Wangle. We was just gettin' the safe open when in the guy comes. Ellsworth got him from behind after me and O'Gatty got into a scuffle. I didn't want to rub out nobody. I told Wangle to hit him easy but the little weasel was desperate and bore down."

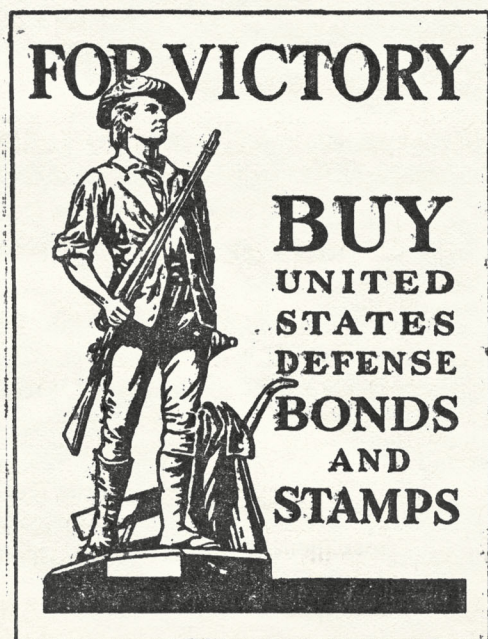
"It's a good thing you had that gat," I says to Snooty Piper. "It stopped her long enough to keep her from gettin' one of us. It would have been me, I know that."

"Gun?" Snooty chirped. "A big fat fountain pen I got at Cliggett's. You hold it just right an'—"

"I could kill you," I says, wiping sweat off my brow.

Four hours later we hear that Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy has left town. He left a suicide note. It was silly, since Iron Jaw would need help to kill himself, he is that big.

"He'll get over it," Snooty says as we relax after writing our story. "He always does."



Death House Bargain

By Charles Larson

|| *Money could do anything, Big Mike thought. Even buy or sell a life. But this time, when Mike tried to buy his own life, he discovered he had already sold it years ago.* ||



BIG MIKE ROBERTS listened to the resounding clang of steel doors down the corridor and thought: That'll be Mallory.

And he relaxed.

He didn't move; he didn't change his expression at all, but he relaxed. His heart beat slower, and the sweat that had made his clasped fingers slick, suddenly dried.

They haven't forgotten, he thought. I'm still up there. I'm still boss.

Now the last steel door opened, and shut, and the faraway sound of footsteps on the concrete floor grew louder, louder. In a moment—

The key in the lock sounded loud. "You got a visitor, Roberts," he heard the horse-faced guard, Mullins, say. "Sit up and look bright."

But still Big Mike didn't move. He lay where he was, on his back on the cot, with his eyes closed and his hands clasped behind his head.

Rumbling, his cell door slid back, and soon he could hear someone step inside. The door closed.

When everything was finally quiet, and the guard had moved back down the corridor, Big Mike spoke: "Just where the hell have you been, Mallory?" he asked softly.

There was no sound for a long moment. Then: "It's not Mallory, Mike."

"Not—" Big Mike opened his eyes quickly, and abruptly things were ice-clear with fright. He was conscious

of the scratching of his gray woolen trousers; he could smell the dampness of his death cell; he heard, plainly, the soft sound of the rain on the small window at the back. And irrelevantly he thought of a day, long ago, when he'd been a smart kid and had climbed a tree after everyone had told him not to, and then hadn't been able to get down. This was the same kind of fear. Only then he'd been able to scream.

Slowly he sat up, swung his thick legs over the side of his cot. "Where's Mallory?" he asked.

The tall, gray-haired man standing by the cell door shook his head. "Never heard of him."

"You ain't from the East?"

"No."

Big Mike lowered his head. He felt weak, as though he might be sick. Mallory hadn't come. Tomorrow they were going to burn him; and Mallory, with his brief case, and his law terms, and his wonderful genius for getting everybody out of scrapes, hadn't come. Instead this tall guy—this tall guy he'd never seen before, yet who seemed to know him . . .

Big Mike raised his head. Who seemed to know him . . .

The gray-haired man laughed. "You don't remember me, eh, Mike?" he said.

"Wait a minute," Big Mike murmured. He got off the cot, walked over to the man. In the dimness it was hard . . . But that laugh, it stuck in his mind like a half-remembered tune, like a tune he hadn't heard for years.

And the square face . . . Take out the lines, blacken the gray hair . . .

Then he remembered.

"I'll be damned," he whispered.

"It's been a long time," the gray-haired man said.

A long time. How long? Twenty-five years? Thirty? Floodlike, it came back to him. They were kids, just raw out of adolescence, cocky, easy-going. But even then he'd been Big Mike, the boss.

Three of them there were, so of course they'd called themselves the Three Musketeers. Big Mike, and Nicky Brewster, and this tall guy, Nick's brother, Hec. Cripes, the things they'd done . . .

"How the devil you been, Brewster?" Big Mike asked. He slapped the tall man on the shoulder.

Brewster's teeth were white in the half-light. "Fine, Mike. After I got away from you, I was O.K."

"Yeah," Big Mike laughed. Already he felt better, more like he'd felt before they'd pinned the murder rap on him. He forgot about Mallory not coming, he forgot they were going to burn him the next day. He forgot everything except the fact that he was still Big Mike Roberts, and that he was standing talking to Hec Brewster, who hadn't the guts of a worm.

"Yeah, Brewster," he said, "when you left, everybody was O.K. It didn't seem like anything could stop me and Nicky." He glanced up. "We got the whole state under our thumbs."

"Then Nicky got smart," Brewster said.

Big Mike paused. "Yeah," he said slowly.

Brewster walked to the window, watched the gray rain slide drunkenly down the pane. "You know, Mike," he said, "I liked Nicky."

"That right?" Big Mike narrowed his eyes.

"That's right, Nicky and I were—" Brewster turned slowly. "You shouldn't have killed him, Mike," he said softly.

OUTSIDE a laundry truck gasped by, and somewhere a prisoner was yelling; but the sound was far away, and lonesome.

"You didn't approve?" Big Mike murmured.

Brewster shook his head.

"You know," Big Mike went on, "that just busts me all up."

Brewster's eyes were steady. "It should, Mike," he said. "Because it means that you're through. You made a mistake when you went out of your own state to get Nicky."

"He knew too much."

"When you left your home, you left security. But you forgot. You forgot that everywhere else in this country, you're nothing but a common murderer. I imagine you were really surprised when they arrested you here."

"Shut up!"

"And now they're going to kill *you*. Tomorrow, isn't it? And none of your little yes-men are here to help you."

Brewster shrugged, smiling, and turned back to the window.

"You been honest too long," Big Mike said. He took a deep breath and his knees stopped quivering. "I ain't one of your two-bit crooks. I got a state behind me. Not this one, maybe, but a state. I *own* it, Brewster. I'm top man. And you just don't electrocute top men"—he snapped his fingers—"like that." He paused. "When Mallory comes—"

"Mallory?"

"My mouthpiece. Smartest lawyer in the country. I bought him. I own him—"

"You bought him. You own him." Brewster turned, his nostrils flaring. "Mike, you don't buy friends—"

"No? Friends didn't put me where I am. Money did. Money . . ."

"And where are you?"

Again Big Mike felt the scratching of his trousers. Fear crawled into his stomach like a great cold cat and curled up there. "This?" he said, waving his arm about him. "I'll get out of this. Don't worry. The boys would starve to death without me."

"The boys would starve to death without you," Brewster said quietly. "They'd try to save you because they'd be saving a meal ticket."

He paused. "Have you ever thought, Mike, that probably the only two real friends you ever had were Nicky and me? You chased me out in the beginning, before I had to wallow in the rot you stirred up. And you killed Nicky when he couldn't take that rot any more." Brewster stopped, shrugged slowly. "If I didn't remember how you used to be, Mike, I swear I'd feel sorry for you."

Big Mike walked slowly to his cot, his paunch swaying under his loose shirt. Sighing, he sat down and looked at Brewster. "You would?" he said. "Brewster, you're a good talker. Lots of ideals. Lots of tugging at the heart strings. You ought to be in politics. But you're all wrong. You wouldn't feel sorry for me. You don't feel sorry for a guy who's gone higher than you; you hate 'em."

"You're jealous, Brewster, and you don't know it. You're burning up because I've gone ahead and you've failed. Think back over what you been saying, all that beautiful preaching about friends meaning more than money. That's just plain damn foolishness. Money put me where I am today, not friends, and granted I am in a spot, money will get me out of it, not friends. Money can fix anything. Anything. But friends? Friends are fine—if they can push you ahead a little more. If they can't"—Big Mike lifted his shoulders—"to hell with them. That's why I was glad to see you scam when we were kids."

"And Nicky?" Brewster murmured.

"Nicky? Same proposition. While he was helping me get to the top, O.K." Big Mike grinned. "Shocks you, eh, Brewster? But don't kid yourself, it's the only way to get anywhere."

BREWSTER shook his head, and turned to look out the barred window again at the courtyard. "You're wrong. But it's no use talk-

ing. I thought—maybe—but I was wrong. You're still the same. Nothing can change you. And now nothing can help you."

"Mallory and money together can fix anything. . . ."

"Not here. I've lived in this state almost all my life, and by God, you're finally caught."

Both of them turned when the guard rattled his key in the cell door. "Time up?" Brewster said.

"Yes, sir. Sorry."

Brewster nodded, walked to the cot. "Well, Mike," he said. He held out his hand.

For a long moment Big Mike looked at it. Then he raised his eyes to Brewster's. "Sorry, little man," he said. "I just don't seem to have the strength to lift mine."

He grinned at the flush on Brewster's face, and watched him walk quickly to the door.

When Brewster was through, the guard closed the door, locked it. Then he leaned close to the bars. "You got another visitor, Roberts," he said. "Fellow named—Mallory, I think. Be up as soon as the warden clears him."

Happiness rushed through Big Mike's chest. Laughing, he got off the cot, wandered to the cell door. "You hear that, Brewster?" he called. "Mallory's coming."

Down the hall, Brewster stopped. "Mallory? Your lawyer, Mike? The one you own?"

"Yeah. The one I own. No bosom buddy like you, but he comes through. I'll give you ten to one he's bringing a pardon."

Brewster nodded. "O.K., Mike. I'll take that bet."

"You sure you got a job?" Big Mike yelled. "I got to know where to garnishee your wages."

"I got a job. Pretty good one. I'm in politics, like you thought."

"Yeah? What are you, dog-catcher?"

"No, Mike." Brewster turned, walked away. Over his shoulder he said, "I'm the governor."

Blackout



With a flying tackle, Williams closed in on the man.

★ ★ ★

Death was peering through the porthole when Lieutenant Williams stepped aboard that hoodooed yacht. And when Williams stood night watch to catch a ghostly killer, he discovered that he was marked for a briny berth.

on the High Seas

By Norman A. Daniels

DICK WILLIAMS, looking trim in his uniform of a naval lieutenant, stepped aboard the yacht which was owned by Mitchell Harris—the Harris with all the millions. It was being sailed from Florida to New York where it was to be turned over to the Navy. Lieutenant Williams' job was to study the craft and have plans ready to convert it into a tender. She was a regular ocean going craft with sleek lines.

Harris, about sixty, heavily jowled and cold-eyed, met Williams as he stepped on deck.

"Glad to have you aboard, lieutenant. What are the chances of submarine interference with our trip north?"

Williams said, "We travel completely blacked out. There have been some reports of enemy undersea craft just off the coast, sir."

"All right," Harris said. "I've taken steps to insure a blackout." He raised his voice. "McClure! McClure—where the devil are you?"

A short, bowlegged man came running along the deck. He wore the white coat of a steward and a battered old hat. He saluted Harris and stood by.

"Show Lieutenant Williams to Cabin Nine, McClure. Take his bags. Lieutenant, I'll expect you to dine with me tonight."

Harris stalked off, but the steward didn't pick up the bags. He just stood staring at Williams.

"Well," Williams asked. "What's wrong with me?"

"Oh, nothing, sir. Nothing at all, only it's that—cabin, sir. It ain't right to make a man sleep there. But the old man—that's Harris, sir—cleaned out his house at Tampa and put all

the furniture aboard. The staterooms are crammed full, except for just enough to accommodate the party. But Number Nine—why that's ghastly, sir."

"What's the matter with it?" Williams asked.

"It's just this, sir—eighteen months ago a man was murdered in that cabin."

Williams grinned. "Is that all? I thought there was really something wrong. I'm not afraid of ghosts, McClure. Let's go see your murder cabin."

McCLURE went on, "It ain't just the fact that a man died there, but how he died. It was young Jimmy Brown, sir. As nice a lad as you ever saw. We were cruising near the Panama Canal and one night this lad went into the cabin and locked the door tight. He closed the porthole too, because there was a heavy sea and he was afraid we might ship some water."

"You can finish as we head for the cabin," Williams grunted. "This ship is ready to sail."

"Very well, sir." McClure picked up the bags and walked beside Williams. "Remember now, he was locked in the room with the port closed. I know it was closed because he asked me to fasten it. A bit under the weather he was. In the morning the door was still locked and bolted from inside, but the lad was dead. Strangled to death. The porthole was wide open, sir. Whatever killed him came through it."

They stepped into the cabin and Williams glanced at the single porthole. He laughed.

"Well, I wouldn't be much afraid

of anyone small enough to come through that port, McClure. Was the murderer caught?"

"Can you catch a ghost, sir?" McClure whispered hoarsely. "I'd ask for another cabin, was I you?"

Williams shrugged, but he walked over to the port. It was open and fastened back. He closed it and twisted the thumb screw which sealed the small, round, black-painted window shut. It looked as strong as a vault door.

Williams shaved and forgot all about McClure's warning. He appeared for dinner promptly at eight and took the precaution of extinguishing his cigarette before he stepped on deck. It was night and the ship was just a dark blob in the gloom. A double watch was maintained and the radio sealed. Every port and window was painted black. The dining salon was hung with long and heavy velvet curtains.

McClure was there, waiting on table and he seemed obviously relieved when he saw Williams. Harris introduced the naval man to the rest of the party.

There was Hank Webster, a middle-aged man and a friend of Harris'. Another man, who looked like an undertaker, shook hands with Williams and answered to the name of Burke. He was an antique dealer and was aboard to spend time appraising various precious pieces which Harris was shipping back to New York. Then there was Glynn, a highly polished type who was Harris' confidential secretary.

Captain Connors was hearty, bluff and red-cheeked. Of them all, Williams liked Connors the best by far.

Williams said, "I've heard some rather gruesome tales about your ship, Mr. Harris. Especially the cabin to which I'm assigned."

Harris frowned. "I should have warned McClure against talking. I'm sorry, lieutenant. It so happens that cabin is the only one available. The rest are filled with my antiques. Burke

wanted to examine them on the way back and they had to be kept accessible. I didn't know until the last minute that you were ordered aboard us or I'd have cleaned out another cabin."

"Forget it," Williams grinned. "Lends atmosphere to the trip and it won't disturb my sleep, I can guarantee that."

Glynn looked up, his black eyes startlingly clear. "Did McClure also tell you that the man we suspect of killing Jimmy, hopped overboard and was drowned? You might as well know the whole grisly truth, lieutenant."

Williams said, "That must have been some cruise, but I'm still not afraid. Well, gentlemen, I think I'll go back and keep my ghosts company."

Williams paced the deck until the cool air made him sleepy. He returned to his cabin, washed up in the spacious bathroom and admired its lavish equipment. The sink, for instance, was built right into the wall and was almost big enough to take a bath in.

AT TEN-THIRTY, he was occupying one of the twin beds in the room. In the darkness, McClure's weird story of murder and Glynn's additional one of suicide, kept him awake. A man murdered in a locked cabin by being choked to death. The only means of entrance and exit a tiny porthole which a midget would have difficulty in squirming through. Impossible—or it seemed so on the surface of things as they now stood.

An hour went by. Williams dozed and wakened fretfully. The cabin seemed to be very cold. He got up, noticed that the porthole was open. Slamming the port, he twisted the thumb screw tightly, then went back to bed. He dozed again, but awakened about an hour later. There was a chilly breeze on the back of his neck too and he glanced at the porthole.

Williams gave a gasp. The port was wide open and hooked back. Yet he

was positive that he'd closed it. Leaping out of bed, Williams approached the porthole and examined it carefully. He noticed that the bolt of the thumb screw projected right through the metal shutter, but that meant nothing. How had the port been opened and fastened back?

Finally, with a shrug, he returned to bed. Another hour went by, but Williams couldn't sleep. He swung legs over the side of the bed and felt around in the darkness for his slippers.

There was a rattling sound at the cabin door. A key had been thrust in the lock and turned, but the inside bolts kept the intruder out. Williams shuffled over to the door, threw the bolts back and opened it.

A man of about thirty-five quickly slipped into the cabin. He carried a leather bag that seemed to be exceptionally heavy and it clanked dismally as he set it down.

"My name is St. John." He offered his hand. "I just came aboard. Friend of the owner."

"You just came aboard?" Williams gaped. "How? By launch—or plane?"

"Good heavens, no." St. John grinned broadly. "They put into port for me. Harris is a good chap. You must have been asleep. Please don't bother to stay awake on my account. I'm hitting the hay immediately too."

Williams nodded, rubbed his eyes and went for a drink of water. As he stared at his own reflection in the mirror, he smiled wryly. He was actually glad to have company in this cabin and he wished that McClure had kept his mouth shut.

When he returned to the cabin, St. John was busy twisting the porthole thumb screw which held it into place. Williams wondered if it would stay shut and determined to remain awake as long as he could. He slid under the blankets and closed his eyes with the rapidly developing idea that this voyage was anything but a soft berth.

Moments later, he opened his eyes again and raised up high enough to

look in the direction of the porthole. It must have been closed because he couldn't see any of the stars which would have gleamed through. Relaxed, he lay back again and emitted a long sigh.

He didn't know how long he'd been asleep, but a terrific racket seemed to be part of his dreams. Then he knew it wasn't and, still foggy-eyed, he sat erect. The first thing he saw was the open porthole.

Williams climbed out of bed and started across the floor. Something seemed to tug at his ankles. He looked down, saw a dark shape. His hands passed over a body. Williams sprang to the port and slammed it shut. Then he turned on the lights.

ST. JOHN lay half out of his bed. He was quite dead and the bluish cast to his face indicated he'd been throttled. Not that such a clue was needed. His throat was swollen and growing black in places. Whatever had choked him must have possessed supernatural strength.

Williams gulped and found his lips and throat perfectly dry. He went to the door, opened it and let out a lusty yell for help.

Mitchell Harris, clad in a heavy bathrobe, hurried into the cabin with Captain Connors. Both looked down at the corpse.

"Who the devil is he?" Harris demanded.

Williams said, "He told me his name was St. John—that you'd put into port and picked him up."

Harris gave Williams an odd look. "Why, I never saw that man before in my life, lieutenant. And we did not put into any port."

Williams gasped. Then he remembered the heavy bag which St. John had brought aboard, dragged it from under the bed and found that it was securely locked. He searched the dead man, found keys and opened it. The bag was filled with a multitude of tools. There was a Stillson wrench, two hammers, a chisel, screw driver,

some sharp knives and two sacks of tiling plaster.

"He must have stowed away," Captain Connors grunted. "No other answer to it. But if you were in the cabin with him, lieutenant—and he's now dead, I—"

Williams flushed. "You mean I'm the only person who could have murdered him? I'll grant it looks that way. The cabin door was locked and bolted. But don't forget what happened in this cabin before. I didn't know St. John—or whatever his real name was. I had no reason to kill him."

Captain Connors said, "I'm not making an accusation, lieutenant. In the former case we were just as stumped, but when Billy Corwin committed suicide, well we took it for granted that he killed young Brown."

Webster, Burke and Glynn were attracted by the noise and hurried aft where the murder cabin was located. Harris told them what had happened. A search of the corpse revealed nothing either to identify him or to give a reason why he'd slipped aboard.

Williams said slowly, "St. John was a funny guy. Talked his head off, but most of it was in riddles. Kept mumbling to himself while I tried to go to sleep. If I could make sense out of what he said, I might solve this. But so far it seems to be just gibberish. I'll think it over. We might find a clue there."

"And meantime," Captain Connors said, "I'll have the body taken to the hospital. Or perhaps, lieutenant, you'd rather sleep there and we'll just let the corpse stay where it is."

Williams shook his head. "No. Whatever is behind this killing and the one eighteen months ago, concerns this cabin or something in it. I'm going to stick. Mr. Harris, has the craft been used much since the first murder?"

"Continually," Harris answered. "I've cruised as far and wide as world conditions permitted. I had an idea it wouldn't last long so I wanted to

make the most of it before I was driven off the seas."

"And who was with you during that time?" Williams wanted to know. "Anyone in this present party?"

Harris looked around. "Just Webster. Burke, of course, is practically a stranger to me. He just wants to buy my antiques. Glynn remained in New York to handle my affairs. He was present when young Brown was murdered, however. So was Webster. Why?"

"Just curious," Williams shrugged. "I thought you might give me some information that would jibe with what St. John mumbled about. Guess not. Well, let's clear out the cabin. I'm tired and I still maintain I can sleep here."

LATER, he was alone in the cabin thinking over matters. St. John hadn't said a word, but if the murderer thought he had, then an attempt would be made on Williams' life and that was exactly what the naval lieutenant wanted. It was the only possible way of making the killer reveal himself. There were no clues—nothing to throw any light on either the motive or the murderer.

"Unless—" Williams kicked the heavy suitcase—"all those tools signify that St. John intended tearing the boat to bits in looking for something hidden here."

Williams snuffed out his last cigarette, got a drink of water from the bathroom and then walked over to make sure the porthole cover was tightly shut. He doffed his lounging robe and climbed back into bed.

Not that he had the remotest idea of sleeping. That was impossible now. Even the weariness that resulted from his long duty at sea had worn off. He propped himself into a sitting position, slid a hand beneath the covers and grasped the heavy navy automatic which he'd removed from his bag. He felt better with the gun under his fingers.

The luminous dial of his wrist

watch indicated that it was half past twelve. It was going to be a long session and he didn't even dare smoke. Twice he got up and examined the porthole cover. It was securely fastened. Twice he almost dozed, but forced himself to stay awake. He tried to think over the case.

Someone on board was a murderer. The motive must be the presence of either contraband or loot hidden somewhere on the ship. That lent the idea that some member of the crew—or Webster or Harris—was implicated because they were the only persons who'd been continuously aboard.

A gentle tap on the panels of the cabin door aroused him. He thrust his feet into slippers, grabbed the robe and hurried to the door. He slid back the bolt, held his gun ready and yanked the door open.

There was no one outside. Yet that knock had been clear enough. Williams stepped out on deck and looked around. The blacked out ship gave him no opportunity to see more than a dozen feet ahead of him.

He walked forward a bit, passed the rest of the cabins and turned a corner. He heard a swishing sound, but he had no chance to spin around and defend himself. Two strong arms wrapped about his neck and a knee was driven with cruel force into the small of his back. He tried to get his gun into play, but a hard blow against his wrist paralyzed the muscles, and the weapon thudded to the deck.

That was the only sound so far made by the fight. The members of the crew couldn't see this spot nor hear a thing and Williams' attacker fought with silent, maniacal fury.

Williams took several blows on the face, but he suffered most from the arm which wound around his throat and gradually tightened to cut off his wind. Things were getting black. He reached up with both hands, encountered a head of hair and seized it. He tugged with all the strength he had left. This drew a muffled oath and the pressure on his throat relaxed a bit.

With a violent effort, Williams tore himself free. He saw a shadowy figure standing four feet away from him. One hand was upraised and the outlines of the knife it held were easily visible.

The killer gave a forward lurch and the blade started to come down. Williams hurled himself to one side. His foot hit the gun he'd dropped and some measure of hope surged through him again. He couldn't afford to risk bending to pick up the gun yet. That knife might get in a death blow while his attention was diverted.

THE killer had the knife raised again and seemed to be looking for an opportunity to get at Williams. But the naval lieutenant had been on the defensive long enough. He gave a leap which carried him close to the killer and both fists went into action. The knife whizzed down, but missed because Williams had been ready for it. He landed two good punches. A foot was thrust forward suddenly. He tripped over it and fell headlong on the deck. That really made some noise.

He started to get up, wondering when he'd feel the hot bite of the knife. But the killer must have been alarmed by the crash and he faded into the darkness. Williams got up slowly. Nobody came to help him. The sound had gone unnoticed. Possibly the pounding of the engines below decks was responsible for that. They were traveling at top speed.

He fumbled around, located the gun and hurried to the starboard rail. As he reached it, he saw a dark figure moving rapidly away from him. Williams leveled the gun.

"Stop where you are," he shouted.

The man stopped. Members of the crew came hurrying toward them. Williams ran closer to the man and peered at him through the gloom. It was Webster, Harris' close friend.

"What the devil is the idea of threatening me with that gun?" Webster demanded irately.

Harris, Glynn and Burke appeared

after a few moments. They were all clad in pajamas. Captain Connors was wakened and everyone went into his cabin. Connors, as commander of the ship, took charge.

"Well, Mr. Webster," he asked, "did you or did you not attack Lieutenant Williams?"

"I did not," Webster shouted. "Why in the world should I? I thought I heard some strange sounds and I stepped out to see what was going on."

Williams said, "It's obvious to me that whoever did lure me out of the cabin was intent on either killing me or knocking me out, so he could slip into my quarters and go after whatever St. John was also looking for."

"I'll put a guard at your door," Captain Connors said. "Now everyone back to his quarters."

They left, all but Williams. "Look, captain," he said, "let the others think there is a guard in front of my door, but don't place anybody there. I'd rather the killer had a free passage. It's the only way we can grab him."

Connors shrugged and Williams wondered if he seemed relieved. "As you wish. Personally, I wouldn't spend five minutes inside that cabin. I'll stand by for trouble so just sing out if anything happens. Good luck, lieutenant."

Williams nodded and walked slowly back to the stateroom. The door was still closed and nothing disturbed. The killer hadn't found an opportunity to get in. Williams opened St. John's bag again and dumped the heavy tools onto the floor.

He studied them for a few minutes. These tools were not meant to rip a floor up, or tear down a wall. The Stillson wrench indicated that work with pipes was intended. Williams frowned and walked into the bathroom. He bent and studied the pipes underneath the big sink. The bite of a similar wrench was still engraved on the pipes, but those marks had been made a long time ago.

Finally, with a sigh of exhaustion, he climbed back into bed, put out the

lights and took one final look at the closed porthole. All he could do was sit there and wait. He knew that whatever killed St. John had completed the job in less than two or three minutes—which meant he was in serious danger too. If something were hidden here, the killer had to get it quickly.

Once in port, the ship was headed for dry dock and a thorough overhauling. The expensive and lavish equipment would be removed and whatever secret the ship held was bound to be exposed.

NOTHING happened that night.

As soon as it was daylight, Williams opened the port and went to sleep. At eleven o'clock he was at work with blueprints of the ship and the hours went by rapidly. Later in the afternoon he spent considerable time in the repair shop below decks.

At dinner nobody spoke much. Webster kept glaring at Williams, in open resentment of what had happened the night before. Burke occupied most of Harris' attention with figures and quotations on the furniture which filled most of the cabins.

At ten o'clock Williams turned in. His room wasn't made up. McClure hadn't gone near it. Several times Williams saw the bowlegged little steward eyeing him peculiarly, but he never approached.

Williams locked the door and the porthole, and then picked up several of St. John's tools. He went into the bathroom and began hammering on the pipes.

He kept this up for fifteen minutes, but made no attempt to actually remove any of the fixtures. He wasn't even sure that anything was hidden here, but if the killer lurked nearby and heard those sounds, he'd be bound to act very shortly.

Williams made sure his gun was in working order and then climbed into bed, pulling only the spread over him. As on the night before, fatigue lulled his senses and he had difficulty

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in keeping his eyes open. Alone in the darkness eerie thoughts began to assail him too. Perhaps he was wrong about things being hidden and that a ghost really did haunt this ship. There were many gruesome tales prevalent in navy circles about hoodooed craft.

Once he thought he heard a gentle scraping sound, but it went away again and he relaxed.

He heard the watch change at two A.M. and kept fighting off the impulse to sleep. Then, despite all his efforts, Williams' eyes closed and he began breathing heavily. He had no idea how long he'd been dozing, but he felt cool air; fresh, sweet air, and it roused him. He opened his eyes, but he didn't move.

The porthole was wide open and the lid hooked back. Something moved just above his face. He heard it scrape gently against the pillow. It came back and he made out the faint shadows of two huge and powerful looking hands. It took all his will power not to move then. He did incline his head very slightly and felt sweat break out all over his forehead. The huge hands were still there, poised above him, but there were no signs of their owner. Just hands—without a body.

Tensed, ready to move instantly, Williams kept looking at those hands and they seemed to grow even larger. Then, suddenly, they came down. They fumbled a bit before they started to encircle his throat. Williams tightened the grip on his gun, but other than that, made no movement.

Slowly the fingers closed tighter and tighter until they felt like a vise. Lieutenant Williams gave a few convulsive contortions and then half slid off the bed. The fingers retained their embrace for fully five minutes and then relaxed. Williams slipped completely off the bed and lay very quiet. He wasn't dead, not even unconscious, and both eyes were wide open.

He saw the hands disappear in the gloom. Then he saw them again, just

inside the porthole. Two minutes after they vanished for good, he saw a slim object thrust through the port. It proceeded across the room and there was a fumbling, metallic sound near the door. Williams heard the bolts slip back.

He breathed very softly until the slim rodlike object was withdrawn. Then he let one arm drop to the floor and got his palm firmly placed against the rug to give leverage when he wanted to jump up.

A KEY was inserted in the door. It turned and the door swung open just enough to allow a shadowy form to slip through.

The intruder believed that the only other person in the cabin was dead and therefore he displayed no great amount of caution.

Williams, who had slipped into his coat, reached out with both hands, encountered a pair of legs and the killer let out a yelp of horrified astonishment. Williams dumped him over, jumped up and fumbled around in the darkness for the light switch. His fingers found it, but before he could turn the lights on, the intruder had also regained his feet. With a savage and very unghostly oath, he flung himself toward Williams.

Williams was shoved against the wall with a force that knocked all the breath out of him. He took several painful blows on the face before he got into action himself. But he hadn't been navy trained without learning something about rough and tumble fighting. He lowered his head and bored in.

Fists buried themselves into a hard stomach. The attacker doubled up in agony. Williams reached out, encountered the man's head and lowered his arm a bit to grab a substantial shoulder. He wheeled the man around, pushed him against the wall and drove home a hard blow to the face.

He let go and the intruder slumped toward the floor. Williams, breathing hard, turned on the light switch.

Glynn, Harris' secretary, was seated on the floor and trying to get back possession of his wits.

"Get up," Williams snapped. "Get up, you lousy excuse for a ghost."

Glynn arose warily. He seemed to be unarmed and winced at the sight of the big automatic in Williams' hand.

"All right," he said hoarsely, "I don't know how you did it. Nobody else lived after I clamped that device around his throat, but you win. Listen, Williams, I'll split with you. There's a fortune to be made with what's hidden in this cabin."

"Oh no," Williams grunted. "I'd rather be broke and honest. Walk over and sit on the bed. All rules are off and if you don't start wagging that tongue of yours, I'll get busy to see that you do. Well? What's it all about?"

Glynn kept staring at Williams as if he were fascinated by him. Williams reached up with one hand and patted the mass of steel rings that encircled his throat.

"Like my necklace? I fashioned those steel rings myself, while everyone thought I was busy in the engine room. I knew some kind of a device was used to murder St. John because it was physically impossible for a killer to have entered and strangled him. You got the port open by manipulating the screw which goes all the way through the lid. With a proper instrument and working from a bo'sun's chair slung overside, that was easy to do.

"Then you inserted a rod with a pair of steel, gloved hands on the end of it. By manipulating the controls, you could make the fingers close around a man's throat and even leave marks like those made by human hands."

Glynn scowled. "I could have gotten away with this, Williams, until you interfered and that fool who gave his name as St. John stowed away. I had to kill him. I knew he was aboard, but not where he was hiding. He was

bound to enter this cabin and he was smooth enough to get away with telling you some excuse for invading your quarters. I did kill him. I also killed that young fool eighteen months ago."

"Ah—now you're really doing some talking," Williams approved, but he didn't like the way Glynn acted. He was too sure of himself, too careless with his confession, as though he stalled for time.

"Harris made me return to New York after young Brown was killed," Glynn went on. "That stopped me cold, but there was nothing I could do. I thought Harris would return himself soon, but instead of that he just cruised around for months. They figured the half-wit who jumped overboard killed young Brown, but he didn't. Neither did he jump into the sea. I threw him over the rail. Or we did, rather."

"We?" Williams grunted. "Who else is in on this with you?"

"The man who is standing right behind you, with a gun in his fist," Glynn smiled contemptuously. "How about it, Red?"

For a moment Williams thought it was a ruse. Then a harsh voice spoke, almost in his ear.

"Everything is under control, boss. If this monkey in a blue uniform don't drop that roscoe, I'll blow him apart. Drop it, sucker."

WILLIAMS let go of the gun.

Glynn picked up his automatic. Williams saw that the crook, who'd slipped into the cabin while Glynn held his attention, was a redheaded member of the yacht's crew.

Glynn pointed the automatic straight at Williams. Without looking at his assistant, he said, "Red, grab those tools and go to work."

Red gave a nasty laugh. "Let the big shot navy man do it. Okay, Williams, grab the Stillson wrench and walk into the bathroom. Your job is to remove the sink from its mooring. Do it fast."

Williams obeyed because there

wasn't anything else he could do. Using the wrench expertly, he removed sections of pipe and then attacked the sink itself, chipping away the tile and plaster. Red stayed right in back of him, gun ready. Glynn lolled idly in a chair planted in the doorway.

"She's loose," Williams said, "but I can't move that heavy sink alone."

"Help him, Red," Glynn ordered. "If he tries anything, I'll plug him."

Red shoved his gun into a pocket, grasped one edge of the sink and both of them tugged at it. The sink was extremely heavy. They worried it out of the wall recess, sidestepped a bit and suddenly Williams let go of his end.

The full weight was too much for Red. The sink came down and landed on his toes. He gave a howl of rage, but the pain prevented him from doing much. Glynn hastily raised the gun. Williams flung both hands outward, straight at the killer. Each contained loose plaster which he'd held.

Glynn fired and the bullet burned past Williams. Then the loose plaster hit Glynn in the face and filled his eyes.

Williams spun and leaped at Red. He hammered the big crook into unconsciousness with two well placed blows. Then he dived toward Glynn who was trying to reach the cabin door. He brought him down with a flying tackle, knocked the gun out of his hand, and then Lieutenant Williams had the most fun he'd enjoyed in days. . . .

Harris, Captain Connors and the others stared at Glynn and Red who were securely tied up. Propped in a corner of Williams' room were the murder instruments. He'd already

found the bo'sun's chair which Red operated and which had swung Glynn overside to get at the porthole.

The long rod, with gloved metal fingers on one end was an ingenious device of steel and spring. It operated something like one of those clamps which grocers use to get stock off high shelves.

Williams smiled. "Glynn and several other crooks ran a blackmail agency. One of the biggest. Glynn could dig up plenty of dirt because he got around in high circles. The evidence they used to intimidate their victims is in that old brief case. Young Brown was in with them, but either got cold feet or wanted the whole set-up for himself. He stole the evidence and concealed it behind the sink. Billy Corwin, who you thought had murdered Brown was killed so you'd believe just that."

"And this St. John, whose body is in the ship's hospital—what about him?" Harris asked.

"One of the mob. He knew where the stuff was hidden and also knew that Glynn was trying to get his hands on it. Glynn was tipped off that he was aboard and made preparations to kill him. He lured me out of the cabin last night too, hoping to knock me out or kill me so he could get at the evidence.

"Well, this cabin has been about everything else so far. We might as well turn it into a brig. Good place to keep Glynn and his pal locked up until we reach shore. Give him a chance to meditate on his sins. And now, if you can clear out another cabin, I'd like to start enjoying this cruise by sleeping through the next twelve hours."

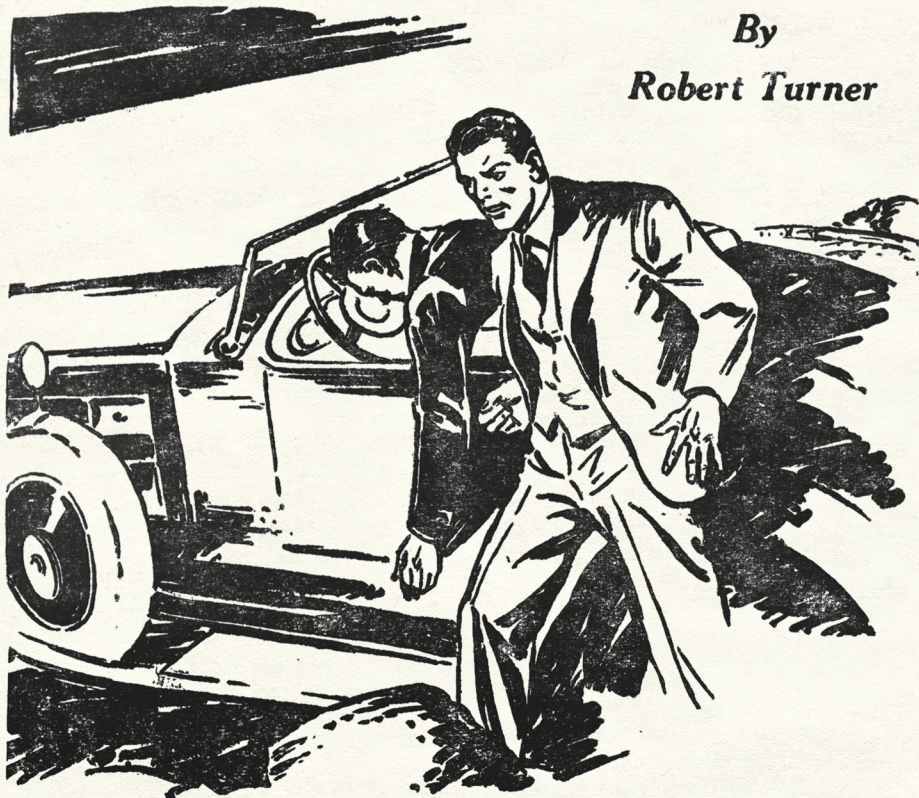


Kerry Marsh braved a killer's bullets—to fulfill a promise to the dead.

Vengeance on Wheels

By

Robert Turner



AT A LITTLE after one A. M. we had dropped off the girls and I was gunning the roadster to get Luke Breen home before he passed out. Even mixed with the night air his breath was tough going for a tee-totaler like me. Anyone but Luke I'd have dumped out to walk it off.

The West Coast repeat of *The Harlequin*, latest radio comic sensation, was blaring from the dash set. Luke waved a hand, drunkenly.

"Shut that damn thing off, Kerry!"

He hunched his lank frame deeper into the seat. His classically chiseled features were a mile long. His mouth was loose and petulant with the liquor

and the load of blues he was carrying. I snapped off the set.

"Why don' I die?" Luke moaned. "Why don' I have the guts to kill m'self, Kerry?"

"That's what I'd like to know," I snapped. "Getting stinko at the dance, fighting with that drip, Sam Fallon. No wonder Julia told you off."

He shook his head dejectedly. "She—she called off the wedding, gave me m'ring back, even. Wazzamatter wi' me, Kerry?"

I slowed down for Dead Man's curve. "You're just a damned fool," I told him peevishly. "Sometimes I wonder why I pal around with you. I

wish I thought Julie was serious. It would serve you right." I glanced at him, sideways. He was so woebegone I had to let up. "Aw, snap out of it! You'll show your handsome mug tomorrow, repent tenderly and she'll forget all about it."

"No, no!" he insisted with drunken gloom. "Not this time. You jus' don't know Julia."

"No, I don't know Julia," I repeated bitterly. Luke wouldn't have said that if he'd been sober. He knew what Julia Summers was to me.

The spare wheel fell off the rear right then, with a clanking clatter. In the mirror I watched it roll down the moonlit road. I braked to a stop, got out, cussing. I told Luke I'd be right back.

He mumbled sodden disapproval and I scooted after the errant wheel. I was examining it, careful to keep dirt and grease away from my only good suit. I was wondering how in hell the wheel could have come loose, tight as I'd put it on, when the shot crashed out.

SHARP and flat in the stillness of the country night, it was as if two ten-pound books had been slammed together, hard. My chin dropped over my Sunday shirt collar. I stared at the car, a black, shapeless blob, a couple hundred yards back, under the shadows of a big tree.

I started to run, lugging the spare wheel awkwardly. An awareness that something horrible had happened, chilled my marrow. I ran faster, shouting:

"Luke, hey, Luke! What was that?"

A big, blurred figure leaped from the shadowed side of the road. Something swished and a brace of bombs seemed to explode at the side of my head. I dropped the wheel, clawed out with both hands. Bright lights spiraled through a purple fog in front of my eyes. Another blow smashed my head. My ears rang. I splashed into a pool of black ink, plunged down, down into the Stygian depths.

When I came to a sickly salty taste was in my mouth. I smeared blood from my lips, spat crimson saliva. Both eyes were puffed as marshmallows. I was seeing through them only by an effort of upward straining brows. Someone had played soccer with my head while I was down and out.

Back at the car the dashlight showed Luke scrunched down, hands still plunged gloomily into his pockets. He looked as though someone had jabbed him with a pin, and he had jumped, stiffened and stayed like that. There was a crazy, startled look on his face. In front of his left ear was a big bubble of blackened blood. The crisp blond hair around it was scorched.

The gun lying on the seat beside him was an ancient army pistol that I use to kill hogs in the late fall. I couldn't imagine how Luke had it. It should have been home on a kitchen cupboard shelf where I always keep it.

I forgot now that I had just been badly beaten, was a living hulk of raw pain. I wanted to reach over, try and shake him alive. I sobbed:

"Luke! Luke, you—you darned old fool! Why did you do it?"

The bubble at his temple broke, rolled, like a red treacherous worm, down his face. I covered my eyes.

Maybe you've had a buddy, played hooky with him as a kid, fought and made up with him, loved him better than a brother, and then had him go and die on you. Maybe you know how it feels. But like this! He killed himself in my car, with my gun, and he and I alone out there in all that dark emptiness.

I remembered how I used to get sore sometimes because he was gay and reckless and charming, instead of conservative like me. I wanted to tell him now I didn't mean any of that.

Luke had everything to live for, a lovely fiancée, the swell farm his dad left him, with seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of timber he could sell any time he wanted to be rich. I couldn't understand it.

THE stone zipped past my ear, clanked against the car. I looked at the ugly dent in the door, then at the rock on the ground. Big as a pineapple, it had viciously jagged edges. If it had struck, my skull would have crushed like a gum-bubble.

I wheeled, cringing, hands upthrown for protection, searched the woods across the road. I saw him on a rising, ten yards away, silhouetted in a moon-shaft slanting through the pines. He looked like a giant human scarecrow, arms waving wildly. He shouted:

"I'll get you yet, you bad Kerry Marsh, you! Stop robbing my traps, you hear! Stay away from them, or by gosh I'll squash your brains into soup!"

He leaped away into the darkness, crashing through the underbrush.

Purdy Bates was the local half-wit, a ragged giant of a fellow who had long held some fancied grudge against Luke Breen and me. Forgetting all about the spare wheel, I leaped into the car before he decided to cut back for another crack at me.

A mile up the road I turned in a short driveway to a little picture house, all white paint and green shutters in the bright moonlight. I pushed a button under a sign that said:

DR. BOBBS—NIGHT BELL

Bald, pot-bellied, sleepily pushing his arms into a dressing robe, Dr. Bobbs opened the door almost before the ringing stopped. He blinked, his sleep-creased face full of concern.

"Kerry Marsh!" he exclaimed. "What happened, son?"

My puffed lips moved, but nothing came out. I finally blurted: "Luke—it's Luke, doc."

Down at the car he played a thin, cruelly bright beam over Luke's dead figure.

"He shot himself," I said. "Help me get him inside."

His fingers squeezed my arm. "We can't move him until the sheriff comes. The boy's dead. Come inside and tell me about it."

Inside, he called the sheriff, produced a quart of brandy, forced me to take a drink. The impact of the burning liquor, being in that familiar waiting room with the worn leather upholstery and the stacks of magazines, helped calm me. In a wall mirror my ugly face stared back, swollen and bruised, taut with sorrow and shock. I told him all that had happened.

Dr. Bobbs lit a crumby looking pipe, glanced over the flame. "Look, son," he said almost sadly. "Why don't you tell me the truth?"

"What—what do you mean?" I leaned forward tensely.

"Luke was going to marry Julia, soon, the girl you've been in love with a long time, Kerry. You've been brooding over that, haven't you? It got to be a little too much, didn't it?"

"What are you getting at?" I popped my knuckles viciously.

THE doctor deliberately placed the dead match in the tray. "When the sheriff comes it'll only make things worse if you stick to that suicide story, Kerry. Luke couldn't possibly have done himself in."

Fear and doubt gripped me with icy fingers. "But he did, he did!"

Dr. Bobbs shook his head, called my attention to the facts that Luke's hands were in his pockets, that he was shot in the left temple.

"Maybe you and Luke had a fight," he finished. "Luke's bigger than you, was drunk. Maybe he gave you an awful trouncing and in blind fury, or self-defense, you shot him. Isn't that more like it, son?"

"No!" I screamed and sprang up. My eyes strained out of their sockets. I trembled like a bird dog. "Why would Luke and I fight? You know how I felt about Luke, doc." How could he even think that? I went crazy. "You—you're an evil-minded old fiend. You're saying I killed my buddy, a guy who'd walk through hell-fire for me, and me him. You—"

The words knotted in my throat. The doc puffed his pipe, unruffled. He

smiled understandingly. "Easy, boy, don't forget I loved Luke, too. He was my nephew."

Sinking back onto the deep leather upholstery, I buried my face in my hands. "I—I didn't do it, but I guess you're right about it being murder. Somebody killed Luke, killed him." I repeated the words dully.

Then I suddenly remembered something. Leaping up, I strode to the window and grabbed his arm.

"Dr. Bobbs, that spare wheel couldn't have come off of its own accord. I put it on over six months ago, with a lug wrench. You couldn't even move it with your bare hands, account of the rust and all. It didn't fall off!"

"What then, Kerry?"

"Somebody loosened it, while Luke and I were saying good night to the girls on their porch. Then whoever it was hid in the rumble and waited until we reached that deserted section of highway, reached out and shoved off the wheel. While I was gone from the car Luke was shot. It was all cleverly and carefully planned. The killer conked me, beat me up to make it look like Luke and I fought."

"Kerry, Kerry, boy!" Dr. Bobbs wrenched his arm from my grip almost angrily. "Maybe I'd better give you a sedative. You get wilder by the moment. Who'd want to do that? Why? I've tried to be patient. Now you'll have to stop this crazy ranting, or—"

Lights flashed in the window from a car speeding up the drive. I bolted for the door. "It's the sheriff and his crowd," I shouted. "I'm getting out, doc. They'll try to pin this on me. I wouldn't stand a chance."

Three men slammed into the room, blocked my exit. It was Sheriff Bill Fallon, a deputy named Tanner and young Sam Fallon. The sheriff was big, rawboned and stooped. He was a musical comedy conception of a country lawman, star on chest, gun holstered from the belt. But there was nothing comical about his eyes. Cold as bayonet steel, they were set deeply in his



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bony, lantern-jawed face. Satisfaction smirked his pinched lips.

SAM'S hawk-face, adorned with sideburns, grinned. Luke Breen and I once pasted hell out of him for annoying a girl. He and his father hated us ever since. This was going to be a sadistic holiday for them.

"So you're a killer now, eh, Marsh?" the sheriff said.

My neck swelled. Here it came again—someone telling me I murdered my best friend. My battered face throbbed. I clenched my fists, managed control, and in a strained whisper told my story.

Fallon, senior, snorted as he thumbed his gunbelt. "Who do you suspect of cooking up that crazy rumble seat business?" he demanded.

I stabbed a forefinger at Sam Fallon. My voice broke like a scared choirboy's. "Him, your son, sheriff! He killed Luke so he'd have a clear field with Julia Summers. He fought with Luke at the dance tonight. He—"

Sam Fallon lunged, windmilling his arms. His eyes popped like a wild animal's. His slot of mouth twisted back over horse teeth. I ducked one punch, caught another on the ear, bored in, my own fists pumping like pistons.

This was going to help some. Sam was an enemy of my dead buddy. Here was a little something I could do for Luke. My knuckles slammed Sam Fallon's ribs and stomach, and he gave ground. I piled him to the floor, cursing, punching.

The three men dragged me off. I was limp and breathing like a panting miler. Tanner, the deputy, held my arms. Fallon helped his son up.

"You can't plant this on Sam just because he had a yen for that Summers gal," the sheriff snarled. "He came right to Saul Keller's filling station after the dance to play euchre with us. He was there every minute. Tanner and Saul'll testify to that."

Wrinkle-faced, mousy little Tanner swelled importantly. "That's right," he said.

Tom Fallon hitched his belt, came toward me. "It's late and I ain't gonna stand here and try this killer. Let a jury do that. I'm takin' him in."

"Wait!" I shouted desperately. "That idiot Purdy Bates could have stolen the gun from my house, killed Luke and beat me up. Maybe my other theory was wrong. Maybe he—"

"You ornery louse!" the sheriff spat. "Tryin' to frame poor Purdy. He was probably just settin' traps in the woods near the road there. It won't work, Marsh. I examined the gun out in the car before I came in. Purdy Bates doesn't even know what time, day or year it is, let alone have sense enough to wear gloves for a kill, or wipe prints off a murder weapon. Stick out your hands, Marsh."

He tugged rusty cuffs from his hip pocket. Tanner released my arms. I stuck out my hands, fingers extended and stiff, palms down. I knew Tanner wasn't going to bust a vein to find Luke's real killer. Not while he had me. So I'd have to do it. Just as the sheriff reached out the bracelets I rammed stiffened fingers up into his Adam's apple.

He gagged, went blue, stumbled backward, clutching at his throat. I straight-armed Sam as he tried to grab me. Then leaped, snatched the sheriff's gun and backed to the door.

"I'm going," I told them, voice cracked and cold. "No one try to stop me."

"You won't get far," Fallon promised. "Bloodhounds will smell you out of any hole you might hide in."

"Maybe." I stepped out of the room, slammed the door behind me. "Stay away from the door."

I FIRED two shots through the wood, low, to scare them, and belted out of the house. I raced around the back, across a cornfield and into a path that led down to a creek swimming hole.

I looked up at the star-bright sky. I promised: "I'll get whoever did it, Luke. Or die, trying!" It was hard to

realize that I'd never see him again, never hear his wild, contagious laughter, watch him squint over gun-sights. I thought about Julie, the sweet kid who was to have become his bride.

Luke and I had both courted her. I loved her so much it didn't get me too bad when she chose him. She was so happy, and Luke was such a good clean guy. I could just see the tears pearly down her cheeks when they'd tell her. Water squeezed from my own eyes, made hot, dirty streaks down my face. I fisted it away, walked faster.

A quarter mile along this trail and I cut through thick underbrush to the highway near Dead Man's curve. Dodging headlights, I hiked to the cowpath that led to the hut of Purdy Bates.

The half-wit lived in a poorly constructed hut of heavy logs, without windows. Bates suffered from a persecution complex among other things. He wanted none of his "enemies" busting in on him. A stovepipe let out smoke through the roof, took in ventilation.

Across the closed door hung a stout iron bar which was dropped into a slot and padlocked when Purdy Bates was out. This bar was not in place. I kicked the door open, leaped back, flattened to the wall. He wasn't supposed to own a gun, but I wasn't taking a chance. There was no challenge.

"Purdy!" I shouted, hoarsely. "Purdy Bates!"

The silence skittered spiders of fear up my spine. I stepped into the blackness. Tripping over something blocking the entrance inside, I sprawled on my face. Sweat popped on my lip and forehead and I scrambled up, found a lamp and lit it.

I had fallen over the giant figure of Purdy Bates. He was spraddled on his back, knees in the air. From a hole in the breast of a dirty checkered shirt, an ugly red blotch was spreading. Purdy's eyes were wide and glazed with death. His mouth yawned, blood-flecked spittle dribbling across thickly stubbled cheeks.

The murderer's thoughts must have coincided with mine. He figured Purdy

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Bates might have seen him kill Luke, attack me. He beat me down here to stop up Bates' mouth for all time.

Gravel rattled outside. I leaped for the door just as a hand shot in, grabbed the handle and slammed it shut. The heavy iron bar clanked into place. I tugged and yanked the handle till my arm-sockets cracked and muscles and tendons screamed pain. The door didn't budge.

A voice spoke from a far corner of the one room cabin, behind me. It was an eerily gentle voice. I whirled, found no one there. Just that sad voice, saying: "It's too bad, son, but I've got to do it!"

A gob of flame spat from the corner. The gun roared and echoed deafeningly. The bullet clopped into the wood at my ear. I dove behind a big iron stove, knocking over the lamp which I had placed on the table. It crashed into tinkling pieces on Purdy Bates' cot. It went poof! very loud, and a sheet of orange flame bellied up from the cot. Crouched behind the stove, breath whistled past my teeth like wind through a tombstone-cluttered graveyard.

THE yellow glow from the fire-gutted cot covered with ragged bedclothes soon lit the whole room. The log walls caught, crackled. I peered around the stove toward the corner. The barrel of the gun poked through a three-inch chink between logs. Gleaming eyes sighted behind it. The fat little finger on the trigger turned white.

I jerked my head back as the gun cracked. The slug hit the stove, whined up to thud in the ceiling. The stovepipe that carried the smoke through the roof came crashing down on me, loosened by the bullet. I didn't know what the hell had happened.

Imagine being trapped in a burning hut with a corpse, and a killer popping away at you from outside where you can't get at him. And then a hailstorm of tin pipe sections falls on you. It was

a little too much. I went berserk for a moment, thrashed around.

The next lead piece whanged one of the tin pipe lengths, sent it spinning off my shoulder. I had floundered out into the open. I opened my mouth, yelped wildly, staggered toward a pile of old packing cases and sprawled behind them on my face.

There were no more shots. Only the sound of the fire spreading, roaring its increasing fury. The melancholy voice of Dr. Bobbs said:

"I think that one got you, Kerry. But if it didn't the fire will." Something clattered to the floor. "That's your gun. I swiped it from the car, but the sheriff will think you took it. He'll think you came down here to kill the moron because he saw you shoot Luke, that Purdy lived long enough to wrestle the gun from you, kill you, too."

I didn't answer. After a moment more of silence he went on: "If you're still alive, Kerry, don't get ideas about breaking out. I'll be waiting outside and I've got another gun."

I didn't move a muscle. I didn't want to knock over one of these cases, bring another rain of bullets. My clothes soaked up perspiration and my stomach revolved like a carousel. The fire was raging on two of the dry log walls, now. Half the junky furniture was aflame and smoke rolled over me like waves of black fog.

When I couldn't stand the inaction any longer I took a chance on a bullet instead of cremation, slammed over the packing boxes, stood up, beat the smoke away with my arms. I realized now that it was so thick even if Bobbs was still at the niche he couldn't see me clearly.

Using a table for a battering ram, I attacked the door until I was exhausted. It didn't give. I wrapped a handkerchief, damp with sweat, over my mouth and nose. Tears streamed from my eyes. I walloped one table leg up and down until it snapped off and used it for a lever to pry one of the wall logs up out of its corner groove.

It was tough going but the barrel-thick log finally slipped free, pushed outward. The whole inside of the cabin was now a furnace of stinking, smoke-spewing flames.

I beat out parts of my clothing that flying sparks had set aflame, pushed my head and shoulders through the narrow space where the log was removed. I wriggled and heaved upward until half my body was outside and half in.

IF DR. BOBBS was still around I was making a perfect target—and a helpless one. The wind blew in from the dirt road and carried the sound of roaring motors. The fire had been seen. Dozens of people would be swarming out in a few moments.

Inch by inch I lunged, twisted and squeezed to freedom, dove face-first to the ground. I scrambled up, dashed into the woods just as the first headlights blazed into the clearing.

In half an hour I was at my own farm. I was going to do what Luke would have done in my place. I was going to get a gun, force a confession out of Bobbs' fat hide. The house was dark, but in the shadows of the front porch a cigaret glowed. Off somewhere in the woods a bloodhound pack bayed, the eerie sound icing my blood. A posse was out already.

Circling to the rear, I entered and grabbed a shotgun and flashlight in the kitchen. Then I cat-walked through the house, flung open the front door and flashed the light toward the cigaret.

I said: "Don't move or this stove-pipe will blow sieves in your chest."

A little barrel-chested man flipped his butt into the darkness, squinted through triple-lensed glasses into the light. His big lips grinned and it was as if a watermelon slice were stuck to his face, with the teeth for seeds.

"Hello there, Marsh!" He rubbed his hands together. "Been waiting for you."

It was still only around four-thirty in the morning, and Ballard was here

Appear at once TALLER



For years I was called Shorty. I was unpopular. I was laughed at by the men in the office. I was scorned by girls everywhere. I felt miserable.

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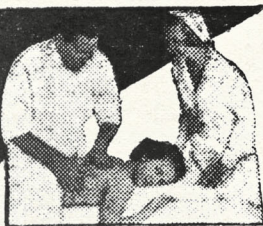
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waiting. The gossips must have started burning up the party lines. The local operator must have done her stuff the instant Bobbs called the sheriff.

"What'll you have, Ballard?" I asked.

"Well, Marsh, I figured you'd need a lawyer." He went up on tiptoes, hunched forward. "I wanted to make sure I'd get you for a client, so—"

"Come inside," I cut him short, reached through the door, snicked on the living room light. "Since when were you interested in penniless clients suspected of murder?"

"Penniless?" he repeated, grinning happily. "Hardly, Kerry. You're in fact quite affluent, now. I—" He paused and gaped at my battered, blackened features, brier-ripped clothing, gulped and went on: "Why, with young Luke Breen dead—why, you own his farm and all that nice valuable cypress. Must run to nearly a hundred thousand." He just about slavered at the thought of all that money.

He went on to tell me how six months before Luke Breen had pneumonia. Luke had made a will ordering Ballard, in case of death, to sell the farm and timber, split the proceeds between two heirs, myself and Dr. Bobbs.

"That clinches it, Ballard!" I said, excited. "That gives Bobbs a motive now. All that remains is to prove his guilt."

Swiftly I recounted all that had happened. When I'd finished he made a face as if he smelled something bad. He beat at the air with his hands.

"Pooh," he said. "Pooh, Marsh. That doesn't hold water. It reeks. Even if I gave half of the timber proceeds to the jury," he faltered, wincing at the thought, "and fed them marijuana all through the trial they wouldn't swallow that yarn."

I admitted it would be tough to prove, but told him he was going to help me do just that. He looked frightened.

"No, no, Kerry, l-l-let's be reasonable," he pleaded. "I can handle every-

thing in court. My—er—interest in you won't permit—"

"Nuts!" I prodded him to the door with the shotgun. "Get out and into your car."

THE sky was shot with the first faint streaks of dawn. With the muzzle of my shotgun at Ballard's neck, he rolled his old sedan to Bobbs' house in several minutes.

"You wait out here till I get inside," I ordered, grabbing his car keys. "Then you sneak in. I'll leave the door ajar. Keep out of sight and listen carefully."

"I—I don't like this," Ballard protested. "It—it isn't legal!"

There were lights on in the house and the door was unlocked. Dr. Bobbs was in his waiting room, comfortably ensconced in the easiest chair, pipe puffing. He held a deadly little automatic in his chubby fist, pointed right at my belt.

"Ah, Kerry, boy!" he said. "You may drop the shotgun."

The sheen of the little fat man's eyes was unearthly. It made the whole usually pleasant expression of his chubby face change. He was now all killer, cold and calculating, the worst kind.

I said: "So you heard they didn't find *two* bodies in the charred ruins of Purdy Bates' hut. You figured I'd got clear and would come after you, eh?"

He cocked his round head, listening. The outside door squeaked. Ballard was being stealthy as a stevedore. Annoyance fled across Bobbs' face and was gone.

He said: "I don't know what you're talking about, Kerry. Tell your friend to come in."

"There's nobody with me."

His fleshy forefinger whitened against the trigger. "Tell him to come in here."

I didn't have to. Ballard heard and trudged in sheepishly. Dr. Bobbs greeted him.

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have you. Consorting with murderers, I see."

"Listen, Bobbs," I said. "You can save that. Ballard knows the whole story. I've told him everything."

Seeing that Bobbs was going to play dumb, I swiftly reviewed how he knew where I'd kept my gun and could have stolen it easily. I explained that he knew what time Luke and I would bring the Summers girls home, that we'd have to pass his house afterward before I got Luke home.

I repeated how I figured he fixed the spare wheel, hid in the rumble till we got within a mile of his own house. Then he must have done his stuff and ran through the woods to the path that led from the creek up to his house. It had been possible for him to be safely undressed by the time I recovered and arrived with the corpse.

"When you heard Purdy Bates had been hanging around there setting traps," I concluded, "you had to get rid of him. You beat me out there, in your car, parked it hidden in the bushes. But you didn't get a chance to leave before I arrived, so you connived the grand plan of killing me, too."

"That would have made it look like Purdy and I did each other in. Then you wouldn't have to wait for me to get the chair before you could collect, as Luke's only living relative, my half of his estate."

Bobbs chuckled, but he was green around the gills. "Very imaginative," he drawled. "But it happens I was home all evening, listening to the radio. Ballard, the phone is right over there. Call the sheriff to come get this poor demented boy."

"You what?" I exploded. Ballard halted halfway to the phone. "Listen, doc, everyone around here knows you never spent an evening at home in your life. The local operator even puts your night calls straight through to that all-night poker game at the Rockville poolroom."

The fat practitioner shrugged. "Tonight I was very tired."

I saw a thin coating of dust on the

radio, even on the push buttons and switch dial. I said: "Don't shoot, doc. I'm not going to make a break. I just want to look at the radio."

Moving carefully so he wouldn't get any wrong ideas, I stepped to the set and turned it on, tuned to a station. Nothing happened. The dial light didn't even go on.

"So you listened to the radio," I said.

BOBBS' little bright eyes flicked to the plug and he grinned with relief as he said:

"Look closely and you'll see the plug half pulled out. Must have tripped over the wire on the way to bed. Listen, I'm sick of all this. Ballard, I told you to—"

"You win, doc," I cut in. I sighed. "I'll go quietly. But just for the books, what programs did you hear tonight?"

Bobbs wiggled the gun, itching to use it, then flicked a quick annoyed glance at Ballard. The stubby lawyer was regarding him curiously.

Quickly Bobbs said: "There were so many—I—I—but one in particular I remember. That fellow calls himself The Harlequin. That gag he pulled about the draftee and the chorus girl was sure funny. It seems—"

"That program was on about one A.M., the time Luke was killed, wasn't it, doc?"

"Mmmmm—I believe it was. Yes, it was the last thing I heard before retiring." His tiny eyes narrowed venomously. "Say, listen, what are you getting at?"

"You heard that, Ballard. Remember it." I had Bobbs now. I said: "The Harlequin's regular program goes on at ten. Anyone who had been listening to the radio all night would have caught it over the local station, not waited for the West Coast repeat at one.

"Besides, your radio is covered with a film of dust. You couldn't have been listening to it. Yet you heard The Harlequin. The only possible way you could do that was by being in my car a little after one A.M.—in the rumble, just as I outlined."

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chair as though on springs. The automatic shook in his fat fist. His eyes glowed like cigaret ends.

"You shouldn't have done that, Kerry," he said, shuddering. "Now I'll have to kill both you and the counselor here. I'll say you grabbed my gun from a drawer, that he very foolishly tried to jump you, got killed. I then wrestled you and the gun discharged finishing you, also."

My foot was working nearer and nearer to the radio plug. It touched now. His gaze was intent on my face. I gave a last nudge and the plug went home. I moved away, sideways.

"Doc," I stalled, "you shouldn't have picked radio for an alibi, especially when you never use it and I'm a regular fan!"

"Damn you!" He jerked convulsively, face ashen. The gun snout pushed toward me like a striking adder. "You young—"

"Stop!" a voice blared. "Don't twist the dials until you've heard this important announcement. Next time you need a—"

I didn't hear the rest. The instant Bobbs' gaze swiveled to the radio blasting the commercial, I went into action. I bowled the roly-poly medico backward into a chair, clutching his gun-wrist. He fought with maniacal strength, twisting and squirming in my grasp like a fat, slimy grub.

The automatic was between us. I strained, cords on my neck swelling, heart throbbing like a drum in a closet. Finally my hands forced the muzzle into his stomach just as he squeezed trigger. I stepped away as he dropped the gun. Panting, I watched his hands clasp over his bleeding paunch. Sweat rolled from his forehead like marbles, and he pitched forward.

Bobbs lived to confess killing Luke to prevent his marriage to Julia, and the will being changed. His fingerprints on the spare wheel lugs and the bramble-ripped clothes they found in his upstairs closet helped convict him. He died in the hospital prison ward.

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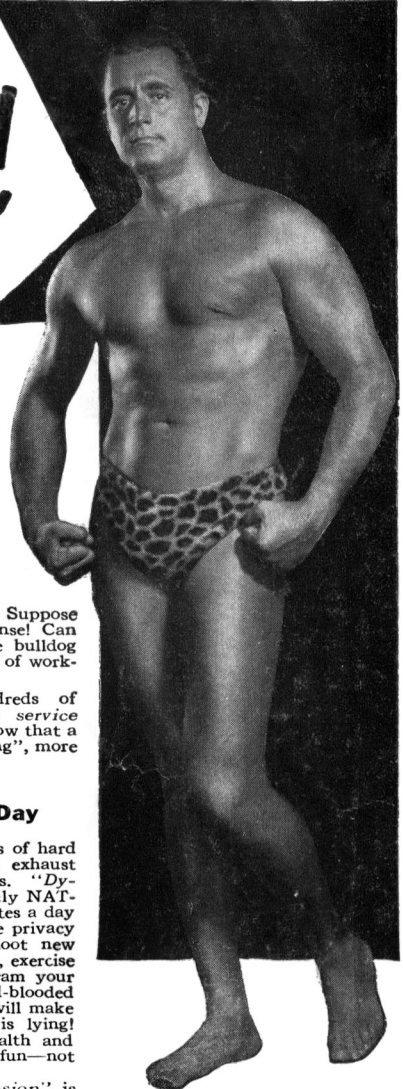
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